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NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 4 December 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Easton: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During last Tuesday's debate on the draft Budget, the Minister responsible for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) moved to the Back Benches in order to speak out. However, instead of speaking as a constituency Member, he spoke as a Minister. Will you look into that matter and give a ruling on it, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for that point of order. I have already written to the Minister reminding him of the conventions and practices when a Minister is called as a private Member. I have dealt with the matter.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Future Delivery Arrangements of the Community Festivals Fund

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that he wishes to make a statement regarding the future delivery arrangements of the community festivals fund.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): I welcome this opportunity to make a statement on the future delivery arrangements for the community festivals fund.

Community festivals have for some time been important vehicles for local communities to celebrate their social and cultural heritage and the talents of their people. They entertain us, educate us and enrich our lives. Many community festivals have grown from modest beginnings as a result of the vision and efforts of dedicated volunteers who encourage and inspire others to make things happen. They instil a sense of belonging among organisers, performers and audiences and play a vital role in knitting together the fabric of communities.

The scale and nature of those events are extremely varied. One of the oldest and best known is the West Belfast Féile, which began some 20 years ago in the difficult circumstances of those times. It is now one of the biggest community festivals in Europe and attracts internationally renowned artists and provides a programme of events that appeals to a wide audience, including visitors to Northern Ireland.

With regard to the number of participants and the size of the audience, the biggest event is the Twelfth celebrations, with the largest parade in Belfast and local events throughout the Province. I know that efforts are ongoing on the part of the Orange Order and others to promote the day as a family-friendly festival that benefits the economy through exploiting the potential for cultural tourism.

Many other colourful re-enactments of important events in our history are celebrated year on year. There are also smaller festivals in which local communities expound their culture and talents through music, the arts, sport and heritage — for example, the Glasgow-bury Music Festival, held in the Sperrins near Drapers-town, which brings together emerging performers and fans of contemporary music from all parts of the community and further afield.

Another example is Country Comes to Town, held in Portadown, where the town centre is taken over for a day by displays of farm animals, agricultural machinery and all things rural. In my constituency, there is the culinary sophistication of the Hillsborough Oyster

Festival. The Lady of the Lake Festival, based in Irvinestown, has been running for many years and is an important date in the calendar for boating enthusiasts on both sides of the border. There are also festivals emerging that are organised by ethnic minorities, which raise awareness of their cultures among the general community, thereby enhancing mutual understanding and good relations.

I am sure that Members will all agree that this is an eclectic mix, and I have mentioned only a few of the community festivals organised across the country. All these events, in some way or other, contribute to major Government initiatives such as 'A Shared Future'. The organisation of such events builds confidence and develops skills and capacity that may be used to address other issues facing those communities.

However, as with all such activity, it costs money to organise community festivals. In the past, small pockets of funding were available from a number of Departments, but this was not widely known and, with a lack of capacity in new and emerging festivals, the funds were not easily accessible. Only a small number of specified festivals were supported from public funds. These included the West Belfast Féile, the Ardoyne Fleadh and the Greater New Lodge Festival.

Following a review of community-festival funding and consultation with stakeholders, it was clear that a more transparent, fair and equitable funding policy was required. From this process emerged the community festival fund, which came into operation in April 2006. The main purpose of the fund is to improve the capacity of community festivals, so as to make them more sustainable and less reliant on public funding. The fund enables community organisations to celebrate their cultural identity and to strengthen community relations.

The budget for the community festivals fund is a relatively modest £450,000 per annum. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) entered into a two-year agreement with the Northern Ireland Events Company (NIEC) as the delivery agent for the fund. In 2006-07, the fund supported 42 festivals from all parts of Northern Ireland, the majority of which had not previously received public funding. In 2007-08, the fund has so far supported 40 festivals.

Part of the community festivals budget has also been used to provide training for festival organisers, the vast majority of whom are volunteers. The skills developed through this training become embedded in local communities, thereby increasing their confidence and building capacity to address wider issues. Demand for this was high, particularly in the first year of the fund, reflecting the lack of capacity in many communities. This support for the development of skills and knowledge is a sound investment for the future.

During the second year of operation, NIEC commissioned an independent evaluation of the community festivals fund, which was carried out by Community Evaluation Northern Ireland. The report concluded that the fund is making a valuable contribution to the realisation of a number of key Government policies and priorities, including promoting good relations and social cohesion. It also concluded that the events supported make a significant contribution to community life and that, given the number of communities benefiting from the fund, the diversity and range of activities and events supported and the considerable level of voluntary input, the fund represents good value for money.

The evaluation also highlighted a number of areas where the administration of the fund could be improved, including the introduction of a less complex application process for smaller grant awards. The application process was seen to be disproportionate to the amount of grant sought, and was likely to inhibit some of the least able groups from applying for support.

In the light of that, I have concluded that the community festivals fund provides positive benefits to local communities at a relatively modest cost to the public purse. The fund will, therefore, continue.

However, I have reviewed the future delivery arrangements, taking into account the emerging findings from the review of public administration (RPA). Under the RPA, the work undertaken by NIEC was to transfer to the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) on 1 April 2008. Nevertheless, it was not envisaged that community festivals would be part of that transfer, as that function is not central to NITB's remit. It is recorded in the RPA that the community festivals fund should transfer as a function to local government and, in the most recent paper from my colleague Arlene Foster, Minister of the Environment, on the emerging findings and next steps, that position remains.

The vision of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) for new local government is:

"to develop vibrant and cohesive local communities, in which all citizens have a voice and opportunities to shape the service which contribute to their quality of life."

It is clear that the logical home for the community festivals fund is with local government. Local councils already have departments that deal directly with local communities, and officers who specialise in community development. That direct interface means that councils are best placed to build capacity at grass roots level, and to identify the events that will benefit their communities.

My intention, therefore, is to transfer the delivery of the community festivals fund to local authorities from 1 April 2008. It is a pressing issue, as there is a significant lead-in time for the funding application

process. In most cases, planning for festivals in 2008 is already under way, and organisers need to know their budgets to enable them to book artistes, venues and equipment well in advance. By transferring administration of the fund to local government, it becomes much closer to the community and the people it supports, making it more responsive to differing local needs.

The Minister of the Environment has confirmed that, given the pressing need to inform festival organisers of funding arrangements, she fully supports my proposals. My Department has taken legal advice, and I understand that there is no legal impediment to an early transfer of the functions to local authorities. No legislation is required, as local authorities already have statutory powers to fund local events. Indeed, many local councils are already involved in funding festivals.

My Department has consulted with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) on the mechanics of transferring the fund to local government. The preferred option is that DCAL retains responsibility for community festivals policy, and that the Department makes an annual allocation to each council under a specific grant process. That model is successfully operated by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to award grants to district councils for their community-relations programmes.

Councils will be required to take account of the Department's policy and guidance framework on community festivals. However, consistent with the ethos of devolving decisions to local councils, they will have considerable flexibility to develop their own application processes, with local criteria. As councils already operate a number of small grant schemes, that should not be onerous to administer. Furthermore, I anticipate that the application process will be much less onerous for festival organisers, and I know that they will welcome that.

It is my view that councils should support local community festivals from their own resources; therefore, I shall seek match funding. Many councils already fund community festivals, and will continue to do so, and pooling of the community festivals fund and local support will maximise the benefit. The Department will liaise with NILGA on the detailed arrangements for implementing the scheme.

10.45 am

I intend to move quickly to transfer those functions to local government, because local councils will need lead-in time to publicise the new arrangements and to process applications for events that are to be held in the spring and summer of 2008. I am confident that the House will agree that that is the best way forward for the delivery of the community festivals fund.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith

agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the Minister's bringing the statement to the House. I agree with him that community festivals play a vital role in our social and economic life. I am pleased that he referred to Féile an Phobail, and to the scale of that particular community-based festival. In the past, the organisers of Féile an Phobail often felt that fine words were not matched by appropriate funding levels, but I shall leave that issue to one side for now.

I also note that responsibility for the community festivals fund is to transfer to local government, which, as the Minister has said, is its logical home. In 2006-07 and 2007-08, how many projects west of the Bann received public funding or support from the Events Company? How was that funding administered and rolled out?

Do the Minister and the Department intend to increase the overall budget for the community festivals fund? It currently stands at a relatively modest £450,000, but are there any plans to increase that figure? Moreover, the community festivals fund's profile was never high enough in rural areas. Can the Minister confirm whether the Ulster Fleadh Cheoil, which was held for two years in a row in Coalisland, received any support or funding from the community festivals fund?

Mr Poots: The following councils west of the Bann received public funding: Omagh District Council applied for funding for two events and received £7,000, although Omagh will now get considerably more than that; Limavady Borough Council applied for funding for three events and received £12,000; Londonderry's council applied for funding for four events and received £38,000; Coleraine is on the Bann, and Coleraine Borough Council applied for funding for five events and received £15,500; Cookstown District Council and Strabane District Council did not receive anything; Fermanagh District Council applied for funding for three events and received £13,200; and Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council applied for funding for four events and received £12,090. I suppose that Craigavon is also on the Bann, and Craigavon Borough Council received £24,400, having applied for funding for four events. Almost all those councils will receive an increase in funding as a result of this morning's announcement. Those local authorities will be able to liaise closely with individuals to deliver that funding.

The Chairperson asked whether additional funding would be made available. I want councils to match the budget of £450,000. Many councils already contribute to festivals, so they will not be asked to give more. However, money is to be given out on the basis that councils at least match whatever we give them. If, for example, a council were to get £20,000 from us, it must match that £20,000. Should councils wish to put more into festivals, that is totally their decision.

Mr McCausland: I welcome the Minister's statement. Under direct rule, funding of festivals was inequitable and discriminatory. Year after year, preferential treatment was given to the three nationalist — indeed, republican — festivals in north and west Belfast. Those three festivals were locked into funding, to the exclusion of other festivals.

What was the breakdown of funding for festivals last year, particularly for the aforementioned festivals? Will the Minister assure us that we will see a change and that funding of festivals will be an equitable and equality-driven process?

Mr Poots: Festivals that were perceived as being nationalist festivals, based on the community-back-ground designation on funding application forms, received £120,242.

Festivals that were perceived as cross-community in character received funding of £113,015. Festivals that were perceived as unionist in character received funding of £45,150. Indian festivals received funding of £5,000, and Turkish festivals received funding of £3,000.

Mr McNarry: I welcome the Minister's statement. The measures that he has announced are innovative and in keeping with forward thinking.

Will the Minister provide details of what the specific-grant system and match funding mean for the proportion of funding that will be available to each council — particularly for Ards Borough Council, Down District Council, and Castlereagh Borough Council in my constituency of Strangford?

Mr Poots: I do not have to hand the details for each council, but funding will be based on population and levels of deprivation. Deprivation has already been taken into account by the Department in deciding on the distribution of funding. It is up to councils what to do thereafter, but they are not under any obligation to consider deprivation in their distribution of festival funding because the Department will already have done that. That is the legitimate and correct thing to do, and that is worth emphasising.

Ards Borough Council would receive a considerable amount of money as a result of the measures that I have outlined — without being specific, that will probably be roughly £40,000 in match funding.

Mr P Ramsey: I also wish to commend the Minister on his statement and on his leadership in such a short period of time, which will give comfort to groups that have great worries and concerns. Perhaps, at a later stage, he can deal with the issue of community sport.

I welcome the fact that funding will be allocated on the basis of population distribution and deprivation levels. In common with other Members, I share the view that the return on such small investment is

enormous, in respect of acknowledging and recognising people's cultural and historical backgrounds.

Are figures available on the grants that were awarded by the Events Company over the past two years? One would imagine that the idea of a community festival is to encourage others to come forward with ideas for new festivals — it cannot just be the usual suspects all the time. We must be innovative in allowing other cities and community groups to take advantage of funding. What has the Minister in mind in that respect?

I particularly welcome funding for the Maiden City Festival, the Gas Yard Féile, an Gaeláras, and the Golden Links Festival. We want those events to continue, but it is important that others have similar opportunities.

Mr Poots: Funding was introduced to assist communities to develop festivals, to introduce fresh revenue streams, to help groups liaise with — and secure sponsorship from — the private sector, and to allow groups to demonstrate to the private sector that festivals can bring significant benefits.

It is not the view of my Department that festival funding should remain with the same groups. Once a festival is established and up and running, it may still require some funding — and most of them will. However, as capacity develops, festivals should be able to develop a greater capacity for introducing funding from the private sector, because they should be able to demonstrate the ability to organise a good-quality festival that will bring many local people into an area and bring real benefits for that community, and for the business sector. The training work that took place in the past year should have assisted in that, and should help smaller groups to get established.

We want to see festival funding continually moving so that more groups and new festivals are introduced and brought on stream, widening the scope of such funding.

Ms Lo: I very much welcome the Minister's new approach, which will also be welcomed by many communities that, in the past, when applying for funding for community festivals, had to approach their local council, the Events Company, and various sponsors.

I think that the new approach will simplify the process. My concern is that if it is cost-effective, we will need to increase the pot of money; first, from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and, secondly, using match funding from councils.

How will the process work as regards the councils? Do they all have the same capacity to provide full match funding or would some of them be discouraged from providing such funding?

Mr Poots: As regards the latter point, for my own council, it would mean finding a sum of between

£25,000 and £30,000 from a rate base of £25 million. It should be remembered that most councils already contribute to festivals; therefore, it will be relatively easy for them to provide match funding.

However, it will be for councils to decide whether to take advantage of the funding that is on offer, and funding will be redistributed to those councils who wish to avail of it. I am minded to skew such a redistribution — if it takes place, because some councils do not see the value of community festivals — to areas that have taken the greatest amount of festival funding in the past.

Mr Shannon: I welcome the Minister's statement, which again shows that the Assembly, at ministerial level, is delivering for local communities. Today's announcement is good news.

Will the Minister confirm that the community festivals fund will be spread across the 26 council areas? Ards Borough Council has received no funding in the past either through community festival funding or directly from the Government. There are many community festivals in the Ards borough and other events, such as the Ballygraffon Horse Trials and the BASC Northern Ireland Games Fair, as well as the Twelfth of July celebrations, which, collectively, have the potential to bring a lot of people to the area. Has TSN been applied to each of the council areas? If so, will the Minister confirm that Ards Borough Council will be the recipient of financial assistance from the community festivals fund?

Mr Poots: Yes, I can confirm that the TSN criteria have been applied and that Ards Borough Council will benefit. I have no doubt that the Member will be very quick to inform groups about the opportunities that may exist — I know him quite well. His colleague from Strangford Mr McNarry asked how much money would be going to the Ards area. If Ards Borough Council is prepared to provide match funding, £18,000 will be provided by the Department. Match funding will raise that sum to £36,000, to be distributed in an area in which, previously, no money was distributed.

This is a great opportunity for many areas across Northern Ireland — five council areas, three of which are unionist and two of which are nationalist — to benefit from festival funding. I think that that is good for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement, but I do not know whether I welcome it because some issues need to be further teased out.

In one of his remarks, the Minister said that if council areas do not take up the offer of match funding, festivals in those areas will not receive funding. That is a flaw. I am not sure whether the Minister has spoken to all the councils. If he has not done so, that is also a flaw and it must be addressed.

I am glad that the Minister mentioned Féile an Phobail at the start of his statement. Like him, I recognise the importance of that festival. In earlier comments, the Minister stated that some groups may be being hindered and restricted as regards funding because they have been organising for many years and funding has been reduced. That issue needs to be addressed also. Some of the most important festivals have had their funding restricted over the years — by half on some occasions.

11.00 am

Mr Speaker: Will the Member please ask his question?

Mr P Maskey: Has the Minister discussed the issue with all the councils?

Mr Poots: We have not discussed the issue with the 26 councils, although we have spoken to NILGA representatives. Through the review of public administration, we have consulted local authorities, and it was clearly identified that community-festival funding would come under their remit, as is stated in the emerging findings paper.

With regard to match funding, this is a tremendous opportunity to ensure that festivals are expanded, not diminished. Councils must not use these moneys to replace moneys that had previously been allocated to festivals. Councils have a chance to enhance festivals, with only a modest impact on their rates base.

Lord Browne: I welcome the Minister's statement. Will the Minister acknowledge the fact that, historically, cultural festivals have been driven from a narrow culture base? How does he intend to ensure an equitable distribution of future community-festival funding? Will criteria be established to ensure consistency across councils? To what extent will the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure be involved in overseeing the fund?

Mr Poots: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will set the overarching policy and guidance framework, which will outline broad criteria for funding festivals. However, councils will have considerable flexibility in determining their own processes and detailed criteria. The Department will issue letters of offer to each council, monitor how the funds are drawn down and ask local authorities to publish their assessment criteria, application processes and procedures for making awards. Local authorities will have control over funding decisions and funding levels. I am confident that no one is better placed than public representatives on local authorities to gear festival funding towards local community needs. I am also confident that our local councillors will identify the projects that are best suited to, and most beneficial for, their areas.

Mr Elliott: I welcome the Minister's statement and the proposals that will allow local authorities to deliver community-festival funding. Will the Minister assure the House that measures will be put in place to ensure that groups that do not come from the majority section of a local community will receive fair access to that funding?

Mr Poots: All equality provisions and safeguards that apply to local authority decisions will also apply to community-festival funding. I am sure that, if a local authority discriminates against people on the basis of their being members of a minority group, the local community will make its voice clearly heard. It is not in the best interests of a local authority to discriminate against any section of a community. In recent years, there has not been much evidence of that happening, and I trust that that will continue to be the case.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement, but I do not welcome its content. The Benches opposite have missed the point entirely; there is not enough money for community-festival funding. I declare an interest, because I am a director of Féile an Phobail, and I thank the Minister for his complimentary remarks about that féile, which he recognises as being one of the largest. In recent years, funding for that féile has been slashed, and the community festival fund owes it £30,000. We are now in a situation where £450,000 will be available for 40 community festivals. Will the Minister tell the House whether there are guarantees to ensure that local councils will match funding? Will efforts be made to increase funding? Will the community festival fund repay the £30,000 that is owed to Féile an Phobail?

Mr Poots: I cannot guarantee what individual local authorities in Northern Ireland will do — thankfully, for everyone, I do not have that authority. Ultimately, Members will seek to influence their local authorities in the best interests of their communities. I do not think that there is a strong case for anyone not to accept the funding being offered, provide match funding and create the best opportunities for their communities to develop festivals.

The West Belfast Festival has been very successful, and its success should lead to more private funding streams. As that festival moves towards receiving more private-sector funding, having demonstrated its success, opportunities can be created for new festivals on the basis of the funding being distributed across Northern Ireland — west of the Bann; east of the Bann; in nationalist and in unionist areas. My Department is not discriminating against people; funding is being allocated on the basis of population and deprivation, and this is an opportunity for everyone to get a slice of the cake. The larger festivals have the capacity to move forward, and, hopefully, smaller festivals will come on stream

that can also move forward and benefit from the funding that might not have been available to them previously.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Minister, and I welcome his statement. He will be aware that this year's Belfast Festival at Queen's was very successful and attracted many visitors to Northern Ireland. Will he assure me that that festival will continue to get funding through today's announcement?

Mr Poots: I am looking at a different mechanism of funding for the Belfast Festival at Queen's. As the Member is aware, the festival is arts-based and already receives funding from the Arts Council, and I hope that the Arts Council will continue to fund the festival.

There was some pressure, particular this year, on the festival, and there was concern about it. First, I hope that there will not be any concern about the Belfast Festival at Queen's continuing — I want to remove any uncertainty about that. Secondly, I want to see the festival expanding, and I will both work with the private sector and ensure that public money is maintained to grow the festival and make it an even more significant event that will bring huge benefits to the community.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the establishment of objective criteria; the Minister is approaching the issue from the right direction. Despite the progress that we can record in our communities, some comments from the Minister's own Benches reflect a shared concern about how the policy will apply in individual council areas. It should be acknowledged that there have been problems in some council areas. Will the Minister outline the checks and balances that will accompany the regulations to ensure that a fair and equitable approach is taken?

Mr Poots: As the Member is aware, the equality regulations that apply to local authorities will continue to apply in this case. Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and other equality measures will help to ensure that funding will be distributed on an equitable basis and that people are not discriminated against. Ultimately, local authorities will draw up the criteria.

However, I do not get the feeling, nor have I for a long time, that local authorities are out to discriminate against sections of their own communities. Local authorities are there to serve their communities, and they do so well. Those who suggest that local authorities may choose to discriminate against their communities in some shape or form do not reflect their true nature. It is a somewhat disparaging suggestion.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's statement and his commitment to the shared future initiative. However, he referred to the Belfast Féile, which began some 20 years ago, as one of the oldest community festivals in Northern Ireland. I inform the House that

the Portaferry Gala, which is held annually in my constituency in the second week of July, has just celebrated its fortieth birthday, and it gets better every year. Any Member of the House who has not been to the gala is more than welcome to come this year.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member come to the question?

Mr McCarthy: Indeed.

In his statement, the Minister acknowledges that most of the festivals in question are run by community volunteers, and the acquisition of funds is vital to their activities. Will the Minister assure the House that, by handing over the funding of community festivals to local councils, and taking into account the future amalgamation of councils, festival organisers will not be disadvantaged or squeezed out from receiving sufficient funds, because the new larger councils will be further removed from local communities?

Mr Poots: Perhaps the Member should refer that question to the Minister of the Environment, who was sitting beside me a moment ago, because part of her Department's remit is to ensure that, when the new local authorities are established — and they may not be as large as Mr McCarthy thinks, although that remains to be seen — they take cognisance of those communities that are smaller or are on the periphery of the council areas. Much responsibility falls to the local representatives, and, if they state their communities' case strongly and cogently, I am sure that their council colleagues will listen.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement and particularly his commitment to giving local government a greater role. As a local councillor, I declare an interest. Will the Minister leave a provision for those councils that may not have community structures in place to avail of the new community festival fund? Last year, local councillors in Dungannon found that sufficient funding was not available for the Flight of the Earls festival, given that it is a sizeable event. It is important that local government has the facility to fund such events.

Mr Poots: Councils must develop funding criteria. The community festival fund is, by its very nature, community-based. However, if it is a matter of reaching out to communities and working in conjunction with them, with the council taking the lead, my Department will examine establishing criteria for that. There will be overarching policy guidelines, but the Department is prepared to work with local authorities on the development of their criteria. If that best meets the needs of a particular area, it can be considered.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Outline of a Vision for our Education System

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Education that she wishes to make a statement on the outline of a vision for our education system.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. When the Administration came into being on 8 May 2007, Ministers in the Executive from every Department faced unique challenges and opportunities. Local Ministers who are accountable to local people are now taking decisions. Unlike under direct rule, local Ministers are accessible, available and, most importantly, working on the ground. One of the principal —

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will take the point of order after the Minister's statement.

11.15 am

Ms Ruane: One of the principal challenges facing education has been the need to reform a system that was constructed more than 60 years ago and that is still in place today. For decades, successive Education Ministers talked about dealing with the issue of the 11-plus — and for decades, all we have got is talk.

In 2002, Martin McGuinness, in his capacity as Minister of Education, announced the end of the 11-plus. We now have an opportunity to truly transform our system into one that is world class and fit for the twenty-first century. In recent months, I have spoken to teachers, parents, pupils and administrators, and there is a real appetite out there to embrace change, to improve our system and to end the two-tier culture that brands so many of our young people as failures at the age of 11.

I relish the challenge of transforming our outdated and unequal education system into a modern, flexible one that places equality of opportunity for every child at its core. Such a system will not only continue to deliver academic excellence for the few but can deliver it for all. That is what local decision-making is all about. The previous lack of local accountability is one of the reasons why no action was taken to change a system that was put in place in the late 1940s and that is still expected to deliver for our children in 2007.

This is an Executive with an agenda for change at its core: this is an Executive that has been mandated to transform our society for the better. As I proceed in carrying out the changes to our education system, equality is my watchword; equality of access and equality of educational opportunity. I plan to bring our

education system into the twenty-first century and lay down a foundation that will ensure educational excellence and greater participation in the future.

My proposals are ambitious. They require further work at a detailed level, but the direction in which I wish to travel is now clear, and the time is right to share that with you.

Central to the 1947 education system, through which children in today's primary schools are still being processed, has been the 11-plus transfer test. Following consultation on the Burns Report, Martin McGuinness announced the ending of the transfer test in 2002. Subsequently, direct rule Minister Jane Kennedy announced that the final transfer test would be held in 2008. That means that the final children to transfer under the existing system will commence post-primary school in September 2009. The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 causes the current admissions arrangements to lapse for September 2010 admissions.

That is the context in which I have been focused; the creation and delivery of a fundamentally exciting new vision for the education system in the North. The changes proposed will, with proper planning and effective implementation, have an immediate and positive effect. I have written to my Executive colleagues outlining my vision and I have briefed the Education Committee. I was to have a meeting with the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, but he did not make it, as he was held up in traffic. However, he will be glad to know that under my new arrangements there will be less traffic on the road, and children will no longer pass each other on buses. My colleague Conor Murphy will also be delighted with that.

I have reflected long and hard on what has been said to me over the past six months. Additionally, I have taken detailed and considered account of the changing environment in which our education system is expected to function. I am conscious that the debate on education has become narrowly focused on the contentious issue of academic selection as the basis for transferring to the post-primary sector. That narrow focus by sectoral interests has been a matter of considerable concern to me because the debate is really about delivering a vision for a world-class education system reflecting the needs of all our children equally.

I am an advocate for dynamic and effective change in education. Today, I am outlining a clear vision that moves us all beyond the outdated concept of the two-tier education system that has failed so many of our children.

Such a system will have to provide our children with the life skills required for today's complex, rapidly transforming, socially changing and globalised world. That system must also provide children with the qualifications and skills required in a modern and dynamic economy. The blue-collar and white-collar

world has gone, and with it the primary rationale for a two-gear post-primary system. It is imperative that we develop a more flexible and agile post-primary system. Surely, in 2007, we can develop sophisticated models of school organisation.

The reformed post-primary system that I am outlining will, quite properly, have to take account of the full reform agenda that is already affecting the education system in the North. For example, the revised curriculum is being introduced over the next three years. The entitlement framework within the curriculum will introduce new and exciting opportunities for our young people. Before and after GCSE, we envisage access to a broad range of academic, professional and technical courses.

I have seen the revised curriculum, which is being delivered in classrooms across the North, beginning to work. Teachers are energised by the revised curriculum and children are stimulated by it, and that combination is helping to ensure that our children get the best possible education. Those changes will be supported by the significant reform of education administration and the establishment of the education and skills authority (ESA). The development of area-based planning will play a key role in that. Tá sé ráite agam roimhe sa Tionól go mbeinn sásta moltaí a thabhairt chun tosaigh atá dírithe ar a chinntiú go mbeidh fáil chothrom ag gach páiste ar an oideachas iarbhunscolaíochta is fearr. Tá sé léirithe agam freisin go dtabharfaidh mé chun tosaigh moltaí chun an córas oideachais a mhúnlú ar leasa an pháiste in áit an páiste a mhúnlú ar leasa institiúide oideachais éigin.

On several occasions, I have stated in the Chamber that I would bring forward proposals aimed at ensuring that all the children in this society have equal access to high-quality post-primary education. I have also made it abundantly clear that I will bring forward proposals to mould the system around the interests of the child, instead of a system that matches the child to the interests of a particular educational institution. That is the direction in which the Department will proceed.

Children and parents must be able to have confidence that their local post-primary schools will offer the quality and depth of educational provision that they want, need and deserve. I am determined that my Department — in partnership with all educationalists — will ensure that every school is a good one, is sustainable and has a clear focus on high standards. That is why I have brought forward my revised school-improvement policy, 'Every School a Good School'.

I intend to mobilise and co-ordinate the resources at my disposal to build a modern and flexible education system, which moves us away from the outdated 1947 institutional model that divides children aged 11 years into just two school types — grammar and non-grammar.

A twenty-first century model will transform that unequal and outdated approach by matching children of all aptitudes to the full breadth of provision that they want, need and deserve to fulfil their maximum potential as citizens and members of society. However, the key principle that underpins the new model of educational provision will be equality. No longer will any child be at a disadvantage because their parents cannot afford tuition or coaching, and no longer will the potential of any citizen be undermined because, as a small child, aged 11 years, he or she fell through the cracks of an unequal two-tier system that was born 60 years ago.

Geallaim don Teach inniu go mbeidh cearta comhionanna gach páiste ag croílár an chórais úir. My pledge today is that the equal rights of all children will be at the heart of the new system.

During the past six months, I have been told that we have the best education system in the world. Undoubtedly, the capacity of our education system to deliver high-quality academic excellence is widely — and correctly — celebrated. However, regardless of the selective presentation of figures for the academic achievement of one section of our children, the cold reality is that the system still fails a high proportion of our young people.

A system that does well for some and does not deliver for the rest is unacceptable.

I am the Minister of Education for all children. I cannot — and will not — ignore the fact that every year 4,000 young people leave school after 12 years of compulsory education without the appropriate basic literacy and numeracy skills. I believe that it is possible to develop a system that will not only continue to deliver academic excellence for the few but will deliver it for all.

To those — particularly on the unionist Benches — who still believe that our system is not broken, I ask: look at the situation in many working-class areas. Unionist working-class communities such as the lower Shankill, Mount Vernon and Tigers Bay have been left behind, and many are completely disconnected with the education system before they reach the age of 16. The same can be said for many working-class nationalist communities whether they are in the Falls, Downpatrick, Strabane or Derry. That is the reality; and it is a reality that I am not prepared to stand by and allow to continue.

Tá mé ag iarraidh córas oideachais a chumadh ina mbeidh fáil ag gach páiste ar réimse cothrom de roghanna ardehaighdeáin sna pointí criticúla ina bhforbairt oideachasúil. Creidim gurb é ceithre bliana déag an aois is criticúla.

Let me be very clear; I am not advocating a one-size-fits-all system. Rather, I am seeking to devise an

education system in which all children will enjoy access to an equal range of high-quality choices at the critical junction points in their educational development, the most significant of which is at age 14. That will involve building a system that will sustain a range of schools and provision and that will value all of them equally. We want to retain everything that is good about our current system — including academic excellence — and improve on its performance so that it will cater for the needs of all our young people.

Making fundamental educational determinations for children at the age of 11 is wrong; and such decisions, for most children, become irreversible. By moving the point of transition to age 14 and by introducing more flexibility and agility into the structures, we will make it possible for the transformed education system to facilitate the deserved and diverse needs of children — reversing the negative demand of slotting children into a system that has historically branded some as failures and others as, potentially, successes. The key point is not that academic selection is unjust, but that it is unnecessary and unjust. I firmly believe that we can collectively deliver all the benefits of academic excellence without the trauma of academic selection at the age of 10 or 11.

In my vision, young people will enjoy equal access to their post-14 educational pathway in a number of ways, as determined by the planning of education in their local areas. They will include: access within an 11-19 school; transfer to an alternative 11-19 school; access through an 11-19 school or a post-14 school, which offers the entitlement framework in collaboration with other schools in a learning community. A local area may offer general provision in 11-14 schools followed by specialism and diversity in 14-plus provision.

An academic pathway will remain that will be accessed by intelligent, well-informed and mature election and available through modern, organisational flexibility. Testing is not the best way to inform admissions decisions at 14 about a young person's educational and career pathway. Such decisions should be based on a process of formal, structured election: it will take account of the outcomes of three years of post-primary education and teacher and parental guidance, in addition to careers education, information, advice and guidance resulting in the matching of children to suitable provision. Contrast that with the way in which our current system approaches matching pupils to provision — by using two one-hour tests sat by 10- to 11-year-olds to determine entrance to one of two types of school.

11.30 am

Through the entitlement framework, academic courses can be well integrated with challenging professional and/or technical courses, providing a much better base

for many future third-level entrants, which is more properly tailored to the requirements of a modern economy.

That framework will also ensure the capacity to deliver high-quality professional and/or technical pathways, accessed by choice, available through modern organisational flexibility, and, above all, enjoying parity of esteem.

Some may criticise the structural change that my vision may entail. However, it is a fact that structural change will be required, regardless of my approach to post-primary education. After 10 years of dramatically falling pupil numbers, we have an increasing problem with school sustainability and surplus places, resulting in 50,000 empty desks — and that figure will increase over the coming years.

Structural reform is unavoidable. George Bain's independent review is clear about that. Far from being a matter of unnecessary structural change, it is a matter of embracing the massive potential that this opportunity offers us to modernise our service provision and education system.

Structural change need not mean vast amounts of new capacity. By reorganising the existing capacity within the framework of my vision for education, I intend to deliver not only effective education, but efficient education. For example, extended access to professional, technical, general and academic courses could be achieved through the process of school and further education collaborations, and the careful management of the schools estate at a time of falling school numbers.

Tá an dréachtChlár Rialtais soiléir sa mhéid seo, nó dearbhaíonn sé go mbeidh na focail “cothroime”, “cuimsiú” agus “comhionannas” mar fhocail faire ag an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin agus é ag soláthar a chuid polasaithe agus ina chlár.

The draft Programme for Government is explicit in declaring that the watchwords of the Executive, in delivering all its policies and programmes, will be fairness, inclusion and equality.

The 1947 education system, which encompasses a post-primary transfer system that brands 11-year-old children as failures, is not fair, inclusive or equal. Because of that, it is my intention, following a period of consultation, to bring forward regulations governing the operation of post-primary transfer for 2010, and for the subsequent interim period before the implementation of a 14-plus system of election.

There will be no 11-plus transfer test in the 2009-10 school year. Pupils transferring to post-primary school in September 2010 will do so overwhelmingly on the basis of preference for certain schools, in much the same way that primary schools and preschools are chosen

now. From 2010, the criteria will include community, geography and family.

I am conscious that many grammar schools have been admitting a wide ability range for some years now, and will receive all their pupils in September 2010 without regard to academic assessment. Some grammar schools may need some time and assistance to adjust to the new system that I have outlined today, and, in my forthcoming discussions with them, I hope to be able to reach an agreed way forward to facilitate that transition. I hope that all grammar schools will see a positive future for the continuation of academic excellence in my vision for education. If any school, however, chooses to operate independent admission arrangements that lie outside the new system of transfer, I want to make it clear that there is no obligation on my Department to assist with funding.

It is important that the transfer from primary to post-primary education be as seamless as possible. I am confident that we can find the best way forward to meet the needs of all our children, based on a vision that places quality educational outcomes and equality of educational opportunities for each and every child at its epicentre.

Next year will be the last year of the 11-plus. There will be no 11-plus in 2009, nor will I be asking primary school educators to ever again disrupt or interfere with the teaching of the revised curriculum in furtherance of a transfer test.

Children in year 5, their parents and their teachers can now focus on the job in hand — educating our young people and concentrating on the curriculum in a way that allows each and every child an equal opportunity to fulfil his or her full potential as citizens in the future.

I recognise the critical role that principals and teachers will play in implementing my proposals, and I know that we will work together in the best interests of our children and young people.

I have outlined today how we are to proceed in the years ahead. Let the construction of a new education system now begin. This is no longer a debate about the merits of academic selection. My focus now is on delivering a world-class education system for all our children. I ask Members to join with me in building that education system, which will benefit everyone. I believe that these proposals offer us the road map to get there. Tosóimid anois ar an obair thábhachtach seo.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is my understanding that, where a matter is of significance or where there are important cross-cutting issues, it should first be brought to the Executive. Can you give a ruling on whether it is appropriate for the Minister to bring this significant issue to the Floor of the House without having first brought it to the Executive?

Mr Speaker: I am responsible for ensuring that business in the House is conducted within Standing Orders. The Minister's only requirement in Standing Orders is that not less than two and a half hours' notice of a statement is given to the Speaker. That requirement was met by the Minister of Education yesterday. I also understand that the Whips were contacted immediately.

Mr McElduff: Further to that point of order, will Mr McCrea confirm whether the Ulster Unionist Party is a member of the Executive?

Mr Speaker: That is not an appropriate point of order. I call Lord Morrow for a further point of order.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will Sinn Féin confirm whether it intends to discuss this matter seriously?

Mr Speaker: Order. That is not an appropriate point of order. I call Lord Morrow.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. If there is doubt that a section of the Minister's statement is inaccurate, should it not be brought to your attention? The Minister said:

"I have written to my Executive colleagues outlining my vision and I have briefed the Education Committee."

When did the Minister write to her Executive colleagues?

Mr Speaker: I hope that Lord Morrow will be able to put that question to the Minister.

Mr Poots: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, as a ministerial colleague, I did not receive any correspondence from the Minister. I informed my Executive colleagues that I intended to make a statement on community festival funding, and I gave them a week to respond. The Minister has not given us the same privilege. She should realise that she will not be able to implement such policies — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to all sides of the House, I am not responsible for Executive protocols and who enforces them. As the Speaker, I am here to protect the House and its protocols, and that is as far as my responsibility goes.

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In respect of what you have just outlined, and in deep appreciation of it, the House finds itself in a similar position to when the Minister for Social Development took a step that resulted in a legal question being asked about her actions, to the extent that I cannot talk about the issue because it is sub judice. Is it in your interests to rule that, in the interests of the House, there may be legal complications about the Minister's statement and that the House should reflect on that?

Mr Speaker: I have already said that I received notification of the Minister's statement yesterday. The

Minister has followed all protocols, and my responsibility ends with that. Whatever happens within the Executive happens within the Executive, and it is for them to resolve.

My main duty is to protect the House and its procedures, and that is what I have done this morning.

Before I call Mr Sammy Wilson to ask the Minister a question, I advise Members that there is a full list of people who also wish to ask questions. Therefore, I ask Members to refrain from making speeches and to keep their questions short and to the point. By doing so, they will increase their colleagues' chances of asking a question.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr S Wilson): I thank the Minister for prior knowledge of her statement, which she made available to me before the sitting. I understand that some of her Executive colleagues may not feel the same way. I apologise for that, because it is perhaps due to the fact that I rushed her into making today's statement in advance of the motion that is tabled for next week.

As usual, the Minister's statement contains a plateful of platitudes but only a spoonful of substance. Therefore, I have several questions, and, given that the Minister has had from May to contemplate the matter, I trust that we will get some answers from her this morning, rather than being told that we must wait until the consultation period is over.

First, given that there will be a gap between the old and new arrangements, between 2008 and 2011, how will the Minister reassure school principals and parents about what will happen during that period?

Secondly, after 2011, how will places be allocated if schools are oversubscribed?

Thirdly, given that the Minister emphasises the geographical context of transfers, how will she ensure that her vision of equality and fairness will be met and that people will not simply buy a house close to the school to which they wish to send their children?

The Minister said that significant structural changes will be necessary. What will those changes entail? How many schools that currently accept pupils aged 11 to 18 will be required to change in order to accept children aged 11 to 14 or children aged 14 to 18? How much will those structural changes cost?

Finally, given that the Minister has ignored the political reality that such changes require cross-community support, as well as ignoring the views of 70% of the public, 65% of teachers, and half of the House, how does she intend to get those proposals through the House?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Go raibh maith agat le haghaidh na ceiste sin. First, I confirm that I sent a letter to all my Executive colleagues,

and it might be wise for Executive members to check with their officials — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor. Give her some order.

Ms Ruane: On a previous occasion, when I sent a letter to the Minister of Culture, Arts, and Leisure, he wrote back to say that he had not received it, but subsequently confirmed that he had. Executive members will find that the letter has been sent.

I thank Sammy Wilson for his comments. I am disappointed that we did not have a chance to talk this morning; nonetheless, his comments are welcome.

There will always be popular and oversubscribed schools. We must ensure that every school is a good school, with good leadership, and that children attend the nearest local school.

On the question about a postcode lottery — what do we have at the moment? We have a life lottery in which we are playing with our children's lives using two one-hour tests. Is that fair? Is that right? I believe that it is fundamentally wrong that generations of our young people have been put through two one-hour tests, which amount to a life lottery.

We need to build a new vision of an education system. We need to transform our education system for every child. I welcome the fact that young people are here today. For the first time, they will be at the centre of the decision-making.

For the first time, their voices are going to be heard. It will not be other people — *[Interruption.]*

11.45 am

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ruane: For the first time — *[Interruption.]*

I am answering the question. For the first time, it will not be other people making decisions for them.

In relation to geographical — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. Allow the Minister to answer.

A Member: She is not answering the question.

Mr Speaker: I am not responsible for how a Minister answers a question. Members ought to know that.

Mr McNarry: On a point of order —

Mr Speaker: No points of order will be taken. The Minister is on her feet. *[Interruption.]*

I ask the Member to take his seat.

Mr McNarry: Is there a time limit as to how long the Minister can take to answer a question?

Ms Ruane: I was actually asked aon, dhá, trí, ceithre, cúig, sé ceisteanna. I was asked six questions, and I am

answering the six questions. I want to go through the questions that I was asked by the Cathaoirleach — the Chairperson — of the Committee for Education.

Regarding the geographical issue, I am bringing forward a school-improvement policy in which every school will be a good school. Regarding structural change and cost, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde, it appears that some politicians in the Assembly know:

“the price of everything, and the value of nothing.”

I intend to deliver not only effective education, but efficient education. Structural change need not mean vast amounts of new capacity, but, rather, by the reorganisation of existing capacity and the careful management of the schools estate — at a time of falling pupil numbers — we will be able to deliver a better education system, which is the most important thing that we can do for our children. What price do we put on our children's education?

I will be consulting on my proposals, and, as a Minister, I will comply with all my requirements and duties. I want to find the way forward. Political consensus is important to me, as is the agreement of parents, teachers, children and educational administrators. We will have many discussions about our vision for education, and I look forward to those discussions with people from every political creed.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire agus tacaíocht a thabhairt di —

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it appropriate for one Member to refer to another as a “lapdog”?

Mr Speaker: I am not taking points of order during questions to the Minister. I will be happy to do so afterwards.

Mr Butler: Maith thú, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank Caitríona Ruane for her statement. This is a historic and momentous day for our education system. The statement is good for children, parents, and the education system. It sets out a vision for transforming the education system from one which has been dominated by academic selection to one in which academic excellence will be achieved. The new system will give every child and young person an opportunity to leave school with qualifications. The best education system is one that caters for, and gives opportunities to, all children.

The Minister has said that key decisions will be taken at the age of 14, rather than, as now, selection at 11. Will that fundamental change to the education system result in children being better equipped to make those choices at 14, and able to select a pathway by which they can leave the education system and go into the workforce?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, Paul. There is broad consensus among educationalists that age 14 is a key decision point for young people. Under the current system, that is the age at which young people make important decisions about their courses of study and future career pathways.

At 11, pupils have not completed their formative core curriculum, and dividing them into academic and non-academic categories by two one-hour tests — or, indeed, by any other means — lacks educational justification.

An individual's decision on his or her post-14 pathway should be taken within a framework of choice and flexibility, informed by parents, teachers and the career strategy that Reg Empey, the Minister for Employment and Learning, and I have jointly put out to consultation. Ask any young person today what they like, what they are good at, what they want to do more of and what they want to do less of. Informed, mature election at the age of 14 is the way forward, and many educationalists will agree with that. There is consensus in the House around that.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Minister accept that, had she come to the House and asked for more resources for early-years education to help tackle educational underachievement, she would have had its full support? Had she talked of increasing parental choice and effort, or asked for more resources for under-performing schools, she would have had the full support of all Members. Is it not somewhat ironic that, instead, someone who chastises the high-stakes, winner-takes-all approach has brought measures to the House that are confrontational, do not build consensus and are unlikely to help?

Instead of tackling the issues that she brings —

Some Members: Where is the question?

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister undertake to fully involve the House and give it an opportunity to debate her proposals? She does not have the support of this half of the House or of the people of Northern Ireland. She will destroy the education system. This will be the ruination of —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Ms Ruane: I went before the electorate with our policies in relation to academic selection. I have been out and about in every part of the North of Ireland over the past six months. I have met people and visited many different areas; I have met school principals, from every community, who are crying out for change. We are debating the proposals now, and we will have many more debates, which I look forward to, as I look forward to working with all Members in building a new, dynamic education system.

The Member described the present system as world-class: I do not accept that. Pupil numbers are falling dramatically. Each year we fill grammar schools with an increasingly mixed-ability intake, and we leave many of the rest of our children to suffer the consequences of shrinking, unsustainable and potentially failing schools. That is despite the best efforts of principals in those schools. Our 69 grammar schools represent 30% of the 229 post-primary schools, but they now educate 42% of post-primary pupils, and the latest NISRA (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency) figures show that in 2013-14, that will be 45%. Our system is changing negatively and drifting. I am looking to galvanise it.

As I have said, I am not prepared to allow the system to continue to fail young people throughout the North. It is unfair. It is unfair to working-class communities, and it is not good for our economy or for the development of life skills among young people.

We have to move forward. We cannot put our heads in the sand and pretend that there is no problem. There are difficulties here, but we now have the opportunity to change. It is a unique opportunity. Instead of squabbling, let us move forward together and build the world-class education system that some think we have now.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá cúpla ceist agam don Aire. Is it not the case that the age of 14 was suggested as pivotal by the DUP at the Programme for Government Committee's Subgroup to Consider the Schools Admission Policy? After becoming Minister of Education, Ms Ruane abandoned the recommendations of the Costello Report, initiated by her colleague Mr McGuinness, and went along with the DUP's suggestion.

Furthermore, what plans does the Minister have to ensure that pathways that are chosen at the age of 14 genuinely reflect the ability and aptitude of pupils, rather than primarily coinciding with social and economic advantage? How can she reassure the public that the new system will not replicate the worst effects of academic selection and social disadvantage?

Ms Ruane: I have given the reasons that explain why 14 is a key age to choose a pathway, and I have stated that there is consensus on that among all parties, not just the DUP. The Member sat on the Committee that discussed that matter, and the consensus was that 14 is a key age for young people to make decisions.

We will do everything possible to ensure that every child is given a fair chance. We will ensure that every child's needs are met within our education system, and that they are matched to suitable provision. However, choice is a key principle — young people know what they want, along with their teachers, career advisers and parents. There is a much better way to make decisions than the one that was used in the past. We do

not need academic selection at 11, or 14, to make decisions. Young people and their parents can do that, helped by the good careers guidance that is crucial to those decisions.

Mr Lunn: The Alliance Party broadly welcomes the Minister's statement, as far as it goes. It is a vision statement, so we shall await concrete proposals. On the last page of the Minister's statement, there is a reference to what would happen if grammar schools opt for independent admission arrangements:

"If any school, however, chooses to operate independent admission arrangements that lie outside the new system of transfer, I want to make it clear that there is no obligation on my Department to assist with funding."

For those of us who like things to be absolutely clear, is the effect of the statement that there is no obligation on the Department to assist with funding related purely to the setting up and administration of those tests, or is there an implied threat to the funding of grammar schools?

Is the Minister comfortable with the proposed timescale? The year 2011 may appear to be far away, but that is no time, and to work within that short timescale will be an achievement.

In the statement, reference is made to the development of area-based planning, which plays a key role and which the Alliance Party welcomes, but how will that be developed within the proposed timescale?

Finally, to repeat a question that has been asked by two Members, but which has not yet been answered: do the Minister's proposals require cross-community support or not?

Ms Ruane: The transfer of the majority of children in the North will occur as it has always done. Most children transfer on the basis of non-academic criteria. I intend to discuss with grammar schools my proposals to move beyond the 1947 selective system, and I am committed to persuading them that academic selection is no more necessary to enable children to have access to an academic education, than vocational selection is necessary to enable children to have access to professional and technical courses.

I am aware that some grammar schools may need time to adjust to an intake that is based on non-academic criteria — the system to which I am committed. Therefore, I am keen to explore with those schools transitional arrangements that build on existing practice. In the new year, I shall make a further statement on progress towards an agreement for transfer arrangements in 2010. On securing the agreement, I will prepare draft regulations to underpin it, and I will bring that to the Committee for Education, and the Executive, for consideration.

If any school chooses to operate independent admission arrangements that lie outside the new system of transfer,

I want to make it clear that there is no obligation on my Department to assist with funding.

12.00 noon

Mr Storey: I do not welcome the fact that the Minister has come to the House with proposals that add to the confusion that already exists. She said that her proposals will:

"require further work at a detailed level before a number of questions can be answered".

Therefore, the Minister is not even in a position to answer questions in the House. If the statement was as well prepared as the one that she made on the amalgamation of two schools in my constituency — St Joseph's Primary School in Ahoghill and St Patrick's Primary School in Aughercloney — in which she made a fundamental error that is now being reviewed, there will be serious consequences for the announcement that she has made today.

Will the Minister state how she intends to deal with her proposals in a legislative framework? Has she any plans to consult with parents, whom she ignores, and their children, for whom she alleges that she has a conscience? I do not know from where Sinn Féin has suddenly got its conscience about children. Will the Minister tell the House what plans she has to consult with parents, so that Members know exactly how parents have reacted to her proposals? When will flesh be put on the bones of the skeleton proposals that the Minister has put forward?

Ms Ruane: At present, there is confusion and mess — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ruane: There is confusion and mess amid dramatically falling pupil numbers. I will repeat what I have already said, because I do not believe that the Member heard me. Each year, grammar schools are filled with an increasingly mixed-ability intake. Many other children are left to suffer the consequences of shrinking, unsustainable and potentially failing schools. Our 69 grammar schools represent 30% of the 229 post-primary schools. However, they educate 42% of post-primary pupils. I want to galvanise that provision. I have made proposals that will fundamentally change the system and improve it for all children, by matching them to suitable provision rather than to institutions.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister answer the question?

Ms Ruane: I am answering the Member's question. The programme of change will be structured, phased in over several years and locally developed. Of course, parents will be part of that, as will teachers, trade unions, different education sectors and the various Churches. Everyone in society has a stake in this, and it is essential that all their voices be heard.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement, not least because I am the parent of a child who is due to transfer to post-primary education in 2010. However, I welcome it not only on my child's behalf but on behalf of all children, who have the right not to be deemed failures at a young age.

Will the Minister confirm that she will ensure that those excellent rural primary schools that are not, at present, in close proximity to secondary schools will not be adversely affected by what many people describe as a "postcode lottery"?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. I understand the Member's concerns. However, I can assure her that the vision that I have outlined will ensure that her concerns do not come to pass. As I said in my statement, pupils who transfer to post-primary education in September 2010 will do so overwhelmingly on the basis of their preference of school, in much the same way in which children's parents choose their primary schools and preschools at present.

The permitted criteria that are issued to schools include family, community and geographical details. A section that deals with feeder primary schools is contained in the community and geographical criteria. The quicker that the move is made towards area-based planning, the quicker that the concerns about a postcode lottery can be put to bed.

Miss McIlveen: The Minister of confusion and mess has said that substantial structural change will be needed and that she will — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Miss McIlveen: She has said that she will require the co-operation of the controlled sector, the maintained sector, the voluntary sector and the integrated sector in order to change the nature and number of their schools and the method of their admissions. How does she intend to ensure in her vision the co-operation of all those sectors?

Does she intend to enforce structural change on those sectors? Amidst what she said earlier, the Minister did not actually answer Mr Lunn's question on her threat to remove funding. Which aspect of funding will she not give to those schools who do not comply with her new system?

Ms Ruane: As I said earlier, area-based planning will be the way forward. Part of area-based planning, as the Member will know, is about working with all education stakeholders. I am also chairing a high-level group of chairpersons, from all education sectors, to consider how we can move forward with all aspects of education reform.

I have answered the question on funding. The Department is under no obligation — let me give my exact words so that I am not accused wrongly. I said:

"If any school, however, chooses to operate independent admissions arrangements that lie outside the new system of transfer, I want to make it clear that there is no obligation on my Department to assist with funding."

A Member: I heard that.

Ms Ruane: I know that you did. However, I am saying it again because you obviously did not listen to what I said.

Mr K Robinson: I am not going to welcome the Minister's statement this morning. However, I will note it. I note that her message is contrary to that of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, who are currently in America where they are praising our education system and trying to sell it to the Americans as a basis for investment. That is a bit of a mixed message, Minister.

The Minister's statement is high on clichés, platitudes and phrases, and all that that is leading to, and it has been referred to again and again by other Members, is confusion for parents, teachers and children. That is not fair to any of them.

The way in which the Minister has brought her statement to the House is reminiscent, for those of us who have served in local councils, of those edgy — and Mr Speaker, I am coming to my question and I will save you from the effort of getting to your feet — planning applications that are presented just before Christmas, Easter or the Twelfth of July. Members in the House will know exactly what I mean.

Will the Minister tell us whether she really consulted with her colleagues in the Executive? In particular, did she consult with the Minister for Social Development and the Minister for Employment and Learning? Will she also tell me why she feels that she can bring these proposals to the House when she cannot get cross-community support in her Committee and is also unlikely to get the required support in the House by bringing the matter forward in the manner in which she has done?

Ms Ruane: I welcome the Member's comments on the economy: it is essential that our education system is built for the dynamic economy that will be created by the Executive. I welcome the fact that the First Minister and deputy First Minister are in North America, where they are promoting the North. That is very important.

Members will know that I met with the Institute of Directors (IOD), the CBI and other organisations that understand the importance of the economy and the role that the education system plays in it. I know that they will be pleased by the proposals that I have brought to the House today. We are sending out a new message that says that we have a vision of a world-class education system, a vision in which equality for all our children

is the cornerstone, and a vision in which life skills and job skills are matched to the needs of the economy.

It is a good time for the North; it is a good time for this island, and it is a good time for relations between this island and England, Scotland and Wales. We can be part of bringing about change in the North for all our children and not just for some.

Mr Gallagher: I hope that many Members in the Chamber agree that we have to do something about the present education system, which labels and stigmatises so many of our young children as failures. Having looked at the flowery language of the Minister's statement, there are some worrying matters. I am certain that in September 2010, there will be confusion and chaos.

Does the Minister not recognise that, even with the criteria that were outlined today, there will be a free-for-all that will suit the grammar schools but do serious damage to secondary schools? That will sound the death knell for many secondary schools. It is very worrying that, in her statement, the Minister makes much of her contact and discussions with the grammar schools. Will she give an assurance that she will take steps to protect small schools and the rural communities that support them, and that children in rural areas will not have to travel excessive distances to urban centres?

Ms Ruane: I do not accept that there will be a free-for-all. This will be carefully managed change. I would not use the term "flowery"; I would use the term "visionary". *[Interruption.]*

We are creating an education system that places the child at the centre. Unfortunately, to date, the children have not been placed at the centre of the system. We will now be doing that.

I share the Member's view on secondary schools. They have borne the brunt of demographic decline. I have been out and about in secondary schools right across the North, in all different communities, and they are crying out for change. I ask the Members across the Chamber to listen to them; they need to listen. At the moment, we have chaos and the secondary schools are bearing the brunt of demographic decline. It is not fair. We need change.

In relation to small schools and rural schools, there will, for the first time, be area-based planning. The people involved in the local education sectors are best placed to put that provision in place. In fact, in many cases, the work has already started, and those people are leading the way.

Mr McNarry: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to take his seat.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As a secondary-school teacher for 35 years, I saw all

that was wrong with the 11-plus selection system. I want to ask the Minister, with regard to —

Mr Speaker: Order. A number of meetings are taking place around the Chamber.

Mr Brolly: There seems to be a feeling that the 11-plus decided how many excellent youngsters — youngsters well capable of academic education — there were. In fact, the number of people who passed the 11-plus depended much more on the number of grammar-school places that were available — as the Minister has said, about 30% of the total school capacity.

The 11-plus started life as a way of providing — *[Interruption.]*

Some Members: Where is the question?

Mr Speaker: Order. Can the Member get to his question?

Mr Brolly: I am going to ask a question now. I am just trying to think of one. *[Laughter.]*

Mr S Wilson: He has worked himself up to it.

Mr Brolly: The 11-plus started life as a means of giving scholarships to poor youngsters so that they could get into secondary education. However, when secondary education became compulsory and free, everybody was able to get it, and the 11-plus, unfortunately, was used —

Some Members: Question.

Mr Brolly: I am going to ask a question.

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to come to his question.

Mr Brolly: Some Members took much longer to ask their questions than I am taking. Anyhow, my question is — *[Laughter.]*

Mr S Wilson: He has forgotten it now. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Brolly: Does the Minister agree that the day of the grammar school is now gone, given that grammar schools now go out to the highways and byways to gather up anyone whom they can so that they can receive further funding?

12.15 pm

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. I believe firmly that we must have academic excellence in our education system. I look forward to working with all schools, including grammar schools, to ensure that the future arrangements — *[Interruption.]*

A Member: Answer the question.

Ms Ruane: I am answering the question. I wish to ensure that the future arrangements that I will introduce will guarantee academic excellence in the education system.

Mr Ross: I will try to bring a bit of calm to the Chamber. I am glad that the former Sinn Féin MLA recognised the reality of the situation over the weekend: namely that — just as an Irish language Act needed DUP support — to get rid of academic selection, which is safeguarded in the legislation that came about as a result of the St Andrews Agreement, Sinn Féin needs my party's support, and that of this side of the House. That is not going to happen, and the Minister knew that it was not going to happen. Therefore, it was her responsibility to put proposals that could secure the support of everyone in the House. She has failed to do that.

In her statement, the Minister said that she had spoken to teachers, parents, pupils and administrators, and that she plans a further process of consultation. I do not know in which language she conversed with those people, because in successive polls and surveys, and among people to whom I have spoken, the message is clear: there is public support for the principle of academic selection. Parents support it, as do teachers. My question is a simple one that requires only a yes or no answer. Does the Minister believe that her proposals will secure the support of the people of Northern Ireland, the Executive and the House?

Ms Ruane: I do.

Mr McElduff: Will the Minister's proposals narrow the gap between respect for vocational qualifications and academic qualifications? It is important, as we go forward, that greater respect is accorded to vocational qualifications.

Ms Ruane: Sin ceist an-mhaith. We must ensure that all children have access to various pathways, and that equal respect is afforded to whatever pathway is chosen. It should not be an either/or situation; it can be both. We can provide for choice between professional, technical or vocational qualifications, and the academic route. If a young person wants to be an engineer, is it not better that he or she can study technology alongside maths and sciences? That is common sense.

In line with the current curriculum, one third of all courses in all schools must be either academic or professional and technical. The Member has raised a fundamental point: if our economy is to thrive, it is essential that vocational qualifications be given respect.

Mr Hamilton: It is very clear on this side of the House that we give the Minister's proposals a grade F for failure, and that her report card would read, "must do much better." She has given no consideration to the current legislation, which enshrines academic selection, nor has she given any consideration to what happens between 2009 and 2011, nor the need to achieve cross-party consensus in the Chamber for her proposals. What consideration has the Minister given to the

inevitable cost of the upheaval that her proposals will cause — proposals that are doomed to fail?

Ms Ruane: I thank the Member for the F grade. The Irish word for vision — *fis* — starts with the letter f, so I will take that as a compliment. I hope that we will achieve consensus; that is my plan. I hope that we will agree a way forward and create an education system that values all our children. I have answered the question on cost. I believe that we can transform our education estate within the resources that I have, and bring about the changes that are necessary.

Mr McCallister: The Minister has not provided much clarity. Has the Department carried out any work on valuing the schools estate, and has it assessed the work that needs to be done? Since the Minister is so confident that she can secure cross-community support, will she give an undertaking to the Assembly that Members will have the opportunity to vote on her proposals?

Ms Ruane: My Department and I have been working on these proposals for the past six months. Therefore, the answer to the Member's first question is yes. I forget his second question. Perhaps he will repeat it.

Mr McCallister: Will there be an opportunity for the Assembly to vote on the proposals? I shall ask another question: where are the Minister's officials today?

Mr McNarry: Yes, where are the Minister's officials?

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

Ms Ruane: My officials, who have been working closely with me for the past six months, are working today. They are busy, because this is a very exciting day for the education system in the North. I am grand here on my own. I know what my vision is.

In answer to the second part of Mr McCallister's question, I will make a further statement in the new year on the progress being made towards agreement for transfer in 2010. I will prepare draft regulations to underpin the securing of agreement. I will then bring the proposals to the Executive and to the Committee for Education for consideration and comment before engagement. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs M Bradley: Does the Minister believe that the focus on transfer at the age of 14 brushes under the carpet some of the problems about transfer at the age of 11? There will still be problems with oversubscription and possibly selection by postcode. What steps are being taken to avoid selection by postcode and the related pressures on the housing market? Although Francie Broolly has declared that grammar schools are gone, I want to ask whether secondary schools will be able to obtain funding to make them equal to grammar schools.

Ms Ruane: Rather than creating a postcode lottery, I intend to abolish a life lottery. As I said earlier, under the old regime, that life lottery gambled with the lives of children and the futures of families, based on children of 11 years of age completing two tests lasting one hour each. Under my new vision, the watchword will be “equality”. Many families do not have the wherewithal or the personal desire for additional tuition or academic coaching for their primary-school children. Those considerations will no longer be necessary. We have here the outline of a vision that is based on local and area-based planning. The resources for the schools in that system will be allocated in a fair and equal way.

Lord Morrow: Having listened to what the Minister has said and read some of the stuff in her statement, I have to say that it is no wonder that the entire education system is totally confused. She says that she wrote to her colleagues. In fact, she wrote to one colleague and delivered the letter today at 10.50 am. That is the consultation in which the Minister believes. However, that tells Members something: the Minister knows perfectly well that there is no hope of her proposals going through. Those proposals have come from a narrow, sectarian, political viewpoint — the Minister’s sectarianism drips from her. We have news for her: not only will she not get her proposals through the Assembly, but she has no chance of getting them through the Executive. That is why she refuses to consult her Executive colleagues. If the Minister thinks that this stuff —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to come to the question.

Lord Morrow: If the Minister thinks that this stuff is going to anywhere in the Assembly, we can tell her today that it is going absolutely nowhere. She had better learn that and learn it quickly. She has introduced proposals and manifestly made an attempt to close all post-primary rural schools in County Fermanagh. She talks about equality, but, in fact, she is going to round up people in Fermanagh —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member please come to the question.

Lord Morrow: I am coming to the question now.

She intends to round up people in rural areas and send them all into Enniskillen town. Will the Minister tell the House where the rural equality is in her proposals? She should hang her head in shame.

Ms Ruane: This is a proud day for me. I am delighted with the outline of the vision that I have presented. It will give every child a fair chance in an education system that matches children to suitable provision. The proposals that the Member mentions in relation to Fermanagh have been brought forward by the boards.

Lord Morrow: And?

Ms Ruane: And it is very important that all political representatives read them carefully and engage with the process. I do not know where the Member lives, or what world he is living in. Maybe he should visit some of the secondary schools in the unionist community, talk to the principals, and hear directly from them how they are being affected under the current system. I have had meetings with principals from all kinds of schools — all the different sectors, all the different creeds and all the different politics. They tell me that we need change. We need an education system that is fit for the twenty-first century. We need a system that puts the children at the centre, and that is what I am going to do.

Maybe the Member is willing to live in the past and condemn 4,000 young people to poor literacy and numeracy skills, but I am not. I am the Minister of Education for every child in the North of Ireland, and I am going to ensure that every child has opportunities.

Ms Purvis: I welcome the Minister’s commitment to ending the 11-plus, but I am extremely disappointed, as many of those disadvantaged by the current system will be, by her proposal to sustain a range of different types of school. In effect, that is selection, slotting children into schools. It brands the schools as failures or successes. This vision is a new system of social selection, which represents a missed opportunity for the Minister. She has abandoned Sinn Féin’s former policy and she has abandoned the most disadvantaged children in society. It is a missed opportunity to create one system — not a two-tier or two-gear system, but one of equality in schools and education that values each child equally.

Does the Minister agree that a ‘ChuckleVision’ view of education does not create a tiger economy? East or west, tiger economies are not based on academically selective systems. Will the Minister outline — and other Members have talked about it this morning — what discussions she has had with her Executive colleagues and with other parties in the Assembly on these proposals, and how she proposes to secure the broadest community support for them?

Ms Ruane: First of all, every area is different, as Members will know. One size does not fit all. We are going to look at a range of provision, and I do not accept that it is a postcode lottery. We are going to look at access to an 11-19 school, transfer to an alternative 11-19 school, access through an 11-19 or post-14 school, and transfer to a 14-19 school. The Member needs to understand that everywhere is different. Rural areas are different from urban areas. I will be seeking the views of all the different stakeholders in relation to the provision that we will be having. It is important that we do not go down the road of one size fits all. No

child will be disadvantaged, and all children will have access to a wide range of subjects and pathways.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome today's statement and the debate that it has begun. It is simply a statement of fact and reality that there is no consensus for the current education arrangements, particularly the transfer system. Therefore, change is required and inevitable. Does the Minister agree that the challenge for Members of this Assembly is to give leadership on this issue, to embrace change and to reject the failed status quo, not to behave as the dysfunctional product of a failed education system? Is she listening carefully to the Shankill Road principals' consortium and its rejection of academic selection and transfer tests?

12.30 pm

Ms Ruane: I absolutely agree that we must show political leadership to match that of the principals and teachers in our schools, who are crying out for it. They understand the impact on secondary schools of 50,000 empty desks, of changing the review of public administration, of creating the education and skills authority (ESA), and of demographic decline. I am confident that we can bring forward proposals that will have the support of the vast majority of secondary and grammar schools. I ask all the political leaders here to show the necessary leadership; we can either hide our heads in the sand and pretend that there is no problem or we can lead by example. With that in mind, I welcome the question.

I have been in many different communities, one of which was the Shankill. I have met the principals' forums and the north Belfast controlled sector forum. I have been to Millburn in Coleraine, and to Ballymena, Derry, the Falls Road — all over the North — and, by and large, the current system is failing working-class pupils. There must be change, and I ask you to work with me, rather than fight that change every step of the way. I will fight if I must, but I would like to work with Members to create the system that is needed.

Mr Ford: I would have been happy to join in welcoming the Minister's vision for education. However, this morning, the problem is that we have a right to expect something more than a vision that could have been expounded a few months ago. There is a huge amount lacking in her statement. For example, can she explain how she will make area-based planning meaningful when, in many areas — such as Antrim, in my constituency — the education and library board on one hand and CCMS on the other have already gone through a rationalisation process? The problem of empty desks remains.

In a rare moment of unity with Miss McIlveen — and my colleague Trevor Lunn — I repeat a point that the Minister made and ask what the implications are:

"If any school, however, chooses to operate independent admissions arrangements that lie outside the new system of transfer ... there is no obligation on my Department to assist with funding."

Does that relate solely to the funding of the new transfer arrangements, or is there an implied threat to those schools in general?

Ms Ruane: I have already answered the last question, so I will not do so again.

Area-based planning is fundamental. It must be — and will be — put in place with the support of all the education partners.

Mr Burnside: Listening to Radio Ulster on the way to Stormont this morning, I was looking forward to an important statement on education. Something along the lines of Dickson academic selection at 14 was being flagged up, and I thought that that meant some progress, with an announcement that could receive cross-community and popular support for our future education system.

What disappoints me about the Minister's statement is its total lack of content and clarity. I therefore ask for a precise answer to a precise question. Referring to the future, she mentioned — after the Irish bit — the introduction of regulations, following a consultation process. Regulations are clearly understood to be under her executive authority as a Minister. Are we, therefore, about to see the destruction of our grammar schools and academic selection by Martin McGuinness mark II, or will that be blocked by the authority of this House? Can she be clear: is it to be regulations or legislation?

Ms Ruane: I, too, listened to Radio Ulster today. The principal of Portadown College spoke, and her vision was interesting. She said clearly that the area in which the Dickson method operates has been much more effective than other areas in the North. I differ from the current system in that I do not believe that academic selection is necessary at 14; it is unjust and unnecessary.

We can create a system of academic excellence by matching children to suitable provision. I have answered the Member's question already, so I do not know how much clearer that I can be. I will bring my proposals to the Executive, and I will work with my colleagues in the Assembly.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Minister for her statement. Speaking as someone who was a teacher for more than 30 years, predominantly in Northern Ireland grammar schools, I fully endorse the principles behind the changes, which reflect the need to provide an appropriate educational pathway for every child, and an equal opportunity for every child to realise his or her potential.

If places in heavily subscribed schools are allocated on the basis of residential location — the proximity of a child's home to a school — does the Minister accept

that that will lead to property hot spots and, ultimately, to a system in which money talks? Surely a system that allocates school places according to how much money a child's parents have is even more unjust than one that allocates according to academic ability. Will the Minister guarantee to the House that she will avoid, at all costs, a system that reserves places at the most desirable schools for those who are better off?

Ms Ruane: First, I say go raibh maith agat to the Member for his initial comments. There will always be pressure on popular schools in our education system. However, we now have an opportunity, because of excess places in our school system, to be more responsive in future.

Secondly, the focus on admissions will shift. The post-14 provision in local areas will be flexible and agile in order to enable all children to be matched to suitable provision through the organisational capacity of larger or collaborating institutions. The key point to make is that no doors will be closed to children.

Mr Elliott: I hope that I have more success than other Members have had in getting an answer from the Minister, after the party-political spoof that I have heard from her today. On what does she base her suggestion that her announcement will have the support of children, teachers and parents? It is certainly not what the opinion polls have indicated up to now.

Ms Ruane: As I have said, I have been out and about, and I have met with many groups and sectors. An increasing number of people understands that we need change in our system; an increasing number of people understands that we need to create an education system that is fit for the twenty-first century; and an increasing number of people understands that choices for children should not be based on the outcome of two one-hour tests. Opinions on academic selection are shifting. I ask that Members go out and talk to their communities. I have been out talking to them, and opinions are shifting. Members should talk to the IOD, the CBI, all the teachers' unions, and the various boards and education sectors — they might hear something that they would not expect to hear.

Mr A Maginness: As someone who belongs to a party that has been totally opposed to the 11-plus, one would have loved to have come to the Chamber today to say congratulations to the Minister. She has said that this should be an exciting day, because she is presenting her vision for the future of our education system. However, it is a sad day, because the Minister has created only more confusion and a further lack of clarity on the future of our education system. The Minister has talked about there being a range of schools and a range of options. Surely that is antipathetic to the ideal of equality for people in education.

Ms Ruane: "Equality" and "diversity" are closely linked words. I am disappointed that the Member does not understand the range of provision. My proposals offer local solutions, because different areas have different needs. I urge Members not to stay in their constituencies but to go out into other constituencies to see the differences that operate at different levels. Equality does not mean that everything need be the same. Equality is a celebration of diversity but with a fair system put in place.

Mr Savage: The Minister's proposals are far-reaching. Can those changes be made within the existing education budget, or will the Minister require more finances to complete the task that lies ahead?

Ms Ruane: Many of the changes are far-reaching, and I will use the existing resources to bring about maximum change in the system.

Mr Speaker: No more Members wish to ask questions. That brings to an end questions on the ministerial statement. The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension.

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Standing Order 60(1)(e) relates to the use of unparliamentary language. When Paul Butler rose to his feet to ask a question, the word "lapdog" was called out in the Chamber. Will you rule, Mr Speaker, on whether that is parliamentary language, and if it is not, will you ask the Member responsible to withdraw the comment?

Mr Speaker: I continually say to all sides of the House that there are debates that can give rise to some tension in the House. I have always said that Members must be mindful of the language that they use. I will study the Hansard report and return to the House on the matter.

As I was trying to say before I was interrupted on a point of order, the Business Committee has agreed 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 12.42 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Public Health (Amendment) Bill

Second Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The next item of business is the Second Stage of the Public Health (Amendment) Bill [NIA 8/07] —

Mrs I Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Are we entitled to proceed without there being a quorum in the Chamber?

Mr Deputy Speaker: No, not if the Member has an objection.

Notice taken that 10 Members were not present.

House counted, and there being fewer than 10 Members present, the Deputy Speaker ordered the Division Bells to be rung.

Upon 10 Members being present —

On resuming —

2.02 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: We now have a quorum, so it is safe to proceed.

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

That the Second Stage of the Public Health (Amendment) Bill [NIA 8/07] be agreed.

The Bill is exceptionally brief but is important nonetheless. Chernobyl and other environmental disasters have demonstrated that ships coming into and leaving port can present a greater threat to public health than the infectious diseases that rats and other vectors carry. Therefore, the 2005 international health regulations, which the World Health Organization issued, seek to strengthen the defences against a wider range of threats, such as chemical and radiological contamination.

The Bill is necessary to enable ports in Northern Ireland to implement the new inspection and certification regime. The Bill simply amends the regulation-making powers in section 2A of the Public Health Act (Northern Ireland) 1967. That section deals with the control of certain diseases. The Bill has two clauses. By adding new paragraph (c) to section 2A(1) of the 1967 Act, clause 1 will extend my Department's power to make regulations to prevent:

“the spread of infection or contamination by means of any vessel or aircraft leaving any place, so far as may be necessary or expedient for the purpose of carrying out any treaty, convention, arrangement or engagement with any other country”.

Clause 2 sets out the Bill's short title.

In order to be able to comply with the international health regulations, the Public Health (Ships) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1971 and Public Health (Aircraft) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1971 must be amended. The international health regulations were remade in 2005 and agreed with the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland is therefore obliged to provide a legislative framework to implement our international obligations under those regulations. This will allow new ship sanitation control certificates to replace deratting certificates, which will have no international validity after this month.

The new certificates deal with infection and with rodents that can carry human disease, and, for the first time, chemical and radiological contamination will be addressed. The Bill is necessary so that the Port of Belfast, for example, can have the same certification power as Liverpool and can impose the same sanitation standards as Shanghai or Liberia. We must put in place new regulations for Northern Ireland in the form of subordinate legislation, which requires parent legislation. Having examined the 1967 Act, I concluded that its powers are inadequate for that purpose. Amended ships and aircraft regulations will, therefore, have to be made under the 1967 Act's new powers.

We must act quickly by passing the Bill, in order to enable our ports to once again carry out those functions that are required under the World Health Organization's regulations.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): As the Minister stated, the Public Health (Amendment) Bill is very short. It consists of one main clause and a further clause that sets out the short title. The Minister advised the Health Committee that he intended to introduce the Bill, and I am grateful to the officials who came to the Committee on 15 November to explain its background and purpose. The officials explained, as has the Minister today, that it is a technical Bill, and that it is necessary to allow the Department to respond to new international requirements. It is designed to enable the Department to comply with international health regulations introduced by the World Health Organization. The Bill will give the Department power to make regulations that are aimed at improving and modernising the way in which public health checks are carried out on ships and ports.

The explanatory and financial memorandum states that the introduction of the Bill was the only option available to allow the Department to comply with international health regulations. This type of single

clause legislation must surely be a costly way in which to proceed, from the perspective of both the Department and the Assembly, and given the time and resources that must be devoted to it. It is a process that should be used only in exceptional circumstances.

What options, other than legislation, were considered to allow the Department to meet its obligations in that regard? If legislation is the only option, when did it first become apparent that a change in legislation was required? It appears from the explanatory and financial memorandum that the Department has been aware of the issue for at least a year, as it states:

“stakeholder engagement has been taking place since the beginning of 2007.”

If that is the case, what consideration was given to including such provision in any other Bill?

The Bill, if agreed, will come before the Committee for detailed consideration. I note from the explanatory and financial memorandum that the consultation with stakeholders produced no concerns or comments. I am sure that the Committee will wish to examine the nature and extent of that consultation. I trust that the Minister will make all the paperwork relating to the consultation available to the Committee. Subject to a satisfactory explanation from the Minister, I am content to support the general provision of the Bill.

Mr McCallister: As a member of the Health Committee, I welcome the Bill. The Minister drew attention to the Port of Belfast, and, as a member of the Committee for Regional Development, I am well aware of the necessity for our ports to meet international standards. Therefore, I have no problem in welcoming the Bill and supporting the measures contained therein.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I will deal with some of the points made by the Chairperson of the Health Committee. As far as legal advice is concerned, it was not possible to simply amend the existing ship and aircraft regulations, as they were made under powers contained in section 143 of the Public Health Act 1936. Although the Act did not extend to Northern Ireland, section 143(9) entitles the provisions of that section to be extended to Northern Ireland only in so far as they relate to regulations with respect to matters on which the Parliament of Northern Ireland has no power to make laws. Therefore, the steps that we take are correct, according to legal advice.

The World Health Organization’s regulations were passed in 2005. The process began at that time, and it has been under discussion and consultation since the beginning of this year. The formal consultation on marine and public health interests in Northern Ireland has elicited no comment or concerns. The only concerns expressed to my Department relate to the failure of

Northern Ireland to come into line with England and meet our international obligations, which we now do.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved: That the Second Stage of the Public Health (Amendment) Bill (NIA 8/07) be agreed.

Pensions Bill

Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the Consideration Stage is intended to enable the Assembly to debate amendments to the Bill. As no amendments have been tabled, there will be no opportunity to discuss the Bill today. Members will be able to have a full debate at the next Stage. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group the 22 clauses of the Bill for the Question on stand part, followed by the six schedules and the Question on the long title.

Clauses 1 to 22 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 6 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Pensions Bill [NIA 7/07]. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Drink-Spiking

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 to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Ms S Ramsey: I beg to move

That this Assembly, in view of the increase in 'spiking' of drinks, calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide for date rape prevention kits to be made available free of charge.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The motion calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide date rape prevention kits free of charge, and I hope that it gets the full support of the Assembly. One purpose behind the motion is to raise public awareness that drink-spiking has happened; is happening, and can happen to anyone.

It is timely that the motion is being debated today as Christmas is three weeks away. Christmas is the time of year when we, as a society, go out more, attend more parties and — unfortunately — drink more. Sadly some people see that as an opportunity to ruin lives.

Last year, the Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre received a number of reports from women who feared that their drinks had been spiked. Dozens of similar cases have been reported throughout the year. Overindulgence in alcohol plays a big part in the problem, and in some cases people have not had their drink spiked but have just drunk too much. However, in other cases drinks have been spiked; figures from the Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre indicated that there were 40 reported incidents of drug-related rape and sexual abuse in the North in 2006, which is an increase on previous years.

The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs clearly states that drug-facilitated sexual assaults — including the use of alcohol — are a significant problem. I congratulate the Health Promotion Agency and drug and alcohol support groups for accepting that there is a problem with people having their drinks spiked, and for developing an advertising campaign that includes putting up posters in pubs and clubs.

Education is a key factor in ensuring that people can protect themselves — every effort must be made to alert people to the issue. As I said, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs highlights a number of issues and offers good advice.

The advisory council states that advice that will minimise the risk of drug-facilitated sexual assaults

should be targeted at secondary schools, as well as further and higher educational establishments. Furthermore, that advice should, as appropriate, include the following message: plan journeys to and from home; avoid going alone to a club, pub or party; make sure that someone knows where you are going and what time you will be back; stay aware of what is happening around you, and avoid situations in which you feel uncomfortable; do not accept a drink from anyone that you do not trust; do not share or exchange drinks; and do not leave your drink unattended — even when going to the toilet, take it with you.

2.15 pm

That final piece of advice has been made more difficult by the introduction of the smoking ban, because most pubs and clubs do not allow their customers to take their drinks outside. Everyone should follow that advice from the advisory council, and doing so will minimise the risk of drink-spiking.

Although some organisations — including the advisory council — have said that the public should be made aware that the so-called drug detectors cannot be relied on, they will help in making people aware of the issue. The advisory council also states that further research should be promoted. The motion calls on the Minister to provide date-rape prevention kits free of charge, but that does not mean that finance should come solely from the Health Department's budget. Pubs, clubs and the vintners' associations have a part to play, because public houses are where most drink-spiking takes place.

Door staff also have a part to play in ensuring that people are safe. They must accept that drink-spiking takes place, and they need to be trained to deal with the issue. Door staff should not assume that someone is drunk; they have a duty to ensure that people are safe and feel safe in their premises. They must also ensure that people feel safe when they leave establishments and are not in a vulnerable state, as is so often the case. I urge the Minister to organise a meeting with the relevant bodies as early as possible to ensure that drink-spiking prevention kits are provided free of charge. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): I support the motion. I do not drink or frequent pubs and clubs; nonetheless, I am concerned about the increase in assaults and rapes on women. This is an area in which we should exercise zero tolerance. Drink-spiking receives a lot of media attention, and anecdotal evidence suggests that it is very much on the rise. It is not possible to know whether the stories are always true, but it is true to say that many young people are fearful about falling victim to having their drinks spiked.

Some figures suggest that Northern Ireland has a problem, and for a region of the United Kingdom that has a population of only 1·7 million, we have an incidence equal to or higher than other regions that have a much higher population. Therefore we cannot dismiss the problem as the result of exaggerated stories or pretend that drink-spiking does not happen to people in Northern Ireland. Although we must remain aware of the dangers of drink-spiking, we must also remember that, whatever the incidence of drink-spiking, alcohol is a drug that remains the main contributor to date rape. Whatever steps are taken to ensure that nothing is added to a drink, the effects of the alcohol — when consumed in the quantities often associated with today's binge-drinking culture — can leave someone open to the same types of assault as any of the so-called date-rape drugs.

The drinks that are popular among young people — particularly young women — can allow for drink-spiking. Strong flavours and bright colours can mask any tastes or colours that could be telltale signs that a drink has been spiked. It is much better to attempt to prevent drink-spiking from occurring, and many women take many of the simple steps that can prevent their drinks being tampered with. By ensuring that they do not leave a drink unattended, they are taking a simple step to reduce the chances of anything happening to their drink. However, it is difficult to ensure that there is no opportunity during a night out for someone to tamper with the drink at some stage of the evening.

Improvements are being made. Public awareness is strong, and some good initiatives are being introduced by pub and club operators.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety for her support for the motion. Raising awareness is a key issue.

In my opening remarks, I forgot to mention men, who are also being targeted and are having their drinks spiked for other reasons. I did not mean to give the impression that it is only women who are victims, because young men's drinks are also being spiked.

Mrs I Robinson: I thank the Member for her comments, with which I agree. I am talking about women specifically, and I have been in contact with the Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre. However, that does not preclude the fact that men's drinks are also being spiked.

One of the main times that a drink is left unattended is when someone is in the toilets, so some premises have installed small lockers where drinks can be deposited and locked away. The measures that I have mentioned so far can be taken either by an individual or by the drinks industry, which can help to put extra safeguards in place.

The motion calls on the Minister to make date-rape prevention kits available free of charge, and although the provision of anything that helps to prevent such terrible abuse of an individual will be welcomed, we must ensure that any prevention campaign does not lead to complacency and people ignoring the fact that alcohol itself can be as powerful a drug as the one that may be placed in their drink.

Small plastic stoppers that can be fitted onto the top of bottles are a relatively cheap, but effective, way to prevent substances being added to drinks. Whether the Department provides the stoppers or simply works with the drinks industry to encourage their provision, that measure is only one part of an overall strategy to reduce the incidence of drink-spiking.

Kits that are supposed to detect whether a drink has been tampered with may play a role, but there are questions about their reliability. Therefore, prevention of spiking in the first place is the ultimate goal.

I hope that today's debate will ensure that people will take extra care over the Christmas season so that we can prevent even one person's drink being spiked.

I ask the Minister to consider seriously the role that the Department can play and how the availability of some relatively inexpensive measures could help to reduce the problem even further.

I support the motion.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Members who tabled this important motion, if only to give the House an opportunity to debate some of the issues that surround it.

The Roofie Foundation is the only specialist agency in the UK that deals with the issue of drug rape. The Northern Ireland branch runs in conjunction with the Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre. The foundation was established by Graham Rhodes after he had conducted research in spring 1996 into the subject of drug-related rape and sexual abuse. Statistics issued by the foundation show that 68% of date-rape drugs were administered in pubs, clubs, wine bars or bistros, which is 6,285 out of a total of 9,260 incidents. Those statistics point overwhelmingly to the need for a solution that involves premises being regulated.

We are not dealing only with sexual offences. The Roofie Foundation believes that there may be up to 2,000 cases of drug-assisted robbery, compared with 900 incidents of drug-assisted rape, to which some Members have already referred.

The prevention measures fall short of legislation, but they could be combined with minimal legislation. Although the police and voluntary groups have issued a number of guidelines on drink protection that include urging people to watch their drinks, refusing to allow strangers to buy them drinks and not leaving drinks unattended, there are devices on the market that seek

to prevent drink-spiking. They come in two main varieties: those that prevent a drink being spiked in the first place; and those that prevent a spiked drink being drunk.

Those include the Drink Detective, a matchbox-size test kit for drinks, which indicates clearly whether a drink has been spiked. The kit can be used by paramedics and club and bar owners to test any suspicious drinks. SafeFlow, which has been tested by police forces across the UK, is another system that relies on prevention rather than detection. A packet of six SafeFlow bottle tops costs around £2. A cap is placed on the top of a bottle, which cannot be removed easily, and the drink can be accessed only through a straw. Spikey is another device that emphasises protection.

We must stress also the responsibility of the bar owner. A duty of reasonable care must be placed on bar owners, who, after all, profit from the sale of drink. They should be expected to provide a safe environment for their customers. Pub and club owners are responsible for enforcing licensing laws, so they should be responsible for administering safety laws in respect of pub and club users.

In response to a question tabled in the House of Commons, the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Home Office, Caroline Flint, stated:

"While bottle caps and drink holders may reduce the potential for drink-spiking, they too can provide a false reassurance of safety, given evidence that it is the consumption of alcohol, rather than drink-spiking, which more commonly increases vulnerability to sexual crime".

That brings me back to the problem of binge drinking, which Mrs Robinson has already mentioned. I will be interested to hear what the Minister has to say on the measures that his Department is taking with regard to binge drinking.

Binge drinking leaves young women vulnerable to sexual predators and young men vulnerable to other forms of crime. The problem is not just about drink-spiking, but about how much alcohol a person drinks. Positive steps must be taken against bar and club owners who boost drink sales through special promotions, in which highly alcoholic shots are sold at a heavy discount. We must have dialogue with the drinks and entertainment industry. I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments.

Mrs Hanna: I support the motion, and I thank Sinn Féin Members for bringing the matter to the Floor.

This issue must be addressed by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and others. However, the whole drink culture is an associated issue, and it must be addressed urgently. Excessive drinking and binge drinking — abusing alcohol and consuming it irresponsibly — are ongoing problems in Northern Ireland, and the negative effect

that that has on physical and mental health cannot be underestimated. The dangers of alcohol abuse must be made clear and prioritised by the Department, as too many lives are being ruined.

In response to a question for written answer to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety about alcohol, I was told that more than 8,000 people in Northern Ireland received hospital treatment for alcohol-related illnesses last year and that treatment over the last three years cost Northern Ireland £35 million. The misuse of alcohol is a major public-health issue.

Numerous problems arise when alcohol is abused. People spike drinks for several reasons; the intention being to sexually assault, rape or rob the person whose drink has been spiked. Sometimes the only motivation is to see what effect the drug will have. All types of people have become victims of drink-spiking, but the majority of victims appear to be young women. The act of spiking a drink is a criminal offence and can gravely endanger a person's life. If that person has a serious reaction to the drug and dies, the person responsible for spiking the drink could face a murder charge.

These attacks often go unreported, and, therefore, the issue may be more serious than we realise.

2.30 pm

It is important that staff in bars and clubs — where the majority of drink-spiking occurs — pick up on what is happening, report any incidents, and are trained to deal with victims. Likewise, accident and emergency staff must be on hand to deal with cases, which are most likely to be seen in the early hours of the morning when A&E departments are crammed with patients.

As with binge drinking or drink-driving, approaches to dealing with drink-spiking come back to the need for better education and putting out clear messages to people who drink irresponsibly. I am aware that campaigns are running, and they must continue. However, to reduce the prevalence of drink-spiking, even if we do get the date-rape prevention kits, messages such as "Don't leave your drink unattended", "Never let someone that you don't know buy you a drink" and "When you buy a drink, watch the barperson pouring it" must continue to be hammered home.

Even if one does these things to prevent drink-spiking, there is still a risk, and I understand the reasoning behind date-rape prevention kits. However, if such kits are recommended by the police or the Department, it is important that they be foolproof and give accurate results.

I am worried by a recent University of Ulster report suggesting that excessive drinking is a factor in the rise of sexual attacks and rapes. Although I do not blame the victims for such attacks, it is fair to say that responsible drinking could improve women's well-being and safety, especially that of younger women, who may be

particularly vulnerable. Sex attackers often take advantage of situations and perpetrate opportunistic assaults as a result of victims' voluntarily drinking themselves into helplessness.

The risks associated with the rise of binge drinking are plentiful, and drink-spiking is another example of the dangers. The Minister of Health has told the Health Committee that he will prioritise health education, and the University of Ulster report suggests that the Department must sustain that prioritisation if we are to highlight the risks of binge drinking and drink-spiking and reduce their frequency in Northern Ireland.

Mr McCarthy: I thank Sue Ramsey and Jennifer McCann for bringing such an important issue to the House, particularly in light of the fact that the festive season is approaching.

As a Pioneer, a teetotaler, and a person who knows little about what goes on in drinking environments, I have no problem supporting the motion if it contributes to increased safety for those who wish to socialise and consume drink in a public place. However, the motion does not consider the cost to the taxpayer of providing free date-rape prevention kits. Perhaps that issue might be addressed in the winding-up speech.

Ms S Ramsey: I did not for one minute suggest that money should come from the Department's budget, which I know is under pressure. Pubs, clubs and vintners have a responsibility and must play their part, because, as John McCallister said, they make big profits. I ask the Minister to ensure that the costs impact collectively on those groups that have a duty and responsibility to deal with the issue.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for that clarification. Even if such kits were to be supplied free of charge, would they be used? Would they justify the expenditure, and how could the usage and results be monitored? Many questions must be answered.

There is also a problem with the escalation of drug use. If such kits are provided, and then new or different drugs appear, will the kits be fit for purpose, or will they be useless and thrown on the scrap heap?

The Alliance Party believes that — as other Members have said — education is more important. We encourage the use of publicity campaigns and help from drinking establishments — as Sue referred to just now — in order to get the message home and put the responsibility on to those people who are at risk.

A big responsibility rests with young people who have little or no experience of what might go on in certain establishments. More could be done to make people aware of the dangers that they might encounter on a night out. As other Members have said, the message must be that people should never leave a drink unattended, even for a second, and should not accept drinks from

people whom they do not know or trust or, in some cases, even from those whom they might trust.

As the Alliance Party's health spokesman, I support any measures that might prevent people ending up in a GP's surgery, a hospital accident and emergency unit or worse. If all else fails, and if it can be proved that the date-rape prevention kits are a cost-effective and appropriate answer, I will support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call on the next Member to speak, I ask all Members to check that their mobile phones are switched off, as someone's phone is affecting the recording equipment.

Mr Buchanan: I apologise on behalf of the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mrs Robinson, who has had to leave to go to London. She would have liked to stay for the rest of the debate but has asked me to convey her apologies.

I support the sentiments of the motion that is before the House. Drug-related rape and sexual abuse throughout Northern Ireland are clear indications of the changing face of the sinful society in which we live. Stories of unsuspecting victims having their drinks spiked for nefarious purposes have become a sickening trend, which is on the increase, and such crimes must be tackled to protect the vulnerable in society.

As other Members have mentioned, it is important to point out that the problem affects men as well as women. However, it must be said that, irrespective of any measures that may be taken, there will always be predators who will target and prey upon unsuspecting victims in order to satisfy their lusts and desires. Therefore, the message of safer and more responsible drinking, alongside increased awareness and vigilance from friends and bar staff, will be most effective in increasing the safety of people who might be vulnerable to drink-spiking. That is why education is a key factor in alerting people — young and old — to the dangers of drink-spiking.

Bouncers and bar staff have a responsibility to be vigilant, and they should be trained to recognise the difference between the tell-tale signs of someone who has been drinking and someone who has been drugged. Nevertheless, it must be recognised that some responsibility lies with those who consume alcohol and leave themselves in very vulnerable situations.

A survey conducted by the University of Ulster on 8 May 2007 revealed that young women in Northern Ireland are making themselves vulnerable to rape or serious sexual assault through their binge-drinking habits. The survey's findings demonstrated that the average alcohol levels at the time of alleged assaults were almost three times higher than the drink-driving limit. That is real cause for concern among Members,

especially for members of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Although the motion calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make date-rape prevention kits available free of charge, the Minister must focus on a much wider issue. Drink-spiking is not a matter just for the Minister and the Department. The various statutory bodies and stakeholders should take a co-ordinated approach. There should be joined-up action from the vintners, local district councils, community safety partnerships, district policing partnerships, the PSNI and other bodies in order to provide the kits at little or no expense to the Department.

Mr McCarthy asked whether the kits would be fit for purpose; if they were not, the Minister and other bodies would not be introducing them. I wish to alleviate the Member's concerns; we will not bring forward measures that are not fit for purpose, because that would be a waste of money.

Therefore, although the Minister should take the lead role, it is important that the other bodies be brought into the equation to help to eradicate the problem and to provide a much safer environment for society. I support the sentiments of the motion.

Mr Easton: I thank Members opposite for proposing the motion, which I fully support. I also thank the Member who proposed the motion for clarifying her position regarding pubs and clubs taking their share of the responsibility in dealing with this issue. Perhaps the Minister will also take on board the point regarding DPPs and councils.

The term "date rape" was first used in a magazine article in 1982. The term refers to rape perpetrated by a person who is known to the victim. Date rape is a brutal, and, sadly, common crime. It is evil and cowardly. Incidents of date rapes are rapidly increasing and must be treated seriously. Drugs are also being increasingly used to render a victim incapable of resisting — or even remembering anything about — an attack.

People from all walks of life need to be made aware of the drugs that are increasingly used in instances of rape. Drugs such as ketamine — which was developed as an animal tranquiliser and anaesthetic — affect the central nervous system and can take effect in 10 to 20 minutes when added to alcohol. Rohypnol is another example; it has a sedative effect, can be administered as a powder added to a drink, and is also used as an anaesthetic. Its effects are also intensified when added to alcohol.

Gamma hydroxy butyrate (GHB) is a drug that is odourless, colourless and is perhaps the most dangerous of all. It affects the brain and induces dizziness, incoherent speech, and, if too much of it is consumed, it can even induce coma and heart seizures. GHB can be created by an amateur chemist using advice

that can, unfortunately, be downloaded from the Internet. It is a dangerous drug, and those who use it are aware that it can be a killer drug.

However, the most dangerous drug of all is alcohol. In modern society, pub crawling and clubbing, associated with the consumption of large amounts of inexpensive alcohol, is part of almost every young person's social experience. The price of alcohol needs to be considered, not just for general health, but also in order to help to address this issue.

Sexual predators can easily find soft targets. It is sad to think that young people are being stalked by evil people who have no remorse, no moral component, no regard for their defenceless victim and no fear of the law or the courts.

Educating young people is important, especially as to the dangers of alcohol and heavy drinking. They must receive timely warnings and advice on self-protection. There are various date-rape prevention kits, some of which include personal alarms, Mace sprays and a variety of devices to prevent drinks being tampered with. It is each young person's responsibility to avail of — and provide themselves with — the protection that they may need.

As public representatives, we can ensure that young people are offered help, support and advice. We can support and further develop awareness programmes that impress on young people the need to take sensible precautions when going out to pubs or clubs. Advice that can be offered includes: go out with friends and come home together with friends; keep an eye on friends during the evening; never leave drinks unattended; never accept an open drink from a stranger; and call the police immediately if there is a suspicion that someone has been drugged.

Rape is one of the most serious offences that a person can commit. Often, it goes unpunished because the victims are afraid to go to the police. They feel a sense of shame; they fear having to describe and relive the event; they fear that their family, friends or employers will treat them in an unsympathetic or even hostile manner; and they fear being mocked by their attacker as they stand in court, reliving the horror of the attack. Rape sentences the victim to a lifetime of fear, damage and distress. More often than not, the predator walks away undiscovered, unnamed and unpunished. It is a brutal crime that is made even worse when drugs are used to make the victim unable to resist or offer defence.

However, it is not enough for Members to stand in the Chamber and offer informed and sympathetic advice; it is not enough to simply debate the availability of date-rape kits; it is not enough to offer our sympathy after the event. It is time to take the war to the enemy. We need to put fear of retribution in the mind of the perpetrators. There is little evidence that those who

commit sexual crime can be successfully rehabilitated. The victim is sentenced to, and has to endure, a life sentence of psychological and emotional damage.

2.45 pm

When people are convicted, we must do all in our power to ensure that retribution is related to the enormity of the crime. We must ensure that those who have been brutalised can have confidence in the police and in the justice system when they have the courage to report such crimes. The system must do more to protect the victim, and much more to punish those responsible for such crimes.

If devolution is to mean anything, we must have the power to treat sexual predators, date rapists and those who prey on innocent children with the severity that those offences merit. We must ensure that the Assembly spells out its intention to work in every possible way to support victims of crime and ensure that the punishment fits the crime.

I support the motion.

Mrs D Kelly: The SDLP supports the motion. However, although we recognise that there is some evidence of an increase in the use of date-rape drugs, we share the concerns of many Members about a culture of binge drinking.

Recent research by the University of Ulster, and an article in the 'Belfast Telegraph' in November last year about a study of drug rape, indicate that the overwhelming majority of people who had come forward with allegations of rape had been between two and three times over the legal alcohol limit for driving.

I hope that the Minister and his colleagues will look to the Investing for Health strategy and bring together Departments to try to educate not only children — as many Members have said — but parents. I am sure that, in every constituency, stories circulate of parents purchasing alcohol for young children. Some think it acceptable that alcohol should be provided for young children and underage drinkers. Shame on them.

We have seen a great campaign aimed at educating people about the dangers of tobacco and smoking, but a similar message has still to be driven home about the long-term impact of alcohol abuse. I ask the Minister to consider the establishment of a forum to take forward such work.

All parties represented in the Assembly have the opportunity to have their say on the provisions of the draft Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2007, not only with respect to date rape, but in respect of the definition of when a rape has occurred. If someone is so drunk that they cannot give rational consent, that should be considered when deciding whether consent was given or whether sexual assault or rape has been committed.

Some Members commented on the type of detection kits that are available. The Minister is aware that community-safety partnerships — at least in Craigavon — supplied bottle stoppers two years ago.

There is a need for interdepartmental co-operation, but the NIO's community safety unit also has a responsibility because it may have money to put towards such projects. The proposers of the motion recognise the difficulties of providing such kits, free of charge, from the health budget, and have stressed that that is not what they are asking for. However, the NIO could be a source of money for that purpose, because a precedent has already been established, and it has considered that measure in the past.

I am not sure whether the Minister's Department runs the current television advertisements about Christmas parties and how people are getting out-of-their-minds drunk. Perhaps the money for those advertisements comes from some other source. However, that advertising campaign appears to be driving the message home. Does the Minister have any plans to establish such a campaign on a longer-term basis, to drive home the message about date rape, the undue influence that alcohol has on behaviour and the consequences of being unable to make informed decisions when drunk?

The SDLP, therefore, supports the motion, but would welcome a cross-departmental strategy to tackle the societal problems that binge drinking poses.

Furthermore, I commend the Department of the Environment on its campaign against drink-driving. Reports have shown that drugs are increasingly involved in such cases.

Date rape is not just connected to unusual drugs used specifically for that purpose: people also take recreational drugs and prescribed medication, which affect alcohol uptake and physiological interactions.

Mr Shannon: Thair hes aye been badness i this worl', fae the faa thon furst tim' i Eden's Gairden. A wus raired i tims tha' mae gran'parents alloed wurnae laike thair day, an' yet leukin beck oan thaim the day they leuk tae bae idyllic compeered tae quhat oor young fowk the day cum ap agin. Hit leuks laike thaim wi' evil notions hae mair tools than iver afore tae heft thaim tae cairry oot thair disgustin' purposes.

There has always been evil in the world, since the first fall in the Garden of Eden. I grew up in times that my grandparents bemoaned as not the same as their era, yet as I look back on them they seem idyllic in comparison to what young people face today. It appears that those with evil intentions have more tools than ever to help them carry out their disgusting purposes.

I commend the proposers for tabling the motion. I am aware of the circumstances of certain people in my

area and of what nearly happened to them, which could have been worse but for the actions of their friends.

Due to the rising number of rape cases in the UK, a scheme was implemented in schools whereby girls of 15 and 16 were given self-defence classes in PE. The scheme made sense; it gave participants the tools to fight off an attacker, scream and run for help. As with everything else, that is no longer enough. The self-defence classes were laudable, but not sufficient to provide a fighting chance against someone with evil intent towards a woman, who must deal with not only brute strength but drinks spiked with drugs that make her pliable and forgetful.

I am not a chemist, and I will not even attempt to pronounce some of the ingredients that are used in the drug cocktails; other Members have already said what they are. There are 27 drugs that may be used to spike drinks; the main problem is that many of those drugs are tasteless and colourless, and even those with taste and colour may be masked by putting them in a strong cocktail, so that in many cases the victim is none the wiser.

That is highlighted consistently through the medium of TV advertisements and, to some extent, through soap operas. In recent years, the publicity around date-rape drugs has been stronger. I do not watch soap operas, but my wife does, and she tells me that those issues have been addressed in 'Emmerdale' and, for the younger audience, in 'Hollyoaks'. I am reliably informed by the girls in my office that the soaps have given advice in a manner that also shows the dangers of the abuse of alcohol in those situations, as well as offering practical advice such as ensuring that your journey is pre-planned and that others know where you are, what you are doing and when you are going home.

That is backed up in certain schools where teachers are taking the time in class to explain the dangers and signals of alcohol overuse and drug use. Pupils are also given invaluable advice, such as to stay in groups. In 2006 in Northern Ireland, some 40 cases were reported to the Roofie Foundation, although it must be pointed out that the majority of women and men who are sexually attacked do not tell anyone, especially if they feel somewhat to blame, as is the case with many girls.

It has been shown that of those who have rung the helpline, only 10% to 15% will inform the police and take the case further, which also gives cause for worry and concern. The Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre estimates that up to two women a week are raped using drugs in Northern Ireland. The number of times that drugs are used to attack girls is unquantifiable. It is estimated that in the UK some 754,000 women over the age the 16 have been the victim of drug-related sexual assault. It is unclear how many of those happen in Northern Ireland.

There are prevention kits; one gadget, referred to as a Spika Stoppa, seals a bottle to allow liquid to come out through a straw but nothing to go back in. I ask the Minister to implement a push of that type of gadget into clubs, to ensure that the clubs work alongside the Minister so that people are protected and are drinking sensibly.

I have read conflicting opinions about the usefulness and accuracy of the drug-testing kits on the market. However, research suggests that the drink-tester used by the police was much more accurate than other detectors. Therefore, the Minister should implement research to determine the effectiveness of the police test and, if necessary, introduce such testers into clubs and bars as a priority.

I am not so naive that I would believe that tests alone will stop all attacks. A combination of tests and publicity to raise awareness among people of all ages, which is not just directed at young people, is needed. It has been shown that those who are most at risk include women who are at house parties, not necessarily clubs, and who are in their thirties. Such an awareness and advice campaign must be combined with a concerted effort by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide any device that would lessen the risk. I urge Members to support the proposal.

Mr G Robinson: It is a strange experience to debate the need for such kits, which can detect drugs that leave those who are unfortunate enough to take them so physically incapable that assaults of such heinous proportions can occur. I condemn outright the perpetrators of such cowardly attacks.

Although there is no question of the necessity to legislate to outlaw some of those substances, it is also sensible to make people aware of the problem of so-called date rape. Date rape is rape — it as simple as that. One case is no different from the other when it comes to the trauma that it causes the victim. Society must get the message, loud and clear, that that is not acceptable. Some people may wonder why the Assembly is discussing the issue. If anyone thinks that, he or she should speak to a rape victim, who may have been drugged as well. It is also worth noting that although rape is usually considered to be a crime against women, men can also be victims.

Although prevention kits are a useful tool in tackling that crime, some research has not been supportive of them. The 2005 'Drink-spiking Report' by Liverpool John Moores University into the effectiveness of the proposed kits found that they cannot be relied upon. Research was conducted for the study under laboratory conditions. That makes the results even more frightening. If the kits show poor reliability under ideal conditions, it casts doubt on their effectiveness in the settings in which they are designed to be used. That does not mean that they should not be used: however, any kit's

usefulness must be evaluated before it is issued to ensure that it serves the purpose for which it is designed.

Advice on people's drinking habits should also be more firmly emphasised and available. I appreciate that young people, in particular, consider those who offer such advice to be killjoys and fail to understand that there is genuine concern for their personal well-being and safety. If people must drink, they should be aware that they are more susceptible to crimes such as rape.

Research that was published by the University of Ulster in October 2007 indicates that alcohol, either alone or combined with prescription drugs, is a major factor in assaults. The study also found that during the six-year period that it covered, there were no cases of the use of GHB, Rohypnol and ketamine in toxicology reports. That is why a multi-stranded approach should be employed to tackle such despicable crimes. Certainly, well-tested and reliable detector kits should be made available. However, the message must be put across that alcohol is a major factor in many rape cases. I urge young people and others to be as vigilant as possible when out socialising in nightclubs and pubs — particularly at this time of the year — so that that heinous crime can be detected and eradicated. I support the motion.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): At the outset, I want to make it clear that anyone who spikes another person's drink or food behaves in a wholly unacceptable and disgraceful way. That behaviour must not be tolerated by society, especially when it is used to take advantage of someone and to commit a serious sexual assault, such as rape.

Spiking someone's food or drink is a crime and a breach of trust that may affect the victim's mental health and well-being for the rest of that person's life. Drink-spiking and the use of date-rape drugs should be everyone's concern. I thank the two Sinn Féin Members who raised the issue for giving the Assembly the opportunity to discuss it in more detail. It is a complex subject. The Assembly must ensure that any action that is taken by Government is effective and worthwhile.

3.00 pm

Although spiking drinks can take place for a range of reasons, including a so-called prank that is played on friends, it is usually seen as an attempt to take sexual advantage of someone. The relatively new term "date rape" is appalling, and is one of which modern society should be ashamed. The term refers to rape, or non-consensual sexual activity, between people who are known to each other, and it can be either spontaneous or premeditated. In some cases, date-rape drugs are slipped into food or drink in order to remove a person's resistance or render him or her unconscious, so that the perpetrator can assault his or her victim. Those drugs,

whether they be gammahydroxybutyrate (GHB), ketamine, Rohypnol or alcohol, can often affect the victim's memory of the event and make it difficult to prosecute the perpetrator.

Police in Northern Ireland do not record statistics for rapes that are alleged to have been drug-assisted. There is anecdotal information that levels of drink-spiking have increased. However, when one considers the nature of the subject, it is extremely difficult to get any measure of the current level of drink-spiking, or to determine whether it is a growing trend. Therefore, it is important that we make the best assessment of the degree to which it is a problem.

A UK study found that 2% of a total of 1,014 rape victims actually had their drinks spiked. Most victims of that type of sexual assault go to the police, or for a medical evaluation, hours after the incident has occurred and, usually, after waking up the next morning. A time lapse of 10 to 12 hours is common. By that point, in many cases, evidence of drugging may be gone. In other cases, the incident may not be reported at all.

However, the lack of evidence of the level of drink-spiking does not mean that there are not significant risks, or that we should not be taking it seriously. I take the issue very seriously, and it is one that my Department has been addressing over many years. I am conscious that a lot of time, energy and money is being spent in making Northern Ireland's towns and city centres safe for entertainment and socialising. It is vital that all our citizens, male and female, are able to go out and enjoy themselves safely.

Since 2000, my Department has funded the Health Promotion Agency to develop and roll out information campaigns on drink-spiking. A series of high-profile posters have been designed and located in prominent places in bars and clubs throughout Northern Ireland. When those posters were being designed, the experiences and views of the target group — the young people who go to pubs and clubs — were taken on board. Two posters deal specifically with keeping safe. One carries the strapline, "Never leave your drink unattended", and a more recent poster, which specifically targets women, highlights how excessive use of alcohol or drugs can make a person particularly vulnerable.

Both campaigns encourage people to look after one another and watch over each other's drinks. Evaluations of the campaigns have been very promising, and the message that one should not leave drinks unattended has been picked up by the young adults who were surveyed as part of the evaluation.

My impression is that young adults are, in general, aware of the risks and that most take the necessary precautions. The message, "Never leave your drink unattended" strikes a chord among the generation who frequent pubs and clubs. Excessive use of alcohol leaves

people in the position in which they are unable to protect their drinks. Apart from any concerns about drugs, there is increasing concern that spiking drinks with additional alcohol is becoming a more significant problem.

Excessive alcohol consumption by males and females makes them more vulnerable to unwanted attentions and can also alter their ability to make decisions. Research by the University of Ulster, which examined alleged sexual assaults over the period 1995 to 2005, concluded that young women in Northern Ireland are leaving themselves vulnerable to rape or serious sexual assault because of their binge drinking. The research findings showed that the average alcohol level at the time of an alleged assault was almost three times that of the drink-driving limit. The study also failed to find any trace of specific date-rape drugs such as GHB, Rohypnol or ketamine. However, the report did caution that delays in reporting alleged assaults and in taking samples of bodily fluids, could mean that such drugs might no longer be detected.

We must acknowledge that excessive alcohol consumption increases a person's tendency to take risks and to put themselves at greater risk from others.

To that end, further to the successful public-awareness campaign, we are also working with the drinks industry, particularly on efforts to encourage bar staff to refuse to serve alcohol to someone who has clearly already had enough. My Department is implementing the new strategic direction for alcohol and drugs, and the strategy's aim is to reduce the level of alcohol- and drug-related harm. It also focuses on young people's drinking.

It is important to note that 70% of all adults in Northern Ireland drink: 75% of men and 67% of women. Some 43% of male drinkers and 33% of female drinkers currently binge-drink, and those figures increase to 63% of males and 50% of females among 18-year-olds to 29-year-olds. Therefore, one of the Department's key focuses is on reducing excessive alcohol consumption. Binge drinking carries with it a range of risks, which is why we have undertaken a regional public-information campaign to tackle it.

Mr Shannon mentioned how times have changed. Over the past generation, the range of alcoholic products and the number of outlets that sell alcohol have grown dramatically, yet the relative cost of alcohol has decreased dramatically. Those factors, combined with powerful advertising campaigns for alcoholic drinks, mean that we, as a society, are drinking much more.

I am aware that several date-rape prevention products are on the market, and I understand the strength of feeling that is out there. However, I must also point out that there is a lack of evidence on their performance. In June 2005, Liverpool John Moores University's centre for public health published its 'Drink-spiking Report'. Two date-rape prevention products were assessed:

Drink Detective, which costs £2.95, and Drink Guard. The report stated:

“Neither testing kit was consistently successful.”

It went on to say that both kits failed to detect the presence of drugs on occasions, and that they also returned false positives when no drug was present. The report concluded:

“Based on these findings we do not believe that either Drink Detective or Drink Guard should be recommended for use.”

Therein lies the problem, which is to find a drinks-testing product that works. There are clearly serious ramifications if a test shows that a drink has been tampered with when it has not been, or if it shows that a drink has not been tampered with when it has been. That could lead to serious problems, so that key hurdle must be overcome if we are to provide safe testing kits.

The other problem is that the overwhelming drug of choice for spiking drinks is alcohol. Bottle stoppers were also mentioned. They are available and have been successful. However, most people drink out of glasses rather than bottles, and that makes preventing drinks being spiked more difficult.

Sue Ramsey mentioned the need to gather relevant bodies together, and that is important. We are working on that; in fact, the regional alcohol and drug forum will meet next week. That body is an important vehicle, and it can be effective, as can the binge drinking advisory group.

The issue is that people drink too much. The drinks industry is very powerful, so, in order to address the problem, we must attempt to work with the industry and to educate individuals about the damage that excessive alcohol consumption causes. Alcohol misuse has serious consequences, and the heavy price of excessive alcohol consumption is borne by the Health Service and society. Figures show that alcohol misuse resulted in 246 deaths in 2005, and it results in around 7,000 admissions each year to acute hospitals. I take seriously the problem of alcohol misuse. I am always looking for ways in which to move forward, and drinks-testing kits may be part of a solution, if we can find products that are absolutely effective.

However, education, advertising, the promotion of better and healthier lifestyles and the proper and sensible use of alcohol will offer a more productive way forward for the Health Service.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank my colleague Sue Ramsey for opening the debate. Many relevant points have been made, and I hope that I will be able to cover all of them.

The addition of alcohol or drugs to someone's drink in order to render them semi-conscious and facilitate rape or sexual assault is commonly known as drink-spiking. It has become an increasingly worrying trend in recent years. Very often, the unsuspecting victim

will not be aware until it is too late that his or her drink has been spiked. Incapacity may be mistaken for drunkenness, which allows the predator who spiked the drink to go unchallenged when he or she leaves with the individual concerned.

I welcome the suggestion made by a Member that training of bar staff, particularly doormen, might help to address the situation. The most commonly used drugs in drink-spiking incidents are GHB and ketamine, but alcohol is often added to non-alcoholic drinks. Some Members mentioned people going into bars, but not everyone who goes into a bar takes an alcoholic drink. It is important to remember that some people go in for a soft drink, which can often be spiked with an alcoholic drink.

The long-term devastating effects of rape and sexual assault are well documented. People must be aware of the dangers of drink-spiking, and measures must be put in place to protect them. Mr Buchanan said that a joined-up approach was required to move things forward. His colleague Mr George Robinson pointed out that men, as well as women, can be victims of drug-related rape. Those are important points.

Mr Shannon talked about the perpetrators; another Member criticised the sentences handed down to people convicted of such criminal offences, and said that we should send out a clear message. I concur with that sentiment; sentences for convicted rapists are not stiff enough.

We ask today that Government play their part in this campaign, and take the lead in providing drink-spiking prevention kits, free of charge. Some Members have asked for a joined-up approach — that the vintner's associations and the owners of bars and nightclubs should take responsibility to ensure that their customers are protected. Although drink-spiking prevention kits can help to detect whether something has been added to a drink, they are not meant to be used as protection against drink-spiking. People must take their own preventative measures.

Several Members mentioned binge drinking. Mrs Kelly and the Minister pointed out that it is not always perceived as being as big a problem as drugs misuse. Although binge drinking is a problem, the debate today concerns drink-spiking and the related use of alcohol and drugs. Other Members have made valid points about educating young people, and the Minister mentioned his Department's drugs and alcohol strategies. It is important that those campaigns continue, and that people are educated about the dangers of binge drinking.

Ms Ramsey pointed out that the kits that we ask for are prevention kits. They should provide information on preventative measures as well as practical items. Several Members mentioned the plug that is on sale for 50p from some of the drug and alcohol misuse centres. Many young people who drink in bars use that plug,

which fits on the top of the bottle so that the contents can be drunk only through a straw.

3.15 pm

A project in England allows people who feel that they, or a friend, have had a drink spiked to text the number of an organisation that can give them access to help straight away. That might be another initiative that we could consider introducing.

People should never leave their drinks unattended, and if people need to go somewhere without their drinks, they should ensure that someone that they trust watches them until they return. If that is not possible, the drinks should be discarded. People should not let a stranger buy them a drink, and they should be watchful of the person who is serving the drinks because there have been cases in which drinks have been spiked by the person who was serving behind the bar.

Although things can be done to prevent drinks from being spiked, people may still be at risk. Going out with other people and watching out for one another can help. Last year, an initiative in west Belfast encouraged women to travel home together and to ensure that their friends were dropped off at their front doors. Such small initiatives are preventative measures that people can take.

Other Members said that particular attention must be paid at Christmas. At that time of year, people tend to let their guard down and relax more. Simple steps can be followed. If someone is behaving out of character and seems to be really out of it, friends should not simply assume that the person is drunk, as they may need immediate medical assistance.

The use of legal and illegal drugs to spike drinks is a big problem because they are so readily available in local communities. The problems associated with ketamine have been publicised in recent weeks. It is important to point out that most people who are involved in community-drugs programmes will say that drugs are more widely available now than they were a year ago.

In summary, the points that were made during the debate were positive, particularly the call for joined-up thinking on this issue. That means that all citizens, male or female, have the right to be safe. The poster campaign that the Minister mentioned, which is targeted particularly at young people, has been evaluated as being highly beneficial.

I thank all Members for taking part in the debate, and I am glad that the motion seems to have cross-party support, and perhaps the full support of the Assembly. I hope that the motion is passed. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly, in view of the increase in ‘spiking’ of drinks, calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide for date rape prevention kits to be made available free of charge.

Royal Commission — United Kingdom

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 are called to speak will have five minutes.

Two amendments have been received and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes for a winding-up speech.

Mr Savage: I beg to move

That this Assembly believes, following devolution in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, that a Royal Commission should be appointed to review the steps that need to be taken to maintain the unity of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom.

The Ulster Unionist Party’s election manifesto of 2007 stated that our party was:

“Advocating a Royal Commission to strengthen the Union — and build the partnership between Westminster and the devolved Administrations.”

Along with my party, I am interested — if not concerned — about the constitutional composition of the United Kingdom. It is deeply concerning that every devolved Government in the United Kingdom is headed by nationalists of some type. In Wales, Plaid Cymru is in coalition with Labour. In Scotland, the SNP forms a minority Government, and in Northern Ireland, the Executive comprise an uneasy coalition of Ulster nationalists and Irish nationalists.

For that reason, the Ulster Unionist Party wants to ensure the continuance of the Union, which lies at the core of being a unionist. One of our central aims is to promote, strengthen and maintain the Union.

Alex Salmond and the Scottish National Party represent the greatest threat to the maintenance of the United Kingdom. The SNP’s website has a section dedicated to independence, in which it is argued that it is time for the Scottish Parliament to have:

“full control over Scottish affairs and the right to decide when to share power with others.”

The SNP believes that despite devolution, the “new level of democracy” is “limited”, and that restricts how much can be achieved for the people of Scotland. The following quote from the SNP is most worrying:

“The 300-year old Union is no longer fit for purpose. It was never designed for the 21st century world. It is well past its sell by date and is holding Scotland back.”

That displays an interesting logic. Many academics and scholars consider that the constitution of the United States is not fit for purpose: it is old, vague, and, in some

parts, oblique. However, there are few, if any, calls to scrap the US constitution.

In August 2007, a White Paper entitled 'Choosing Scotland's Future: A National Conversation: Independence and Responsibility in the Modern World.' was published. The following comment from an Irish home ruler Charles Stewart Parnell appears at the start of the document:

"No man has a right to fix the boundary of the march of a nation; no man has a right to say to his country, 'Thus far shalt thou go and no further'".

The summary of the section entitled —

Mr Moutray: Will the Member give way?

Mr Savage: No, I will not. There will be plenty of time for the Member to speak when I have finished.

The summary of the section entitled: "Extending Scottish devolution" states:

"Significant powers are currently reserved to the United Kingdom Parliament and the United Kingdom Government. Further devolution in these important areas would allow the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government to take their own decisions on these issues in the interests of Scotland and reflecting the views of the people of Scotland. In some areas, further devolution could also provide greater coherence in decision-making and democratic accountability for delivery of policy."

The document outlines a variety of areas to which it is hoped that devolution can be extended, examples of which include taxation and spending responsibilities; anti-terrorism legislation; legislation on firearms; misuse of drugs; the level of pension for the older population; the regulation of the major health professions; the taxation of tobacco and alcohol; and the Civil Service in Scotland.

That list clearly indicates the intention of the SNP's Administration to attempt to use devolution to weaken the Union. In last night's 'Belfast Telegraph', Alex Salmond said:

"When Scotland becomes independent, England will lose its surly lodger and gain a good neighbour."

I urge Members to look up the definition of "surlly".

On 3 July 2007, the Westminster Government published a Green Paper entitled 'The Governance of Britain', which sought to address two basic questions: how to hold to account those in power, and how to uphold and enhance the rights and responsibilities of the citizen. Paragraph 143 states:

"Devolution does not cede ultimate sovereignty. The decisions Parliament takes have consequences for all the people of our nation. The great strength of our constitution is its effectiveness. It can accommodate difference and rough edges in support of wider goals of national unity, affiliation to the institutions of the state and the service of those institutions to the public."

'The Governance of Britain' Green Paper restates the supremacy and sovereignty of Parliament. However, it fails to address adequately the relationship between

Westminster and the devolved Administrations. For that reason, a Royal Commission should be appointed.

Gordon Brown has gone on record as saying:

"There is a debate to be had about the future of the United Kingdom."

However, when one considers the arguments, family ties, economic connections, shared values and history of our relationship, which has lasted for over 300 years, people will decide that we are stronger together and weaker apart: united we stand, divided we fall; what we have, we hold. I have one simple message for those who wish to destroy and dismantle our most excellent union: no surrender to the break-up of the United Kingdom. I commend the motion to the House.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Hamilton: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"notes the proposal within the Government Green Paper, 'The Governance of Britain', to develop a British statement of values; welcomes the strong emphasis of the Executive, reinforced within the draft Programme for Government, to fortify links in the East-West dimension between Northern Ireland and Great Britain; and believes, following devolution in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, that a Royal Commission should be appointed to review the steps that need to be taken to promote further the unity of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom."

I hope that Members on the Ulster Unionist Benches agree that the amendment enhances the motion.

I welcome this opportunity — indeed, any opportunity — to underscore the benefits of the Union. Unless Members are in any doubt, I am an avowed unionist and not an Ulster nationalist, whatever that may be. If my colleagues and I stand charged of trying to seek the best possible deal for Northern Ireland within the Union, we are guilty of that charge but not of any other silly titles that people might level at us.

Like many of a unionist persuasion, I became involved in active politics partly because of a perceived threat to the very existence of the Union. For me, it was the Belfast Agreement. For others, it was the Anglo-Irish Agreement or even the Sunningdale Agreement. Perhaps some go further back, but I do not think that there is anyone on these Benches who can quite remember the Ulster Covenant, although there may be some Members who could surprise us.

For half a century or more, unionists have often had cause to believe that the Union's days were numbered, and, at times, who could blame them? They were under the cosh of terrorism, betrayed by their Government and let down by their leaders. Fortunately, those days are gone. I hope that the intention of the Ulster Unionist Party in bringing the motion to the Floor is to celebrate the Union and see a way in which it can endure. It is worth celebrating, and the fact that the retention of the

Union enjoys such widespread support across our community must be celebrated.

The motion refers to maintaining the Union in a manner that suggested that there was a threat to it. At times during the proposer's speech, I felt that I had been transported to Edinburgh. Now that the IRA has been defeated and Irish republicanism is in its weakest state in living memory, beaten on both sides of the Irish border, we should not start to panic about the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru.

Now is not the time for defeatists and doom merchants, although I suspect that some may still exist. I do not wish to go too far down this route, but it is laughable that the Ulster Unionist Party seeks to portray itself as some sort of steadfast defender of the Union, when it has such an appalling track record.

Between 1998 and 2003, the Union was undermined, symbolically and substantively, by the acquiescence of the Ulster Unionist Party. The Union flag was removed from public buildings, the name and symbols of the Royal Ulster Constabulary were ditched, good old-fashioned British democracy was tainted by the presence of terrorist representatives in our Government and unaccountable all-Ireland institutions were established.

I am happy to say that those dark, gloomy days when the Union was under threat are long gone, and I am happy to welcome the Ulster Unionist Party in its refound support for the Union. Welcome back, boys. It is good to have you back.

Support for the Union is strong. A BBC 'Hearts and Minds' survey conducted in November 2006 found that 82% of unionists and almost 40% of nationalists believed that Northern Ireland would still be part of the United Kingdom in 2020. That level of support was the highest recorded to the same question since 1998.

3.30 pm

It is no coincidence that that huge level of belief in the Union was secured during the DUP's tenure as the leader of unionism; contrasting with the low level of 61% in May 2000 in the midst of the Trimble and Empey era. The figures were backed up by the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey in June, which showed that 54% of all people in Northern Ireland supported the Union and only 30% preferred a united Ireland.

Even 22% of Catholics surveyed — over one in five — favoured the retention of the constitutional link between Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom. It is little wonder that the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs was recently forced to admit that the constitutional question has been parked.

The Sinn Féin mantra of having a united Ireland by 2016 completely lacks credibility. Today, nine years from that target date, Sinn Féin representatives sit in Stormont,

exercise British power in part of the United Kingdom's political system and support the Police Service of Northern Ireland and British justice — that is what Gerry McHugh would say. A united Ireland is a pipe dream, and support for the Union will get stronger —

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

Mr Attwood: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after the first "Ireland" and insert:

"that the democratic requirements of the principle of consent will determine any change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland; believes in the deepening of relationships between the people of these islands; encourages policy engagement and joint actions among the different administrations in these islands, and on this island; and calls for the significant expansion of North-South areas of co-operation and joint implementation."

Unlike the previous Member who spoke, I do not intend to rubbish the views of anyone who expresses their opinions in the debate — these matters are too important and too sensitive, and people hold too many deep values for those sorts of comments to be made in any speech in this Chamber.

Although the SDLP opposes the motion, it is not diminishing the fact that people who value the Union have reasons to assess what it means to them. The old certainties of the Union — the British empire, the monarchy, and Westminster rule in all parts of what is referred to as the United Kingdom — have changed utterly. The British empire has gone, the monarchy has changed, and one Parliament is no longer responsible for four jurisdictions.

The SDLP acknowledges that there may be reasons why those who value the Union want an assessment of what it means. As George Savage said, given the rise of the SNP, the presence of Welsh nationalists in the Welsh Government, and the fact that a constitutional position has now been agreed for the North, there may be more fundamental changes to the nature of the Union.

The SDLP has three reasons for opposing the motion. First, there cannot be debates about the future of the Union or the future unity of Ireland — both must be part of the same debate. There cannot be a debate that is narrowly defined by either the Union or Irish unity. If we are going to have a debate, let it cover all the issues that people have.

Secondly, it must be recognised where politics now resides. Politics in the North has moved on from only being about the Union: it is now about the three sets of relationships that historically made up our political conflict and that now are the basis of political agreement; the relationships between North and South, Britain and Ireland, and between the communities in the North. I say to the proposers of the motion and amendment No 1 that anything that does not address the fact that that is the nature of our past conflict, and will consequently

be part of the future political solution, disregards something that is very important.

Thirdly, any motion that discusses the Union but does not address the reality of politics that Members practice every day in the Chamber does a disservice to the debate in general. Only yesterday, the Minister of Finance and Personnel outlined proposals for European funding, in the border counties in the South and the west of Scotland as well as in the North. Every week, motions are proposed and reports are made about the British-Irish Council, and sectoral meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council. Anything that disregards how Members practice everyday politics does a disservice to the issues regarding the future of the Union that the proposers of the motion and amendment No 1 want to discuss.

Therefore, the SDLP will oppose the motion. There are also many good reasons why Members should support the SDLP amendment: it recognises the new constitutional situation in the North, the diverse relationships that exist between these islands and the real politics that involve all the parties in the Chamber. The SDLP amendment touches all the necessary bases for a proper, informed and embracing debate with prejudice to nobody in respect of the future of the Union or the future of Irish unity.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I apologise to Simon Hamilton for cutting him short: I assure him that it was not political. Likewise, Alex Attwood cut himself short. Each Member should have been allowed 10 minutes to propose their amendments. *[Interruption.]*

I am not sure how that can be interpreted, but I call Martina Anderson.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt in éadan an rúin seo agus tacaíocht a thabhairt do leasú an SDLP. I apologise to the House for being late.

I do not support the motion, and I speak in support of the SDLP amendment. No one in the Chamber will be surprised to hear that as a republican Member of the Assembly who is committed to the constitutional reunification of Ireland — North and South — I do not support the motion calling for a Royal Commission to outline the steps to maintain what some call “the Union”.

The dislocation of the United Kingdom has been a slow but steady process since its inception. Indeed, the Union has always been a concept under stress. The 1801 Act of Union was challenged by the second rebellion of the United Irishmen in 1803. That stimulated successive insurrections — all of which had debilitating political consequences for Ireland's part in any union with Britain. I remind Members that they would not be sitting in a democratic Assembly if it were not intrinsically grafted to an all-Ireland executive body. Therefore the notion that the Six

Counties is part of some insular set-up with Britain that can be supported by a Royal Commission is a forlorn hope, and it is disconnected from reality.

Although the Six Counties remain constitutionally linked to the island of Britain politically, socially, infrastructurally and economically, it is becoming increasingly integrated with the rest of this island — and that is a fact. It is doing so for the best of reasons: for the common good and for the mutual benefits of all our people. For the first time since the Act of Union of 1801, we are an island united in how we govern ourselves, through agreed and evolving structures outlined in the Good Friday Agreement, with strand two mapping out how we can pool sovereignty for the benefits of the whole island.

On the island of Britain, the Union is dislocating through the transfer of powers to the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales. The unitary state in Britain is history: it is politically dead. Any developments in Britain regarding the Union are firmly beyond the control of anyone in this Assembly. The Scottish Labour Party, the Welsh Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish Conservative Party and the Welsh Conservative Party agree on one thing: to stay politically relevant in their respective local assemblies, they must advocate more autonomy. The process will not stand still or be hindered. The destination of the process of dislocation on the island of Britain does not lie with a desperate collection of politicians in a Royal Commission, but with the sovereign will of the people of Scotland, Wales and, increasingly, the people of England — many of whom are pushing for some form of English assembly.

The Welsh Assembly now supports the finding of the Richard Commission, which calls for that Assembly to have powers equivalent to those of the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Parliament has outlined the parameters for a national conversation on Scotland's future, and there are only two real areas on the table for debate: a significant increase in the powers of the Scottish Parliament, and national independence.

Standing still is not an option. Indeed, even the recent Steel Commission, which examined fiscal practices across the EU, recommended, among other things, a form of fiscal federalism that would see the powers of the Scottish Parliament increase, and the retention of some of its own taxes. The Scottish and Welsh people are moving on, and so should we.

Rather than doing a King Canute, our time in this Assembly would be better served promoting and shaping new emerging relationships through the designated structures outlined in the Good Friday Agreement, which would be to the mutual benefit of all concerned.

Finally, I do not like to stand in this Chamber without saying the words “stand up for Derry”.

Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Lunn: On these occasions, I sometimes feel as though we are intruding in a private squabble, and I wonder whether some of my colleagues pay the slightest attention to anything that goes on outside this House. Do they actually talk to anyone outside Stormont? Do they speak to constituents, or, even better, non-political friends and neighbours, or listen to 'The Steven Nolan Show', or 'Talkback'? When I see motions such as the one on the Order Paper, I wonder whether some Members are living in a fantasy world.

The people to whom I talk want to see us get down to real business, and they are fed up with seeing politicians engage in an endless round of sectarian squabbling for the sake of a few seconds' coverage on the evening news. Instead, they would like to see us tackle issues such as the terrible toll of road deaths in this country, or developing the type of economy that we need to survive in a twenty-first century of brutal global competition, or the fact that our inability to implement European environmental rules means that we are still dumping raw sewage into the sea.

The motion will do absolutely nothing to make Northern Ireland a better society. It is simply an attempt by the right wing of the Ulster Unionist Party to outdo the DUP in the silly game of "who leads unionism?". The motion will do nothing except divide the House on an issue over which the Assembly has absolutely no power — an issue to which no one outside Northern Ireland will pay the slightest bit of notice.

As a believer in free speech, I absolutely support the Ulster Unionist Party's right to bring business to the Chamber. If it makes them look foolish, I should probably welcome it, but I really wish we were spending our time talking about something useful. I wonder whether they have even thought through the implications of the scheme that they are proposing. Of the three devolved Governments in operation in the UK, the one in Scotland is entirely nationalist, the one in Wales is half nationalist, and, at the danger of stating the obvious, the one here is also half nationalist.

I can just imagine the nature of the input from the nationalist half of this Assembly if Mr Adams and his party found themselves able to contribute to such a commission. What do the proposers of the motion think that Alex Salmond or Ieuan Wyn Jones would say to a Royal Commission? Do they think that a Royal Commission would take evidence only from people with whom the UUP agrees?

The world has changed fundamentally over the past decade, as indeed has the nature of both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. The Ulster Unionist Party still seems to struggle with that reality, and, with their amendment, the DUP seems to be determined to give themselves a pat on the back, and then propose

exactly the same action. The SDLP amendment appears worthy, and does not say anything that the Alliance Party would take major issue with, but given that the thrust of the motion is to set up a Royal Commission to further promote the unity of the United Kingdom, what is the connection between the original motion and the SDLP amendment? It does not even mention a Royal Commission.

Mr Burnside: The Member appears to be in favour of the SDLP amendment, and against the original motion from the Ulster Unionist Party, and the DUP's amendment. I thought that the Alliance Party supported the principle of consent of the people of Northern Ireland, who wish to remain part of the United Kingdom. Is it now leaning towards becoming a nationalist party?

3.45 pm

Mr Lunn: I thank the Member for his contribution. I did not realise that he had read the rest of my speech.

The motion is another example of unionist insecurity to try to obtain yet another assurance that is now being proposed by both unionist parties. The second amendment seeks to emphasise the significant expansion of the North/South dimension, but it does at least emphasise that the principle of consent will determine the future status of Northern Ireland. We are really at the point at which the SDLP can acknowledge that. However, once again, the unionists display their lack of faith in the many confirmations given by other interested bodies that their Britishness is secure — unless the population votes otherwise.

This debate is an example of how to waste valuable Assembly time that we can ill afford to lose. The Alliance Party will oppose both of the amendments and the motion.

Mr Simpson: It is regrettable that Alex Attwood was cut off in his prime. However, we should be grateful for small mercies when we receive them. Mr Savage — one of the proposers of the motion — will be glad and will go home to Upper Bann saying that he is now a right-winger. George will be dancing the whole road home.

I welcome any debate that will forge greater links with the United Kingdom. Despite the comments from the Sinn Féin Members, they are living in a fantasy world. However, only time will tell exactly what will take place.

The DUP amendment incorporates all that is best in the original motion, including the call for the establishment of a Royal Commission. However, our amendment goes further than the motion. It makes considerable improvements to the motion and takes greater account of where the United Kingdom is on political and constitutional issues than the original UUP motion. The motion restricts its call for a Royal Commission:

"to review the steps that need to be taken to maintain the unity of ... the United Kingdom."

The DUP amendment goes way beyond that admirable goal. It calls for the appointment of such a Royal Commission:

“to review the steps that need to be taken to promote further the unity”

of that United Kingdom. On that fact alone, the amendment ought to command widespread support. I ask those Members who tabled the motion to fall in behind the DUP amendment. Our amendment also refers to the commitments made in the draft Programme for Government, and it is very plain as regards east-west relationships. The draft Programme for Government refers to “mutually beneficial and practical co-operation”. That is a good principle that ensures that any arrangement should be beneficial to Northern Ireland. However, it also takes account of our ongoing relationships elsewhere. I congratulate the Executive for committing themselves to benefiting the United Kingdom as a whole.

Our amendment takes greater account of where the UK currently stands on political and constitutional issues than the Ulster Unionist Party motion. Our amendment refers to Government proposals to develop a British statement of values. Those proposals are designed to work with the British public to develop a British statement of values that will set out the ideals and principles that bind us together as a nation. Surely the DUP amendment gives far more expression to the hoped-for outcome of those who tabled the motion.

I believe that I have shown why amendment No 1 deserves support, and much of what I have said exposes the fact that amendment No 2 completely ignores the idea that any east-west relationship could be beneficial to Northern Ireland. Instead, amendment No 2 is about outdated ideology. Only the SDLP can say why it wraps itself in political notions that are well past their sell-by date.

I believe that amendment No 1 is worthy of the support of all people of goodwill in the Chamber, and I commend it to the House.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt in éadan an rúin agus i bhfabhar an leasaithe.

Mr Simpson: That sounds painfully like the Six Counties?

Mr McElduff: The occupied Six Counties. I speak in opposition to the motion and in favour of amendment No 2, which was tabled by the SDLP.

The wording and substance of the motion bespeak a lack of self confidence on the part of the proposers — why introduce them at all? Do the proposers fear that the union with England is losing relevance in the minds of people day by day, which is what I believe? It would explain the defensive nature of the motion.

In recent times, the British Government have transferred significant powers to the Assembly, the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament, and that has been universally welcomed. Last March, the proposers even went to the electorate on a manifesto platform of reducing Westminster’s political powers in the North of Ireland and exercising greater local responsibility. The Royal Commission seems to be an anachronism — something that belongs to an imperialist notion of history — and that is enough to be saying on that matter.

A cursory reading of the UUP motion and the DUP amendment makes it clear to whoever is interested that unionist internal party-political rivalry is the main reason why today’s debate has been tabled. It might even explain the context for George Savage’s unusual, untypical and intemperate affirmation of no surrender — fair play to George, I am sure it will have helped someone in his townland.

One key flaw in the motion is the presumption that the political union between the Six Counties and the island of Britain is in the best interests of the people who live in the North of Ireland. Of course, many people do not believe that to be the case, but rather that their best interests lie in a future united Ireland of equals. The unionist community might enjoy more clout in a new Ireland than they do as a small minority in the so-called United Kingdom. It is agreed that people have been disadvantaged by the union — not least the farming community, to which the UK label has never been of benefit in this, or any, part of Ireland.

The motion ignores the North/South dimension, and Martina Anderson covered that point adequately in her contribution. In fact, the motion robs people in Scotland and Wales of their right to national self-determination by binding them to something to which they may not consent.

In the recent past, I was one of four MLAs who attended the British-Irish Interparliamentary Body in Oxford, England. Although it is wonderful that David Simpson says that he wants closer links with the UK, I found that English MPs, and members of the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, and the Channel Islands’ and Isle of Man’s legislatures cannot understand why the UUP and the DUP refuse to take up their membership of that body.

What hope do they have of winning the day via a Royal Commission, when they cannot work the mechanisms that already exist?

In conclusion, I wish to make a suggestion. There has been much talk about the future constitutional position of the North and whether it rests with the UK or with a new Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement makes provision for a referendum on our future constitutional status and for a border poll. I invite the unionist parties to consider conducting a border poll,

or a referendum on our future constitutional status, because they might discover that the results would challenge a whole lot of notions and assumptions. There is even a possibility that the unionist majority in the Six Counties might remain in the short term; but let us put that to the test. I look forward to a time — in the not-too-distant future — when the people of Ireland will take their rightful place among the nations of the world. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr O'Loan: The motion is terrible. It is a pity that it was proposed, because it will only do damage. The reaction of the parties is predictable — all the unionist parties support the motion or the DUP amendment; all the nationalist parties oppose it. Anyone watching from outside the House could have scripted every speech in advance. The DUP needs to show that it is more unionist than the Ulster Unionist Party, so it has proposed an amendment.

Mr Simpson: Change your speech. Let us see whether your speech will make a difference.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Loan: It is hardly surprising that the House is relatively empty this afternoon; that is appropriate for a debate that is a fairly empty ritual.

What provoked the motion and the DUP amendment? Was it, as one Member remarked, confidence in the Union? Of course not. It was simply the opposite; concern about the fragility of the Union initiated the motion. It cannot be unconnected with the substantial interest in independence for Scotland that is being pursued by Mr Alex Salmond, who is a good friend of our First Minister.

What is wrong with the motion is that it represents the politics of old. It is a statement that comes entirely from one side of the community, pretending that the other side does not exist. It presents an orthodox unionist view as if it were the whole truth. Nobody reading the motion would think that we had forged, with the greatest difficulty, a way of conducting politics that embraces the whole community. That way of conducting politics achieved its summit in the Good Friday Agreement. Despite protestations to the contrary, that is essentially where we still stand.

The agreement is worth quoting from. The declaration of support says that:

“We are committed to partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of relationships within Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between these islands.”

The thinking behind the agreement is simply light years away from that of the proposers of the motion or the DUP amendment. The thinking behind the agreement is the only way forward for Government here.

I wish to refer to a couple of instances of “bad language” that I recently heard in the Assembly. First,

Members may have noticed the phrase “four-party mandatory coalition”, which was used by the Minister of Finance and Personnel once or twice.

Mr Simpson: Is that not right?

Mr O'Loan: I will comment on it. Members might notice in particular the use of the word “mandatory”. The coalition is not mandatory at all. The DUP, or any party, could have walked away and lived with the consequences of doing so. However, that is not the most important point. The only way in which we can do business here is together.

If we are going to do business together, and do it well to counter our very real social and economic problems, we cannot afford to do it begrudgingly. We have a choice. We can talk ourselves down, or we can talk ourselves up. In talking about working together as being “mandatory” we are talking ourselves down. We must embrace the common project — not damage it by careless use of language that causes real damage.

The other piece of language that I want to refer to happens quite often, but this struck me particularly just yesterday: the Minister of Health, Mr McGimpsey, was talking about cancer treatment, and he referred to creating the best facilities in the north-west, making much out of comparisons with the rest of the United Kingdom.

He then said that he would co-operate with the health system in the South. At first glance that may sound generous, and, as a unionist Minister, he probably thinks that it is. However, that policy is woefully inadequate when dealing with healthcare; and that point extrapolates to other policy areas.

4.00 pm

Who seriously thinks that, with a population of 1.7 million, we can do everything efficiently and in a world-class manner by ourselves? Co-operation is not adequate, and it is not the right and necessary language to be using. We need to free ourselves and organise our structures on a North-South basis when it makes sense to do so, as it often will, and on a British-Irish basis when it makes sense to do that.

The SDLP amendment is a model of common sense and fairness. That is why, in all probability, Members of this Assembly will reject it, or certainly will attempt to do so. If there was real political maturity in this Assembly or this society, the proposers of the motion would withdraw it, and the amendments would fall. However, I fear that I ask for too much.

Mr Deputy Speaker: In a spirit of reconciliation and atonement for my earlier mistake in cutting off the proposers of the two amendments, I have decided that those summing up the two amendments can have a little extra time to do so.

Mr A Maginness: I agree with my colleague Mr O'Loan that the stated positions of all of the parties were predictable, and conformed to what one may have expected.

As a result of the Good Friday Agreement — which all Members are now committed to, either directly or indirectly, officially or unofficially — the principle of consent is central to the constitutional position. Therefore, to use the words of Dermot Ahern, the constitutional position has been parked. That is a sensible decision.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [McClarty] in the Chair)

As my colleague Alex Attwood said in his speech, we now have a new type and period of politics. The implementation of the Good Friday Agreement — or Belfast Agreement, as some people prefer to call it — means that there is now a partnership arrangement in Northern Ireland, between North and South, and also between Ireland and Britain. The SDLP amendment simply reflects the realities of the Good Friday Agreement.

To some extent, I am disappointed with colleagues in the Ulster Unionist Party who have tabled a motion that, if it is not contrary to the Good Friday Agreement, is certainly contrary to the spirit of that agreement. What we are trying to build — *[Interruption.]*

I know that George Savage disagrees with me, and I have every respect for him and his unionist opinions. Nonetheless, as a result of the Good Friday Agreement, we are now into new politics, which have led to partnership and will, I hope, ultimately lead to reconciliation in this society. I do not know, and no one can predict, where that will lead to. It could lead to a realignment of politics, not just in Ireland, but throughout these islands.

One should also remember that we are members of the European Union, which as a dynamic institution, has done much to reduce the tensions and the ancient and historic hostilities between Ireland and Britain.

The relationship between the Republic and Britain has never been better — it is much better than the relationship between Northern Ireland and Britain. That is something that unionists should examine.

We respect unionists' point of view; we respect unionism; we respect their right to feel proud of being unionists and to have an association with Britain. However, Northern Ireland is in an era of new politics, so let us work to create partnership and bonds between people in Northern Ireland, between North and South and between Britain and Ireland. We do not exclude the east-west relationship. Although we consider the North/South relationship to be extremely important, we do not seek to diminish that other relationship.

I am pleased that Barry McElduff and Martina Anderson expressed support for the SDLP amendment

and that the Alliance Party recognised its merits, although I am disappointed that its Members will not be supporting it. If that party sees value in the amendment and considers it sensible and consistent with the agreement, it should support it rather than opt out.

The speeches of Mr Simpson and Mr Hamilton were predictably nationalistic — British nationalistic — and there is nothing wrong with that. However, those Members miss the centrality of our new politics: to build relationships in our society, in the Assembly, in the Executive and between North and South. Emphasising such nationalism does injury to the objectives of the Good Friday Agreement: bringing about peace and reconciliation and harmony among all our people. Everyone recognises the great value of those objectives.

Extensive devolution in Britain has created new political relationships between the Scottish, the English and the Welsh. More power has been ceded to the National Assembly for Wales, and yet greater power will be given to it in the near future. The Welsh, the Scots — and, perhaps as a reaction to that, the English — are less interested in the unitary system that has existed in Britain for the past couple of centuries. Where the process will end no one knows; but those natural and important relationships are developing, and it is important for us in Northern Ireland to recognise them. By failing to do so, we are burying our heads in the sand. The peoples on the island of Britain are developing a new form of political relationship and a new form of constitution, and Members ought to recognise that.

I urge all Members to support amendment No 2, which is both reasonable and fair.

Lord Morrow: I have listened intently to Members' contributions. Sometimes, I am amazed at the position that certain people adopt in debates. Often, the phrase that we in Northern Ireland have "moved on" is used, inside and outside this House. That is correct: people have moved on. When are the politicians going to move on?

In fairness to Alban Maginness, he made a very strong case in support of the SDLP amendment. I would prefer it if he were to support the DUP amendment, because he has said some things with which I agree. He said that we have developed an arrangement in Northern Ireland that seems to be working, which is correct.

Surely, if we are going to develop a strategy and a way forward, we must do so on the basis of deciding where we are? Simply put, we are rooted in the United Kingdom. Barry McElduff may have a problem getting his head around that concept. However, the real problem for the Shinnars is that they must try to live with and justify — *[Interruption.]*

You have tried to free Ireland — as you call it — with the gun for over 35 years, and you have not done it yet. You will find that even the people that you claim

to represent are quite happy and content to live in this part of the United Kingdom. You have tried to make unionists feel that our cause was not legitimate, proper and correct. At least now we have an acknowledgement from the SDLP that there is nothing wrong with being a unionist, and that, indeed, one may be very proud to be a unionist. Therefore, we must be grateful for the small mercies that fall from these great tables from time to time.

Mr O'Loan takes great exception to the repeated references that were made to the four-party mandatory coalition in the House on Tuesday of last week. One can turn that one around and twist it over as many ways as one likes, but the fact remains that it is a mandatory coalition, and a four-party mandatory coalition. I see the SDLP shaking their heads — perhaps I can persuade them to shake them the other way. *[Laughter.]*

As unionists, we acknowledge that the only way in which we will achieve change is to move forward together. That is the reason for there being a mandatory coalition at the moment. That is not the best or the most satisfactory arrangement in the world, and I suspect that it may not even endure — but what do we want to do? We want to put something in place that will endure in the weeks, months and years that lie ahead.

That is not to say that the DUP will not be respectful of others who hold different opinions. We accept that there is a divide in Northern Ireland, but at least we have a Government in place that appear to have the popular support of the people of Northern Ireland. I wonder whether we can move forward from that position.

I do not often agree with Barry McElduff, but I ask the SDLP to withdraw its amendment, because it now acknowledges that we have a right to exist within the Union, and it says that it is not going to try to take that away from us.

Barry McElduff said of the Ulster Unionists that the motion's wording and substance bespoke a lack of self confidence on the part of the proposers.

For once, Barry, you are right.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, I ask the Lord Morrow to refer all his remarks through the Chair. I have given you some latitude until now, but please direct your remarks through the Chair.

4.15 pm

Lord Morrow: I cannot think of a better way to do it, Mr Deputy Speaker. Thank you very much. I apologise for my not being up to the mark again.

That lack of confidence is why the DUP has tabled its amendment. Having considered the motion, my party says sincerely to the Ulster Unionists that it shows a lack of confidence. My party does not lack confidence in the way forward — absolutely not. The DUP believes

that the Union is secure. Even the Taoiseach says that the constitutional position of Northern Ireland is settled for the long term.

Mr McElduff: A LeasCheann Comhairle, why, then, does the DUP not take up its membership of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body? That is a straightforward question. Why did the DUP not take up its place at the Body's thirty-fifth conference in plenary format that was held in Oxford a week ago? Might the DUP decide to take up its places on the Body by the time the plenary in Wexford takes place in April 2008?

Lord Morrow: Mr McElduff will be aware that the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body of which he speaks was a product of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which was foisted over the heads of unionists. Does he recall that agreement? It is the reason that my party does not take up its places on that body. I hope that the Member will rest content.

The four parts of the United Kingdom were mentioned, as too was the danger that, under devolution, the United Kingdom will split up — and that Alex Salmond is one of the people who must be watched. I want to draw Members' attention to certain comments that Alex Salmond has made. In fairness to him, he is committed to restoring the ferry service between Ballycastle and Campbelltown. One might say that that is not a big deal. However, it is a big deal in that it shows that there is an affinity between Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Nevertheless, the same Mr Salmond exclaimed that Scotland was free in 1993, and a separatist heaven in 2007. However, 1993 is long gone, and Scotland is still an integral part of the United Kingdom. Now 2007 is almost gone, and the utopia that Mr Salmond referred to has not arrived. Unless he gets his skates on within the next two or three weeks, it will not arrive in time. I know that much, folks.

I implore the Ulster Unionists to unite with the DUP on this matter. After such a reasonable and rational debate, I ask you, Mr Maginness, to withdraw the SDLP amendment and accept the status quo.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It may have been a senior moment, Lord Morrow, but you did not address your last remarks through the Chair.

Lord Morrow: I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker. Do I still have the Floor?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Yes, for 10 seconds.

Lord Morrow: I will, therefore, apologise once more for my not being up to the mark. Again, I make an emphatic plea to the SDLP, which tabled the other amendment to the motion: now is the time for the House to unite steadfastly behind the DUP amendment in support of the United Kingdom. I suspect that Mr McElduff will not even bother to vote against my party's

amendment because he is aware that the cause for which his party fought for the past 40 years is a lost one.

Mr Burnside: I thank all Members, with one exception, for their contributions to the debate, which has taken place in a good mannered and courteous atmosphere. It would be a bad state of affairs if at Stormont — or in the Dáil, Scotland, Wales or the sovereign Parliament at Westminster — democratically elected Members could not call for a debate or find the time to discuss the relationships in these islands among the devolved assemblies of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. The most intemperate remarks — which always seem to come from moderates — came from a friendly Alliance Member, who said that the debate was a waste of time. I do not regard it as a waste of time.

Without going into too much detail, I wish to comment on the two amendments. There is some reasonableness in the SDLP amendment, which recognises the principle of consent. The SDLP is a constitutional nationalist party that has recognised the principle of consent throughout its history. My party welcomes that. However, I object to the SDLP amendment because it concentrates too much on all-Ireland relationships.

We already have all-Ireland relationships, yet the SDLP now wants more of them. We have never had so many all-Ireland institutions that the Ulster Unionist Party supports and that the DUP completely supports, including two new all-Ireland institutions that were set up as a result of the St Andrews Agreement. Therefore, there are lots of institutions. On many occasions, those institutions are set up to appease nationalism's philosophical and political objectives rather than to aid real economic co-operation.

Unionists in the House will oppose the SDLP amendment, because it is too narrow and seeks to increase the number of North/South bodies rather than to increase relationships across these islands. The Ulster Unionist Party is more than happy to accept amendment No 1, which Democratic Unionist Party MLAs tabled. Their proposed amendment supports the main thrust of our motion to set up a Royal Commission, something which the SDLP amendment opposes.

The Ulster Unionist Party tabled the motion because to have consent from the regions of the United Kingdom is not enough. I remember when consent for maintaining the Union was not enough. Devolution was ill-thought out and badly timed. Different systems were used for Scotland and Wales, and different systems, techniques and procedures were used for Northern Ireland. Obviously, Northern Ireland had a violent rebellion going on for 35 years that turned the whole peace process into a political process. Things have changed

on the mainland. Some of those changes have been good for the Union and some have been bad for it.

I remember when, 15 or 20 years ago, the Labour Party — the current party of Government — was advocating the withdrawal of troops from Northern Ireland. It is to be greatly welcomed, and it helps the confidence of the unionist people throughout the whole of the kingdom, that the Labour Party now recognises the principle of consent. Its old attitude on withdrawal from Northern Ireland has been replaced, and that has undermined the militant republican, Sinn Féin/IRA position of withdrawing the British presence from Northern Ireland.

The Conservative Party is changing, too. In some ways, I do not like the way in which that party is changing. However, it is evolving. Undoubtedly, the English Conservative Party is applying pressure, because it seeks the magic number of 255 Members in the British House of Commons. That is what it is after. It is not showing as much interest in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, which account for one seat, three seats and no seats, respectively, at Westminster. The Conservative Party is looking for a majority in the Commons. Internally, it is considering and debating whether England should have its own Parliament, be it in the form of a Grand Committee of the House of Commons or some other form. However, it is certainly considering the idea of England having its own Parliament. If that were to happen, Northern Ireland's MPs, Scotland's MPs and Wales's MPs would not vote on internal English matters. Therefore, changes are taking place in the Conservative Party that are changing and affecting the relationships between the three devolved institutions — one Parliament, two Assemblies — and the national Parliament and Government at Westminster.

The Liberal Democrats, who are a bit like the Alliance Party in that they cannot make up their minds about anything, have their views as well. They accept the principle of consent and that the United Kingdom will remain as long as its consenting parts — Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland — wish to remain part of it.

A Royal Commission, within tight terms of reference, is a constructive way in which to have a sensible debate on the future relationship between the two Assemblies, the one devolved Parliament in Scotland and the national Parliament.

Changes are also happening externally, to which our SDLP friend Alban Maginness has referred. The relationship between the United Kingdom's Government and the European Government is on the agenda again. Whether one calls it a constitution or a treaty rather depends on whether one comes from the centre, is a Euro-sceptic or is on the pro-European side of the debate. Great constitutional changes are continuing to

evolve in the United Kingdom, in the relationship between the UK and the European Union, and in our relationships with friends and neighbours, such as the Republic of Ireland.

Nationalism in England, Scotland and Wales poses a major threat to the Union. I like Alex Salmond and get on well with him. He was a great operator in Westminster at a time when I was in that House.

He is a dangerous, Machiavellian man. When Mr Salmond came here at the invitation of the First Minister, I said to him: "You are the most Machiavellian man I have ever met." He said to me, "David, Machiavelli was not nearly Machiavellian enough for me." He is trying to create the circumstances in Scotland that will get the English to end the Union. There are two sides to the Union, and my greatest fear is that circumstances may arise that will threaten it.

I find very worrying some of the comments that the First Minister, as a unionist and as leader of the Assembly, made about Alex Salmond's policies. Supporting Alex Salmond's call for a Queen of Scotland would end the unity of the United Kingdom that was established by the Act of Union in 1707. There would no longer be a Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We do not need another Mary Queen of Scots; we need a continuation of one Crown for the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I have concerns about the views that our First Minister expressed, although I wish him all the best in his campaign in the United States to bring investment to Northern Ireland.

We must continue to examine whether, under the principle of consent, there are constructive and democratic ways to develop the institutional relationships between the devolved Parliament and Assemblies of the United Kingdom and the national Government. That relationship is under strain. If there was an economic recession across the entire United Kingdom, increasing English nationalism would put pressure on Scotland. The English would say, "Go away, Scotland; take your North Sea oil and have your own Parliament and your Queen of Scotland." Northern Ireland would not escape the effects of that sentiment. Our Members of Parliament who have devolved powers in Northern Ireland would not be treated differently from other Members of Parliament in the United Kingdom.

Therefore the Ulster Unionist Party recommends that there should be a Royal Commission, with tight terms of references, under the leadership of Gordon Brown. Now is the time to establish a Royal Commission because Gordon Brown is playing the pro-Union card of Britishness — even though he and his colleagues have ludicrous ideas about putting a dragon on the Union flag. However, they are considering the issue of

nationality. For Gordon Brown to continue to be Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland he must be a unionist. It would be inconceivable for a British Prime Minister who comes from Scotland not to vote on most of the legislation that passes through our national Parliament and Government.

I want the pro-Union card played as often as possible in the interests of English and mainland politicians. Ulster unionists on this side of the Irish Sea should strengthen the relationship between Stormont, Scotland and Wales and the national sovereign Government at Westminster, and the best way to do that is by establishing a Royal Commission. I ask for as much support as possible for the motion. The Ulster Unionist Party will support amendment No 1, which strengthens our motion. In the cause of unionist unity —

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

Mr Burnside: — the Ulster Unionist Party will accept that amendment. It is a great pity that we cannot have wider support from the supposedly pro-consent Alliance Party.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. 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 will proceed to put the question on the motion, as amended.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 40; Noes 41.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Burnside, Mr T Clarke, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Buchanan and Mr I McCrea.

NOES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, 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, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Mr Neeson, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mr O'Dowd,

*Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey,
Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.*

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Boylan and Mr A Maginness.

Question accordingly negated.

Question put, That amendment No 2 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 36; Noes 44.

AYES

*Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, 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 Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly,
Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey,
Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney,
Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin,
Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd,
Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey,
Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.*

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Boylan and Mr A Maginness.

NOES

*Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne,
Mr Buchanan, Mr Burnside, Mr T Clarke,
Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Easton,
Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Dr Farry, Mr Ford,
Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin,
Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland,
Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McFarland,
Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry,
Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Neeson,
Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr K Robinson,
Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson,
Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells .*

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Beggs and Mr K Robinson.

Question accordingly negated.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 39; Noes 42.

AYES

*Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne,
Mr Buchanan, Mr Burnside, Mr T Clarke, Rev Dr Robert
Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott,
Sir Reg Empey, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch,
Mr Irwin, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland,
Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McFarland,
Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry,
Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton,
Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr Ross,
Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Storey,
Mr Weir, Mr Wells .*

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Beggs and Mr K Robinson.

NOES

*Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, 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,
Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew,
Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn,
Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey,
Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney,
Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin,
Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Mr Neeson, Ms Ní Chuilín,
Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey,
Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane, Mr B Wilson.*

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Boylan and Mr A Maginness.

Main Question accordingly negated.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Deputy Speaker:*]

ADJOURNMENT

Provision of Traffic Attendants in Waterfoot, Cushendall and Cushendun

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the debate will have 10 minutes to speak.

Mr O’Loan: I thank Members for their attendance, and I thank the Minister for Regional Development, who has responsibility for the provision of traffic attendants, for his presence. I am grateful for the opportunity to debate the matter of traffic attendants in the north Antrim villages of Waterfoot, Cushendall and Cushendun.

I will give a bit of background on the three villages. I know that they are well known and well loved by many Members. Waterfoot, Cushendall and Cushendun are traditionally Irish in character with attractive vernacular-type buildings and narrow streets. The villages are situated in the glens of Antrim and along the Causeway coastal route, which runs from Belfast right through to Derry.

In July we saw the installation of nearly 400 signs along the Causeway coastal route, signed off — if Members will excuse the pun — by the Minister responsible for tourism, Nigel Dodds, who said:

“The Causeway Coastal Route is one of the key driving routes in Northern Ireland and the new signage will encourage visitors to experience and enjoy all of the scenic attractions within the Causeway Coast and Glens region. The route will lead visitors to inland scenic areas, bringing increased visitor number and tourism revenue to a wider geographical area.”

My point here is to outline the importance of the main road through the three villages of Waterfoot, Cushendall and Cushendun.

On 30 October 2006, there was a transfer of enforcement powers from the police for most parking restrictions, including yellow lines, urban clearways, bus lanes, limited-waiting parking places and pay-and-display bays. NCP Ltd was appointed to carry out that enforcement on behalf of Roads Service.

In July 2007, I asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide details of traffic-attendant patrols in the Moyle District Council area since the implementation of the new traffic-management scheme. The Minister responded that, from October 2006 to the end of June 2007, there had been 62 patrols in the Ballycastle area, six in the Bushmills area and three at the Giant’s Causeway. There was no mention of any patrols in the rest of the Moyle District Council

area, including in the villages of Waterfoot, Cushendall and Cushendun.

The Causeway coastal route runs through those three villages; they are at the heart of the master plan for the Causeway Coast and glens area, and they regularly face total gridlock. Cars are parked on both sides of the street, drivers ignore yellow lines, lorries are abandoned outside local businesses while goods are delivered, and, daily, coaches attempt to manoeuvre around tight corners.

The traffic problem is not just a seasonal one. In February, a colleague met two Roads Service staff in the centre of Cushendall to discuss an unrelated issue. In the space of about 30 minutes, they saw five large coaches travelling through the village. The Roads Service employees saw for themselves how difficult it is to drive through the village, because people are able to abandon their vehicles wherever they like in the knowledge that there is no enforcement in the area.

In March, at a meeting of Moyle District Council’s retail and environmental working group, the same colleague raised the issue of the lack of traffic attendants in the area with Roads Service employees, and was told that the Roads Service would monitor traffic over Easter and that, over the summer, due to the influx of tourist traffic, traffic attendants would specifically staff the Causeway coastal route. That did not happen.

The Roads Service website states that the objective of the new enforcement scheme is:

“to reduce the number of illegally parked vehicles on our roads. This in turn will reduce traffic congestion, improve road safety and improve accessibility for all road-users, including Blue Badges holders.”

Significantly, the website also states that one of the positive changes to the scheme is:

“Helping traffic to flow more freely”.

Elsewhere, the decriminalisation of parking enforcement may well be a success; however, it does not serve rural villages such as Waterfoot, Cushendall and Cushendun. If traffic and parking is not managed in those three villages, people will begin to avoid the area, local businesses will suffer and the full benefit that the Causeway coastal route brings to increased visitor numbers and tourist revenues in the area will be lost.

The Minister should urgently review the provision of traffic attendants in the mid-glens area and in other rural villages. He should do as his Department says in its information leaflet on the decriminalisation of parking enforcement, and get tough on illegal parking. Of course, such enforcement must be discreet; however, it must happen.

Mr Storey: The implementation of the traffic-decriminalisation legislation makes it abundantly clear that the people with responsibility for implementing enforcement priorities are not impartial. Answers to recent questions about the number of tickets that have

been issued in towns such as Ballycastle reinforce the comments of Member for North Antrim Mr O'Loan.

Towns such as Cushendall and Waterfoot are being neglected. I am gravely concerned that the consequences of the decriminalisation legislation are the driving motivation of revenue generation, rather than traffic management. I thank Mr O'Loan for bringing the issue to the attention of the Assembly and, particularly, of the Minister.

Legislation must be well enforced; nevertheless we must ensure that consideration of each area's traffic needs — not only the needs of Cushendun, Cushendall and Waterfoot, but those of areas across Northern Ireland — is paramount. Traffic management is not just about issuing tickets in order to reach a monthly quota, and to ensure that the company with the contract is satisfied that a good return has been made on its investment.

Furthermore, I thank the Member for bringing the Causeway coastal route to the Minister's attention.

The North Antrim constituency has the coastal route, and we can say with some pride that it is of idyllic beauty. We are very proud of it, and we want to encourage people to visit it all year round. If visitors are hindered when they come into the villages, such as Cushendall or Waterfoot, which are mentioned in Mr O'Loan's proposal for the Adjournment debate, surely they will sail on through or bypass them. We must adopt a pragmatic approach to traffic control, which requires sensible enforcement.

5.15 pm

I also wish to talk about the input of the PSNI. The rural community suffers not only from the lack of enforcement of traffic management, but from a lack of a PSNI presence. At weekends, the part of my constituency from Cushendall to Bushmills is neglected, and there is only what might be called a skeleton staff on duty. One weekend, there were only three police officers on duty in the Ballycastle station to cover the whole area. That is totally unacceptable, and I have raised the matter with the district commander.

I thank Mr O'Loan for bringing the matter to the Minister's attention, and I welcome the fact that the Minister is here. I trust that he will bear in mind the genuine concerns of people who want to enhance the lives not only of those who pass through the area, but of those who live in the rural villages. We must ensure that they can go about their business unimpeded, and I trust that consideration will be given to the points that have been raised.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I too thank the Member for bringing the issue of traffic management in the glens to the House. When I speak of the glens, I refer to the Glens ward, which includes Armoy, a village that sometimes is

forgotten when it comes to issues such as tourism. As far as I am aware, however, it does not face any great problems with parking and traffic.

I recognise the need for adequate enforcement, but it requires a multifaceted approach. We must ensure that appropriate parking facilities are available throughout the glens and that the public make use of them. There is an excellent car park in Waterfoot, which is filled to the brim in the summer. The recent provision of lighting there has allayed some concerns about security. However, the pedestrian access to and from the car park is not safe, and that must be greatly improved before it can be offered as a viable alternative to the public.

I am not aware of any yellow lines or parking restrictions in Cushendun, but I am well aware of the problems that Waterfoot and Cushendall face, especially during the summer and when community festivals are held in the area. I know that Roads Service has already agreed to give priority to a request from the local council for more resources to be used at weekends during the summer months.

There is very little room for manoeuvre for drivers on Waterfoot's main street. However, most of the vehicles parked there — especially at this time of year — belong to people using the local shops and businesses. I am aware that the provision of lay-bys along the main street is being explored. That scheme may help to improve the situation, although it will depend on the views of the householders who live there.

Another issue is the livestock market that is held in the middle of Cushendall, which adds to the traffic problems. Planning Service and other agencies should support any efforts to establish the market outside the village, which could help to alleviate congestion. An increase in the provision of traffic wardens will not solve the traffic and parking problems in the area. Traffic-management schemes, the provision of more car parking places and meaningful consultation with local residents will help to address the problems.

I ask the Minister to examine the possibility of providing parking bays for disabled drivers in the villages in the glens, especially in close proximity to essential services, such as post offices.

Better public parking facilities throughout the glens of Antrim are required, and the possible provision of car-parking permits for local residents should also be explored. Go raibh maith agat.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank Mr O'Loan for bringing this issue to the attention of the House and for giving us the opportunity to air these important points in the presence of the Minister.

There are three areas that should be considered. First, there is tourism. As representatives for North Antrim, we are doing our level best to encourage tourists

to visit that beautiful area. It is almost impossible, especially during the summer, for traffic to get through some of the villages that have been mentioned. Considering the coaches that are now being used, and the number of people who arrive to see the beauty of that lovely route along the coast, it is important to take this issue seriously and to ensure that there is a free flow of traffic through those villages during the summer.

As Members have mentioned, it is not simply a question of traffic management; it is important to provide areas in which people can park their cars. If we are to increase tourism, this issue must be taken seriously, progressed and examined in its entirety to ensure that those who are breaking the traffic laws are brought to book.

Secondly, the economics of the area must be considered. People who drive along that route to see the beauty of the road may wish to stop for a meal at one of the hotels. However, because of the traffic problems and congestion, they may turn off to the left to find somewhere else where they can enjoy their meal without worrying about the traffic.

It has been mentioned, in connection with the economic issue, that people who own shops and businesses, and especially the farming community — who come to the area for the market and to exchange their goods — must also be considered. How on earth are those people supposed to conduct their business if illegal parking on both sides of the road is allowed to continue?

Thirdly, this problem should not be considered only from the point of view of the three villages to which reference has been made. The issue needs to be addressed with reference to the road from Belfast right through to Ballycastle. When that is taken into account, it will be seen in the context of something far greater.

I am glad that the Minister is present, and I ask him to take on board the fact that regulations have been put in place but that no follow-up action has been taken, which has led to the continuation of old bad habits. I am sure that if the issue is taken seriously, those habits will eventually be broken, because when people are hit in their pockets, they are hit in the most tender part.

Again, I thank Mr O'Loan for bringing this issue to the attention of the House.

Mr Neeson: I also thank Declan O'Loan for raising the issue, which concerns an area that I know well. I remember, way back in my single days, spending many weekends in Cushendun and enjoying nothing more than canoeing on the River Dun and out in the bay. Therefore, it is an area that I not only got to know very well but that I grew to love very much.

There is no doubt that there are major problems, particularly during the summer. The issue that stands

out more than any other is the lack of public-parking facilities in the three villages.

There is a car park in Waterfoot and another in Cushendun, but Cushendall lacks adequate parking provision. We live at a time when we want to increase tourism not only in Northern Ireland as a whole but in the glens of Antrim in particular. It is the most beautiful part of the island of Ireland. The road to Torr Head is much more spectacular than the Ring of Kerry.

The area has a lot going for it, and it is important that we make it more amenable for those who want to come for a holiday and stay in the places concerned. Adjacent to Cushendun lies Knocknacarry, where there is also very limited parking.

I know that the Minister will address the problem, but rather than take a heavy-handed approach, we should be sensible about the whole thing.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Declan O'Loan, the Member who tabled the debate, and all Members who have contributed to it. I welcome the opportunity to discuss parking enforcement and general parking issues along the Antrim coast — a very beautiful part of the countryside — and, in particular, in Waterfoot, Cushendall and Cushendun.

I will try to address most of the points raised in the debate, but, as Ministers generally do in these debates, I have asked my officials to study the Hansard report and I will respond in writing to Members about local or specific issues raised.

By way of background for Members who may not be familiar with the subject, I would like to explain my Department's involvement in the enforcement of on-street parking restrictions. On 30 October 2006, certain parking restrictions were decriminalised, and my Department assumed responsibility for their enforcement. Roads Service entered into a contract with NCP Services Ltd to deploy traffic attendants to perform that service on its behalf. Prior to decriminalisation, responsibility for enforcement rested with the PSNI, through its traffic warden service.

On average, 100 traffic attendants are deployed, from Monday to Saturday, in larger towns and cities. They are mainly deployed on foot. However, in some instances, they use bicycles and scooters to patrol certain routes, such as clearways and bus lanes. In certain locations, attendants are deployed on Sundays. In addition, 16 mobile attendants are deployed in cars: their responsibilities are to provide support to on-foot attendants at certain times and to cover smaller towns and villages as needed.

I take this opportunity to dispel any myths about the contract between my Department and NCP Services Ltd. Mervyn Storey, in particular, referred to those

arrangements. NCP Services Ltd is not paid according to the number of tickets issued, and individual attendants are not set ticket quotas that they must meet. NCP Services Ltd is paid a standard rate for the number of hours each attendant is deployed, irrespective of the number of tickets issued. Revenue generated by the payment of penalty charge notices, along with income from car parking and other charges, supplements the overall financing of Roads Services by central Government — it does not go to NCP Services Ltd.

The objective of on-street enforcement is to reduce the level of illegally parked vehicles, which helps to reduce congestion, improve road safety and facilitates easier parking for blue badge holders and delivery vehicles. To ensure that maximum benefit is derived from on-street parking enforcement, Roads Service deploys attendants to areas where traffic volumes are highest, and where illegal parking causes most disruption. Targeting available resources to areas of highest priority is key to the success of the enforcement project.

I now turn, a LeasCheann Comhairle, to Waterfoot, Cushendall and Cushendun. As my colleague Daithí McKay pointed out, Cushendun has no waiting restrictions and, therefore, there is no requirement to deploy traffic attendants in that area. However, Waterfoot and Cushendall have a small number of restrictions in place: there are 75 restricted metres in Waterfoot and 227 restricted metres in Cushendall. That must be compared with 800,000 restricted metres across the North.

When initial deployment routes for the mobile patrols were established, no illegal parking problems were identified in those villages. As a result, they have not been included in routine mobile patrols. As a result of Mr O'Loan's query, Roads Service re-examined the Waterfoot and Cushendall areas. During those assessments no illegal parking problems were observed and no penalty charge notices issued. I have been advised by the parking enforcement unit that it intends to keep the situation under review, and that it intends to deploy mobile patrols in those areas, particularly next summer.

5.30 pm

I am aware that Mr O'Loan supports the need for effective parking enforcement, and he has made positive contributions to the related debate. I know that he is aware of the benefits that it can bring, and I welcome his support. The Department's objective is to ensure that people park properly and legally, in order to reduce congestion and improve road safety in towns and cities across the North. In that regard, the preliminary findings from compliance surveys are encouraging; they show a significant reduction in the number of illegally parked vehicles since the decriminalisation of parking enforcement.

I hope that I have addressed all the concerns. A general issue was raised around parking facilities in the villages on the Antrim coast. Roads Service is happy to work with elected representatives, and other interested groups and individuals from those areas, to see where parking facilities can be enhanced and improved. That was referred to by Daithí McKay, Rev Robert Coulter and Sean Neeson.

Following discussions with local representatives about traffic management measures in Waterfoot, a number of options have been established for the provision of lay-bys on Main Street. Those measures will help to reduce parking on the carriageway, and thereby assist through traffic and help to relieve congestion. Roads Service is in a design process for that scheme, which will be discussed with local representatives and frontagers to seek their opinion. Subject to the outcome of that discussion, it is hoped that the scheme may commence during the present financial year.

Members made references to other areas where parking facilities could be improved. I will be happy to study the Hansard report and, if necessary, I will meet local representatives to see how those issues may be developed.

In conclusion, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I hope that I have addressed all the concerns and points raised by Members. As I said at the start, I have asked officials to take note of the Hansard report; if I have missed any points that Members have raised, I will write to them with clarification. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Adjourned at 5.32 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 10 December 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Moutray: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It has been drawn to my attention that during a function held in Parliament Buildings on Friday evening, individuals refused to leave the Building when the fire alarm was sounded. Is the Speaker able to make a statement to the House on this serious issue today, or will he undertake to carry out an investigation and report back to the Assembly to ensure that the situation will not be repeated?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. I will look into the situation and report back to him.

At the sitting on Monday 3 December, Mr Campbell, on a point of order, asked me to establish when the Department for Social Development was aware that it was likely that his question to the Minister could not be put on the grounds that the matter in question had become sub judice on Friday 30 November. Mr Campbell was concerned that he had not been informed earlier that his question could not be put.

I can confirm that information showing that leave had been granted for a judicial review was received from the Department for Social Development last Monday morning. My officials made enquiries about the grounds on which leave had been granted. On that basis, I was satisfied that the grounds for review related to matters referred to in Mr Campbell's question.

At approximately 1.35 pm last Monday, I ruled that the question could not be put on the grounds that the matter was sub judice. I understand that the Member was informed soon after that. I cannot say at what time the Department considered the matters raised by the Member.

Mr Campbell: Thank you for investigating the case at my request, Mr Speaker. May I take it that the High Court proceedings that were commenced on the morning of Friday week ago — about which we are now having this discussion and about which you were

informed last Monday morning by the Department — were the reason why my question was ruled inadmissible? Rather than being informed when it became apparent that my question would be inadmissible, I was notified a full working day later that my question would not be included on the Order Paper.

Mr Speaker: In response to the Member's point of order, my office and I were informed only on the morning of Monday 3 December 2007.

On Tuesday 4 December 2007, Mr Raymond McCartney made a point of order alleging that the word "lapdog" had been called out when a colleague had risen to ask a question. Mr McCartney asked me to rule on whether that was unparliamentary language. I did not hear the remark. However, if it was made, I do not consider that it was unparliamentary, in the context of Standing Orders.

As I have said on a number of occasions, I urge Members to consider the dignity of the Chamber before they indulge in such antics. I have repeatedly asked Members to be mindful of their language, and I do so again.

Mr S Wilson: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. Would the term "pet poodle" be acceptable in the Chamber?

Mr Speaker: Order, order.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council — Aquaculture and Marine Sectoral Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that she wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in aquaculture and marine sectoral format.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 regarding the first meeting since restoration of the North/South Ministerial Council in aquaculture and marine sectoral format. The meeting was held in the Loughs Agency headquarters at Prehen on Wednesday 21 November 2007.

The Executive were represented by Ian Paisley Jnr and me; the Irish Government were represented by Eamon Ryan TD, the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources. This statement has been agreed with Ian Paisley Jnr.

The Council noted the progress that had been made since the last meeting in April 2002 and welcomed the opportunity to come together to discuss co-operation in the aquaculture and marine sector. The Council welcomed the passing of legislation in both jurisdictions in 2007, which provided the Loughs Agency with the powers to regulate aquaculture and wild shell fisheries in the Foyle and Carlingford areas.

The Council also welcomed the introduction of a hardship package to provide a measure of relief to those affected by the cessation of commercial drift-net, or draft-net, salmon fishing in the Foyle area.

The Council noted the plans in the aquaculture and marine sector for 2008-2010. Those include actions to maintain the sustainability of fisheries in the Carlingford and Foyle catchments; the introduction of a regulatory and licensing regime for aquaculture in the Foyle and Carlingford areas; the improvement of the angling licensing system; and the introduction of a marine tourism development strategy.

The Council also approved the Loughs Agency corporate plan for 2008-10 and the business plan for 2008, subject to budgetary considerations by the Executive and the Irish Government. It was noted that the St Andrews Agreement review is now under way and that the agency's future plans may require consideration in light of the outcome of that review.

The Council approved the implementation of the Loughs Agency's marine tourism development strategy

for 2008-13, subject to the availability of funding under the EU programme for cross-border territorial co-operation. That strategy will work through partnerships with state authorities and private bodies, and it will provide support for projects, develop access infrastructure, project development, skills training, marketing and communications activities.

The Council also approved the Loughs Agency's financial assistance policy to oversee how grant aid will be administered to support angling development, conservation and protection of fisheries, marine tourism and aquaculture.

The Council noted the Loughs Agency's annual report and financial statements for 2006. The Council approved the agency's proposed purchase of a monitoring vessel, subject to the availability of funding under the EU Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance (FIFG).

The Council approved the Foyle Area and Carlingford Area (Angling) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations 2007, which should impact positively on the conservation and protection of salmon stocks in an area of the River Finn, noting that the regulations will now be progressed in accordance with legislative procedures in both jurisdictions.

The Council also noted the regulations being developed to improve the control of salmon and coarse angling, and for the licensing and development of aquaculture.

The Council agreed that its next meeting in the aquaculture and marine sectoral format will take place in February 2008.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): The Minister indicated the welcome for the hardship package in respect of the cessation of commercial drift-net salmon fishing in the Foyle area. What progress has been made with the EU to ensure that those payments are made before the end of the year?

Will the Minister state whether a similar package will be paid to the oyster fishermen of Strangford, who are being forced to close their fisheries? Those fisheries have been supported in the past by the Department in order to protect the horse mussel.

Ms Gildernew: Both sponsoring Departments have submitted state-aid notifications to the European Commission in respect of the hardship payments. We have been working with the Commission to expedite its approval. Following receipt of that approval, the Loughs Agency will be in a position to start processing those payments. I intend to raise that issue with the EU Fisheries Commissioner, Joe Borg, when I visit Brussels this week. Like the Chairman, I would like to see the payments made before the end of the year.

As for the oyster fisheries in Strangford Lough, I do not have the relevant information at hand because my

statement relates to the work of the NSMC. However, I am happy to respond in writing on that matter.

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for her statement. I welcome the plans for the aquaculture and marine sector for 2008-10, which are interesting. The Minister's statement mentioned the North/South Ministerial Council's welcome for the introduction of a hardship package to provide relief for those affected by the cessation of certain types of salmon fishing in the Foyle area.

There were two jellyfish attacks on salmon stocks on the County Antrim coast on 21 and 23 November. Can the Minister provide an update on that situation and confirm that that matter has been discussed by the Executive? What financial package will be introduced for those who have been affected?

Ms Gildernew: I am dealing with the North/South sectoral meeting. The Glenarm situation was not discussed at that meeting because that matter is outside the Council's remit. As the Member knows, I have had a number of discussions with Executive colleagues, and the matter that he has raised was discussed at last week's Executive meeting. At this point, I do not have any further news for the House on a financial package. We are still working on that. I am not sure whether that will be forthcoming.

Mr P J Bradley: I welcome the Minister's statement. Like the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I note the Minister's reference to the hardship package for those forced from the industry because of the new regulations. Who was involved in drawing up the guidelines for the hardship package? Could the Loughs Agency corporate plan for 2008-10 be tampered with as a result of the review of the St Andrews Agreement?

Ms Gildernew: As I said in my statement, we shall be examining all those matters under the review of the St Andrews Agreement. I have already addressed that issue.

The hardship package was discussed by the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission, the Loughs Agency and officials from my Department. However, those discussions were very much guided by the Loughs Agency.

Mr McCarthy: My question also relates to the hardship package, which is welcome. Why can the Minister not make similar provision for the Irish Sea fishermen, such as those in Portavogie, for example, who have been crying out for such a package for quite some time? That also applies to the fishermen of Strangford Lough, who have been denied a livelihood.

Ms Gildernew: Again, that does not come within the remit of my statement. However, the package is available for the salmon fishermen because it is part of

measures to conserve stocks and to protect species from overfishing or exploitation. That does not automatically read across to other sectors, where the stocks are not the matter of most concern. However, I am very aware of the pressures that face the fishermen of Portavogie, as the Member has pointed out. I met those fishermen last week, and I am trying to explore ways in which we can help them.

12.15 pm

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her statement, and I thank her and her ministerial colleagues for the work that they did at the meeting.

The Council welcomed the legislation that was introduced this year to give the Loughs Agency powers in relation to aquaculture. Will the Minister and her counterpart in the South keep the implementation of that legislation under review, so that new anomalies do not emerge? In relation to the hardship package, the questions are how much and how soon. Similarly, how much is envisaged for the proposed tourism development strategy?

Ms Gildernew: The hardship package is marginally more than that agreed in the Twenty-six Counties, due to the nature of fishing in the Foyle. We received approval for that from the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) when I met the Loughs Agency earlier this year. I welcome the Council's support for the Loughs Agency and for what it is doing, and I can reassure the Member that I will be keeping a close eye on all these developments to ensure that they are as helpful to the agency as can be.

The agency is in the process of applying to the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) for funding of approximately £13.64 million for the marine tourism project. SEUPB will only advise the agency of the proposed level of commitment after a feasibility study has been completed.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her statement. Does she recall her meeting, some 6 to 8 weeks ago, with the Strangford Lough Fishermen's Association? We were looking for hardship money for them as well, and she said that she would look at the matter. She has said this morning that hardship money has been made available for conservation reasons. Since sections of Strangford Lough have been boxed off for conservation purposes, would it not be fair for the Minister to consider hardship money for the fishermen of Strangford Lough?

Ms Gildernew: As the Member says, we did have a meeting some weeks ago. The issue there was the environmental protection of the modiolus beds in Strangford Lough and the impact on them of fishing and pleasure boating. When I was in Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel last week, I announced measures under the European fisheries fund. We will want to explore how we can spend that money with a view to helping all the

sectors of the industry — fishermen, processors and the aquaculture and inland fisheries people. We will be trying to use the money imaginatively while keeping within state-aid rules. As the Member knows, there is quite a bit of controversy over the application of those rules.

If the Member is suggesting that the remit of the NSMC be extended to include Strangford, we can certainly consider that and the future prospects of Strangford Lough.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Charities Bill

First Stage

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I beg to introduce the Charities Bill [NIA 9/07], which is a Bill to provide for the establishment and functions of the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland and the Charity Tribunal for Northern Ireland; to make provision about the law of charities, including provision about charitable incorporated organisations; to make further provision about public charitable collections and other fund-raising carried on in connection with charities and other institutions; to make provision about the funding of such institutions; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of future business until a date for its Second Stage is determined.

Pensions Bill

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: The Further Consideration Stage is intended to enable the Assembly to debate any last amendments to a Bill. As no amendments to the Pensions Bill have been tabled, there will be no opportunity today to discuss the Bill. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at the Bill's Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage of the Pensions Bill [NIA 7/07] is therefore concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Company and Business Names (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): I beg to move

That the Company and Business Names (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 (S.R. 2007/462) be approved.

I am seeking the Assembly's approval for regulations to add three further expressions to the list of those that require the prior approval of my Department before being included in the title of a company or business. The Department's prior approval is required if a company or business seeks to use certain words or expressions as, or as part of, its company or business name. That control is in place to protect the public from possible harm arising from a company or business using a name that falsely or incorrectly suggests a status to which that company or business is not entitled.

The regulations before the House today add the expressions "HPSS", "HSC" and "NHS" — the abbreviations for health and personal social services, health and social care and National Health Service respectively — to those words and expressions already prescribed. "HSC" and "HPSS" have both been included in the regulations at the request of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, while "NHS" is included at the request of the Department of Health in Great Britain. The Assembly approved a similar motion on 2 October 2007 in respect of regulations that added the word "Government" to the list of words already prescribed.

My Department made these regulations on 7 November 2007, and they came into operation the following day. As laid down in the parent legislation, and to ensure continuing effect, the regulations are subject to confirmatory procedure, and require approval by resolution of the Assembly within 10 sitting days or 30 days, whichever is the longer, of the laying date, 7 November.

The Department of Health in Great Britain had some concerns that an opportunist could seek to include "NHS" in a company or business name and moved to have the expression added to the list of prescribed words and expressions requiring the written permission of the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform in Great Britain before a company or business may trade under a name that includes any of those words or expressions listed.

While "NHS" is a well known brand name across the whole of the United Kingdom — and I understand that the Department of Health has now registered "NHS" as a trademark — its cover does not extend to Northern Ireland. Health provision here is dispensed under the health and social care, formerly health and personal social services, banner. However, it is necessary to

include the term "NHS" in regulations made here as a company registration is recognised across the United Kingdom, irrespective of the jurisdiction in which it is incorporated. Similarly, "HSC" and "HPSS" have also been included in the corresponding Great Britain regulations made on 5 November 2007, which were debated in the House of Lords and the House of Commons on 20 and 21 November respectively.

Since the Great Britain legislation was made under powers in its Companies Act 1985, which does not extend to Northern Ireland, my Department was asked to consider the introduction of similar legislation here under equivalent powers in the Companies (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. That is to maintain parity in company law with Great Britain, thereby removing any opportunity to exploit the lack of parallel legislation here.

These regulations amend the principal Company and Business Names Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1984, previously amended in 2004 and 2007, to add the same expressions — "HSC", "HPSS" and "NHS" — to the list of those words and expressions requiring the written permission of the Department before being included in the name or title of a company or business. The departmental committee considered the regulations at its meeting on 15 November 2007 and recommended confirmation by the Assembly.

I hope that the motion, which is non-contentious, will be approved by the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan): On behalf of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I advise the House that the Committee has considered the amendment to the regulations. It believes that it is necessary and appropriate to add to the prescribed list of terms in the company and business names regulations the three terms that the Minister has outlined. Therefore, the Committee fully agrees that it is necessary and timely for the Department to act in the manner in which it has.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Company and Business Names (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 (S.R. 2007/462) be approved.

Administration of Estates (Rights of Surviving Spouse or Civil Partner) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007

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

That the Administration of Estates (Rights of Surviving Spouse or Civil Partner) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 (S.R. 2007/452) be approved.

Like the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I hope — and expect — that debate on the motion will be non-contentious.

The purpose of the Order is to increase the statutory legacy, which is the sum of money that a surviving spouse receives from the estate of his or her deceased spouse if that person dies intestate. The provisions also apply to a surviving civil partner in the same way as to a surviving spouse. The amount of the statutory legacy that is contained in the Administration of Estates Act (Northern Ireland) 1955 is set at two levels. First, a surviving spouse will be entitled to the first £125,000 of the estate if the deceased is also survived by his or her issue — that is, children and grandchildren. Secondly, if there is no surviving issue but other relatives of the deceased, such as parents or siblings, are still alive, the surviving spouse will be entitled to the first £200,000 of the deceased's estate.

Those figures were set in 1993 and relate to deaths that occurred on or after 1 January 1994. The Order will increase the amount of the statutory legacy that is payable from £125,000 to £150,000 for cases in which the intestate is survived only by a spouse plus issue, and from £200,000 to £450,000 where the intestate is survived by a spouse and other relatives.

The level of the statutory legacy was the subject of a public consultation exercise that ran from January 2007 to April 2007. However, only four responses were received. The Committee for Finance and Personnel has considered and approved the new amounts. Clearly, no formula exists that will determine, at any given time, the appropriate levels of the statutory legacy. However, the new amounts follow on from a review of a full range of social, economic and demographic factors. I believe, therefore, that they have been set at an appropriate level for this jurisdiction and that they will allow reasonable provision for a surviving spouse.

It will be apparent from my earlier comments that the amounts of the statutory legacy have remained unchanged for 14 years. In future, I will seek to review those amounts more regularly to ensure that they keep pace with economic developments. I urge Members to support the motion, and I propose that the Order be affirmed.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Storey): As the Minister of Finance and Personnel has explained, the Administration of Estates (Rights of Surviving Spouse or Civil

Partner) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 increases the amounts that are payable from an intestate.

On 27 June 2007, the Committee for Finance and Personnel received a detailed oral briefing on the proposed statutory rule from the Department of Finance and Personnel's principal legal officer in the Departmental Solicitor's Office. The Committee considered some aspects of the statutory rule, and it made several recommendations to the Department. Those included increasing the statutory legacy figures that are payable from an intestate; seeking views on the new figures from the respondents to the original consultation; considering any revised figures for England and Wales; and acknowledging the need for a regular review of the statutory legacy figures and the five-year review period.

There is a case for a wider review of the intestacy laws, to ensure that arrangements are in place for an equitable distribution among all claimants, including children and dependent relatives, and to take account of societal changes since the legislation was introduced in 1955.

The Committee raised those issues formally with the Department on 4 July 2007, and received a substantive written reply on 15 October 2007. The Committee gave further consideration to the statutory rule on 21 November 2007, and was content that the Department had taken on board its recommendations.

The Committee agreed unanimously to support the Department in seeking the Assembly's endorsement of the provisions of the Order. On behalf of the Committee, I therefore support the motion.

12.30 pm

Mr P Robinson: I thank the Deputy Chairperson for his comments, and I thank the Committee for its work regarding the Order. I assume that the reason that no one else wishes to speak on the matter is that everyone is satisfied — just as, having submitted only four responses, the community is clearly satisfied with our approach.

The issue is important because, in general, the belief is that were someone to die, his or her spouse automatically takes over the proceeds of the estate. That is not the case, and this should be a warning to everyone with considerable assets to prepare a will, and ensure that no one dies intestate.

The Minister of the Environment has arrived, so I need filibuster no longer. I encourage colleagues to support the motion. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: I must thank the Minister for that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Administration of Estates (Rights of Surviving Spouse or Civil Partner) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 (S.R. 2007/452) be approved.

Climate Change Bill [HL]: Legislative Consent Motion

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

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension of the provisions of the Climate Change Bill [HL] to Northern Ireland.

I thank my colleague for filibustering on the administration of estates — something that few of us would take lightly.

We debate the motion because it is now accepted that climate change is the greatest environmental challenge faced by the world today. The matter is being taken very seriously at international level and, in recent days, we have heard of talks in Bali to achieve a new post-Kyoto agreement. The outcome of that conference, and future discussion, may well demand new international action.

The UK Government, and each of the devolved Administrations, are committed to tackling the issue, because we in Northern Ireland must play our part. The Climate Change Bill [HL] is intended to assist the UK's transition to a low-carbon economy. The Bill will make the UK the first economy to set a long-term legal framework for reducing emissions. There are no specific devolved provisions in the Bill, as the attainment of targets will require action in both reserved and devolved-policy areas.

The key provisions of the Bill are: a series of statutory targets for reducing carbon dioxide emissions; a new system of legally binding five-year carbon budgets; a new statutory body, to be known as the committee on climate change, to provide independent expert advice and guidance; new powers to enable the Government more easily to implement emissions-reducing policies; a new, open and transparent system of annual reporting; and a requirement for a risk assessment of the impact of climate change, including a commitment to develop a programme to prepare for those impacts.

I have had good support for my position from the Executive and from the Committee for the Environment. Moreover, I am pleased to say that the Environment Committee supports the motion for legislative consent. However, scrutiny by the Committee has raised several issues in relation to the composition of the committee on climate change. Those were, specifically, the establishment of a Northern Ireland subcommittee, and the need for a member of the climate change committee to be from Northern Ireland.

I understand the intentions of Committee for the Environment members, who are concerned that the special and specific needs of Northern Ireland may not be recognised and taken into account. I have assured the Committee that provisions that are now in place provide for devolved Administrations' specific needs.

Members of the committee on climate change will be appointed jointly by the other relevant devolved Ministers and me, and the committee will have knowledge and experience of Northern Ireland's circumstances. Moreover, criteria that instruct the committee on climate change must take into account Northern Ireland's circumstances, and there must be a direct reporting line from the committee to me. I have also assured the Committee for the Environment that I will follow good practice and review the issue of a Northern Ireland subcommittee once we have evidence of assistance received.

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

The Committee for the Environment asked that a Northern Ireland member be appointed to the committee on climate change. However, this is not to be a representative committee but one made up of experts in relevant fields. I can tell the House that no similar representations for an equivalent arrangement have been made in either Scotland or Wales. Therefore, it is not necessary that we have a Northern Ireland representative on the committee on climate change. Good arrangements have been made for the appointments process, for the criteria for operating the committee on climate change and for its reporting lines. Those arrangements reassure me that the committee will provide Northern Ireland with all relevant advice. I am committing significant resources — around £100,000 per annum — to the running of the committee. Therefore, I want to ensure that we get value for money through the advice provided.

The Committee for the Environment agrees that, at this stage, we should support UK targets rather than provide for Northern Ireland targets. I have given the Executive a commitment to return to the issue once I am more certain about the Northern Ireland emissions baseline and when I am better informed on the relationship between economic competitiveness and greenhouse-gas-emission reductions. Current research into those matters is progressing well, and I anticipate receiving the findings of that research by March or April 2008.

The Bill will amend the Energy Act 2004 by enabling the Secretary of State to set up a renewable transport fuel obligations (RTFO) scheme, which the Department for Transport plans to introduce from April 2008. I have agreed to inform the House on that matter on behalf of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. The RTFO scheme will be the main mechanism for supporting the increased use of biofuels in transport across the UK. The 2004 Act, which provides the framework for the RTFO scheme, already extends UK-wide. That was agreed while the Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended and has considerable merit, despite the fact that energy is a transferred matter. For example, the transport-fuel industry operates almost seamlessly UK-wide, and the proposed structure of the RTFO scheme is such that it will impact on the large GB-

based suppliers that import fuel and refine oil rather than on our local suppliers. Furthermore, it is planned that the obligation will be applied alongside the road-fuel excise duty and the associated biofuel rebate, both of which are reserved matters.

The Department for Transport's work to date to develop the detail of the RTFO scheme has identified a number of administrative areas in which change from the original concept, as outlined in the 2004 Act, would be preferable. Appropriate amending provisions have been included in the Climate Change Bill [HL] and must now be included in this legislative consent motion in order to enable Northern Ireland's continued involvement in the UK-wide RTFO scheme. Those amendments will allow the Secretary of State or Department for Transport agencies to be the RTFO scheme's administrators; will provide for the proceeds from buyout payments to be paid into the Consolidated Fund rather than be redistributed among suppliers; will establish an information gateway between the RTFO administrator and HM Revenue and Customs; and will provide an overarching duty on the RTFO administrator to encourage the supply of sustainable biofuels.

None of those proposed legislative amendments nor the existing primary provisions specifically apply to Northern Ireland — they all apply UK-wide. From an operational perspective, the Department for Transport does not consider that any local transport-fuel supplier will be obligated under the RTFO scheme. Furthermore, the Department for Transport does not believe that there will be any appreciable impact on pump prices.

I have highlighted the significance of the Climate Change Bill [HL], including those provisions that relate to the RTFO scheme. The House's endorsement of the principle that the Bill be extended to Northern Ireland would demonstrate that we are fully committed to playing our part in tackling the very serious global issue of climate change. I commend the motion to the House.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Committee for the Environment, I thank the Minister for tabling the legislative consent motion to extend the provisions of the Climate Change Bill [HL] to Northern Ireland.

The Committee recognises the threat from climate change and is aware of the urgency of the problem. It is against that background that the Committee considered the extension of the Bill's provisions. It was briefed in writing on the issue on 28 June 2007 and by the Minister in Committee on 5 July 2007. The Committee learned that the Bill provides a framework for moving to a low-carbon economy. Indeed, the Minister has outlined some of the Bill's key provisions in the debate: a series of key statutory targets for reducing carbon dioxide emissions, including an overall UK target of 60%

reduction by 2050, with a 26% to 32% reduction by 2020; a new system of legally binding five-year carbon budgets that are set at least 15 years in advance; a new statutory body, called the committee on climate change, that will provide independent expert advice and guidance to Government on achieving their targets and staying inside their carbon budgets; and new powers to enable the Government to more easily implement emission-reducing policies.

The Bill also contains accountability provisions that require progress reports. In early September 2007, the Committee provided a written response on the extension of the Bill's provisions. The Committee supported the UK carbon-reduction targets that are set out in the Bill but sought a commitment to provide Northern Ireland targets in the future. The Minister subsequently advised the Committee by letter on 15 November 2007 that she will revisit the issue of Northern Ireland targets after further examination of the emissions baseline. Research into the emissions baseline is currently ongoing.

On the matter of representation on the independent committee on climate change, to which the Minister has referred, the Committee for the Environment initially held the view that the committee should have specific representation on it from the North, and that there should be an independent subcommittee structure in Northern Ireland for the independent climate change committee. However, during recent meetings, the Committee considered the issue of representation against the size of the proposed overall committee and the need for it to have specific expertise. We also sought the views of our counterpart Committees in Wales and Scotland in order to inform our point of view. The Committee for the Environment now acknowledges that the Bill currently provides for members to be appointed to the committee on climate change jointly by the national or regional authorities and notes that the proposed committee may set up its own various subcommittees. Therefore, we no longer seek the specific representation that the Minister outlined.

The Committee for the Environment takes the view that the independent committee on climate change should provide independent advice to the Northern Ireland Executive. It is acknowledged that the Bill states that the committee must give, on request, advice, analysis or information on targets, budgets, trading schemes or other requirements that relate to greenhouse-gas emissions. The Committee supports the Bill's enabling powers, which it views as helpful, subject to Northern Ireland consent, for the introduction of other climate change initiatives. The Bill provides for Northern Ireland to set up, if required, its own trading schemes. The Committee can foresee climate-change-mitigation initiatives in the North that would use those enabling provisions. The Committee also supports the proposed reporting arrangements.

During its deliberations, the Committee for the Environment expressed an interest in examining the idea of setting up a separate local body on climate change that could harness local knowledge on the issue and through which views could be formed and expressed. The Committee will revisit that matter. Information is currently being sought on whether other similar initiatives exist. My Committee colleague Mr Ford may address that matter in more detail. However, I raise the issue because the Committee discussed it recently due to its relevance to the broader issue of dealing with climate change. I conclude that the Committee is content in principle for Westminster to legislate in the area concerned and will support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Weir: I welcome the motion and congratulate the Minister of the Environment on moving so quickly on the issue. It was important that the Committee received the extensive briefing that it got from the Minister and her officials.

It was also important that there was a real sense of engagement on the issue so that, although the Committee was unified on the broad purpose of the Bill, concerns about the detail were dealt with appropriately. That has steered us in the right direction.

12.45 pm

As regards climate change, we are often told to think globally and act locally. The motion allows the Northern Ireland community to make a vital contribution towards meeting national targets and towards ending the international problem that is climate change. It will put us into a regulatory framework at a national level, which is appropriate, but it will also allow us a degree of flexibility to develop our own initiatives. It has been said that there has been a problem with monitoring the Northern Ireland baseline figure, and we are glad to hear that there is ongoing work to establish Northern Ireland's position. That will help us to frame further initiatives on climate change at a later stage.

It is important that the Assembly sends out a clear message to people that no contribution is too small. Whether contributions are made at Assembly level, Government Department level, or by businesses, institutions and individuals, we all have a part to play in helping to achieve the targets that are vital for the future.

Although the work of the Minister and the Department in ensuring that Northern Ireland has an input to the Bill is welcome, it would have been preferable to have had someone from here on the carbon committee that will be dealing with the matter on a UK-wide basis. However, we must be realistic when it comes to a committee that is likely to comprise eight or nine members. Whether it will happen remains open to question. However, ongoing work on co-ordinating

efforts between the devolved institutions across the UK will play a vital role.

The Department has put provisions in place to ensure that Northern Ireland's input is direct and that the committee will hear a clear voice from Northern Ireland — that is something that should be welcomed.

I also welcome the fact that we can proceed on the basis of the existing structures, and that the possibility of a review has been left open. I welcome the Minister's commitment that, in three years time, there will be a review of how the system is actually operating and whether there may be, for example, a need for a Northern Ireland subcommittee. That can only come about when we are much more secure in our knowledge of Northern Ireland's baseline data. However, that the option is being kept open is welcome.

Therefore, I welcome that the Minister and the Department, in taking action, have been able to meet the Committee of the Environment's concerns. It is a positive step forward, so early in the lifetime of the Assembly's current mandate. Reducing carbon levels is an Executive commitment, as outlined in the draft Programme for Government. I welcome the steps that have been taken and I urge everyone to support the motion.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the fact that the Minister is taking firm measures to reduce CO₂ emissions here. The matter needs to be addressed urgently, as recent reports, such as the 'Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change' and the 'Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change: Fourth Assessment Report' have outlined. Both reports have spelt out, in the clearest terms possible, the consequences that climate change is having already, and the potentially disastrous effects to come. It is also worth noting that the scientific community is united in its acknowledgement of those dangers.

The leading economist Nicholas Stern has endorsed the need for a 50% cut in emissions, globally. That requires the more developed world to put in place an 80% reduction in emissions, especially in places such as Ireland and across the water. Therefore, it is quite clear that there will be dire economic consequences if climate change is not taken seriously, something which Mr Stern makes clear in his report.

Although Sinn Féin believes that a target of reducing CO₂ emissions by 60% by 2050 is a step in the right direction, we support following the example of the Scottish Government that have set legally binding targets to reduce the 1990 levels of emissions by 80% by 2050.

Ireland, of course, has huge potential to generate electricity from wind and wave power, as well as from biomass technologies, and we should not be reluctant to set higher targets in the Climate Change Bill [HL].

Sinn Féin also believes that all-Ireland legislation should be introduced to ensure that there is consistency across the entire island. The levels of carbon emissions North and South are closely linked through the single electricity market and the proposed single gas market, as well as through other fields. Many areas in the world have already been affected by the increase in average global temperatures, and the latest scientific evidence suggests that the next five years will be absolutely crucial if further irreversible damage is to be avoided. Even the European Union's agreed long-term goal of limiting global warming to no more than 2°C above the temperature in pre-industrial times might not be sufficient to avoid the significant negative effects of climate change.

In conclusion, I welcome the fact that the Minister has brought this matter to the House so soon after restoration of the Assembly. The provisions of the Climate Change Bill [HL] are a step in the right direction, but Sinn Féin would like further changes to be made, and the party believes that a review early in the new year would provide the opportunity to make those changes. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Burnside: I welcome the Minister's statement, and I support the motion.

In her opening remarks, the Minister referred to the international obligations that are again under discussion in the post-Kyoto conference at Bali. Will she agree that the challenges of climate change and reducing carbon emissions worldwide are such that whatever we in the United Kingdom and the developed industrialised world do to tackle the problems, unless the United States and the massive economies such as India and China are included in those efforts, it will amount to nothing?

Therefore, although I support the motion, I ask the Minister if she will, on behalf of the devolved Administration, bring pressure to bear on the United Kingdom Government to adopt a much wider international framework that incorporates China and India and does not exclude them for the foreseeable future.

Mr Ford: As a member of the Committee for the Environment, and on behalf of my group, I welcome the proposal that the Minister has brought to the House today. It is absolutely right — and there is unanimity in the House on this — that we should be full participants in the UK climate change process. However, I have some slight concerns that by being involved with the UK structures, there is a danger that focus may be lost — particularly as this proposal comes from the Environment Minister rather than the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

We have already heard that, quite reasonably, because of the size of the committee on climate change, which will cover the whole of the UK, it is unlikely that there will be specific Northern Ireland representation. How-

ever, we know — and it has been acknowledged on all sides of the House — that climate change is probably the major challenge that we face in the world today. This matter has global implications.

Although I hear what Mr Burnside has said about the developing economies of the Far East, at this stage, carbon production per capita in China and India is far lower than it is in the North and in the West. We must be realistic; we are the people who have the lead to give. The Assembly has taken considerable interest in international development, yet it is a blunt fact that carbon is created in the north and the bulk of the problems are caused in the south. We have a moral obligation to provide the lead on this matter.

I ask the Minister to give an assurance that when we play our part in the UK-wide process, she will ensure that the Executive take global warming and carbon production extremely seriously. She has already talked about getting the baseline report next spring, and that is to be welcomed. However, we know from a UK-wide report that was published last week by an NGO, and which was broken down by local authority, that Northern Ireland has the worst environmental record in many areas. That is largely because of the fuels that we use for domestic heating and the fact that we are excessively reliant on private cars. We have a great deal to accomplish, and I trust that the Minister will ensure that the Executive continue to take note of today's debate even when other pressures are on them.

I want to follow up on a point that was made by the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, Patsy McGlone, who referred to advice that the Committee sought from Wales and Scotland. In particular, I draw the Minister's attention to the fact that, like us, Wales is covered by the UK Bill and has no specific representation on the committee on climate change, yet the Minister for Environment, Sustainability and Housing in the National Assembly for Wales has established a Climate Change Commission for Wales, which I understand will meet for the first time this morning.

That commission has been designed to involve the National Assembly for Wales, local government, and the business and voluntary sectors, and it will have a link to the Sustainable Development Commission Wales. By working on a voluntary basis alongside the UK committee, it will be able to maintain a focus on Welsh needs.

Rather than waiting three years for a review, I ask the Minister to establish an informal voluntary local structure that would enable a more specific focus to be directed to Northern Ireland and that would ensure that we continue to meet our obligations. That would be useful to Northern Ireland, and it would not cost a great deal more than the UK process — £100,000 — to which she has committed. I thank the Minister and her

officials for the work that they have already done, and I hope that she will consider my proposal as a way forward for the future.

Mr Gallagher: Today we are addressing the most important issue that faces us in the century ahead: climate change as a result of global warming. That is an important issue, not just for those who live on these islands, but for people everywhere in the world. We should all know from our own experience that even in winter, we have less snowfall and heavier rainfall than we had 20 years ago. For those who have not yet experienced those changes, scientific opinion supports the facts. For example, since the 1970s, the average temperature in these islands has increased by 1°C. Several Members have said that if that increase continues unchecked, there will be more catastrophes, such as floods and droughts, and infectious diseases that result from those will spread. It is therefore important to extend the Climate Change Bill [HL] to Northern Ireland, to set targets for the reduction of carbon emissions and to keep rising temperatures in check.

Findings always emerge from scientific study, not least the latest, which warns that over the next 50 years we must keep the temperature rise in check and below the critical figure of a 2% increase. Many people are of the view that a 60% reduction in carbon emissions, which is the aim of the Bill, is not enough. As another Member said earlier, that is perhaps a modest target, and we should aim to achieve an 80% reduction. In light of that, will the Minister tell the House what capacity is in the Bill for reviews to take place, lest we find out in 20 years that the 60% target was far too modest a reduction in carbon emissions? Will it be possible to aim for a greater reduction, and even to achieve a reduction of 80%?

I also seek clarification on an issue that has arisen previously when the Assembly has considered UK legislation. During the debate on the draft Renewables Obligation (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 on 15 October 2007, I raised the matter of the single energy market. Given that local suppliers of renewable energy sources are unable to obtain credits for feeding their products into the Republic of Ireland, I discussed how oddly that Order fitted against the reality of the new single energy market, which came into being on 1 November 2007. The same disadvantage affects suppliers in the Republic of Ireland who wish to trade in this direction. If we consider that the Bill is concerned with energy production and the use of carbon, how will it fit against the background of an all-Ireland single energy market?

1.00 pm

Mr B Wilson: I also welcome the motion. It is particularly appropriate that the motion should be introduced during the UN climate change conference

in Bali. I regret that the Assembly is not represented there. The only Northern Ireland delegate is my Green Party colleague Peter Doran, who is making some input into that important decision. It also follows last Saturday's global day of action, held at St Anne's Cathedral, which highlighted the growing concern of people in Northern Ireland. We must listen to such legitimate demands for us to show leadership, and I therefore welcome the small step that has been indicated by the proposal to extend the provisions of the Climate Change Bill [HL] to Northern Ireland. The Green Party suggests that the Assembly should develop and implement its own climate change Bill.

The UK Climate Change Bill [HL] aims to reduce the net carbon account by at least 60% by 2050. Although we welcome that reduction, it is clear from the reports of the intergovernmental panel on climate change that that figure is not adequate to prevent global temperatures from rising above dangerous levels. Therefore, we welcome the fact that the Government have emphasised that that is only the minimum level of reduction to be considered. Equally worrying is that the Bill proposes that some of the CO₂ reductions may be accounted for by the purchase of foreign carbon credits. The buying of such carbon indulgences must be kept to a minimum.

The Climate Change Bill [HL] consultation document recognises:

“the role of the Devolved Administrations in relation to setting, modification and achievement of the UK targets and the intervening carbon budgets”.

More significantly, it allows the devolved Administrations flexibility:

“The Bill will be amended to take account of these decisions before introduction to the UK Parliament.”

The Scottish Executive have expressed their intention to introduce a Scottish climate change Bill, which is due to set a long-term target to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 80% by 2050. That target is 20% higher than the target proposed in the UK Bill and amounts to reductions of 3% each year. The Irish Government are also committed to reducing the amount of CO₂ emissions by 3% each year. In both Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, the main reason for the more stringent CO₂ targets is the input from the Green Party. If the more scientifically informed reduction of 3% per annum is good enough for our neighbours in Scotland and the Republic, and since there is explicit provision for the Assembly to devise its own legislation on climate change, I ask the House to devise climate change legislation that commits Northern Ireland to making cuts of at least 3% per annum in CO₂ output.

Mr S Wilson: Carbon dioxide output is determined by a lot of factors, not least changes in the climate and weather from one year to another. For example, a particularly cold winter might lead to more coal or oil

being burned or more electricity being consumed. Can the Member explain how such year-on-year targets would work? There will be peaks and troughs, and the targets would become either meaningless or a rod to beat people with over an event that was beyond their control.

Mr B Wilson: I thank the Member for his question. Given the weather conditions that the Member refers to, there will be changes in the levels of emissions. However, the targets would be assessed over a number of years. A target of 3% a year would equate to 15% over five years. One year the emissions might be 3%, another year 5% and another year 1%, but, over a period of time, the average would be 3% per annum.

The Assembly should make that its target and, therefore, I support the motion.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan): I place on record that the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment was consulted on the legislative consent motion and received a written briefing and presentation by officials. The Committee supports the legislative consent motion and recognises that, as the Climate Change Bill [HL] is taken through Westminster, it is important that it clearly encompasses the situation in Northern Ireland.

The Committee has a direct interest in energy policy and recognises that, as the Bill goes through, players in the energy sector here will probably raise different angles and issues. Through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister of the Environment, the Committee hopes to be able to factor in such considerations as the Bill proceeds. Climate change must be a major consideration that will programme and frame our energy policy, and we view the legislative consent motion as one part of that. However, we recognise, as other Members have expressed, that that will not be enough, and additional measures must be introduced. We must reflect on what people in the energy sector — both existing players and those who enter the sector with new and innovative ideas on renewable energy — have to say.

Although the Committee did not come to a formal conclusion, members had some sympathy with the view of the Committee for the Environment, and we too wanted to ensure that particular guarantees about the quality of consideration be given to Northern Ireland. I note that the Minister expressed her intent to supplement the structures to which the Bill commits Northern Ireland with further consideration.

The single electricity market is one of the issues that Committee members identified as requiring much consideration, and some Members mentioned that too. We can learn from the experience of the UK legislation on the renewables obligation: it set the framework for Northern Ireland in a way that was blind to the single

electricity market. In an area as important as climate change, we simply cannot afford legislation that informs and affects how the energy market will operate, but that is blind to the single electricity market in Northern Ireland. If Members are to be considered coherent legislators, we must ensure a proper reconciliation between the two. If the two do not properly rhyme, we cannot back one and not back the other.

Dr Farry: I am pleased to follow the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. At one stage, I feared that the debate was becoming a closed shop for members of the Environment Committee, despite the fact that the implications of the legislation cut across all Government actions and all sectors of society.

Several Members have expressed their concern that the target of a 60% reduction in carbon emissions is not sufficient. I appreciate that we are debating the UK Bill today and that 60% is the target that it sets. However, it seems that many of our devolved partners are more ambitious and have recognised the need to go beyond 60% by considering a figure of 80%. There is widespread concern among domestic and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that the UK is not aiming for an 80% reduction. As someone who firmly intends to be around in 2050, I hope that —

Mr Durkan: You are fairly round now.

A Member: Now, now; it is Christmas.

Dr Farry: I understand that the Member for Foyle was busy being Santa at the weekend. I too dressed up as Santa over the weekend, and it is all part of the act.

Mr S Wilson: You are a better Santa than he is.

Dr Farry: I hope that I have better presents.

Anyway, with hindsight, there are genuine concerns that we may have made a mistake in not aiming for a more ambitious target of 80%. I hope that we — as a country, not just as an Assembly — do not live to regret not opting for that target.

I want to focus on what we are doing to address climate change in the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget and on the interaction between the environment and our economy.

Mr S Wilson: If Northern Ireland were to achieve an 80% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050, what percentage of electricity would have been generated in that time by, for example, windmills or tidal power? Is there even the capacity to achieve that target through the use of renewable forms of energy, or does the Member support many people's position, which is that we will have to go nuclear?

Dr Farry: I will deal with that point in more detail presently, but it is fair to say that we must invest in a wide range of alternative ways in which to generate

electricity and energy. It is important that we keep an open mind.

Two conclusions are part and parcel of the Stern Report. First, the implications for our economy will be huge if we do not protect the environment and address climate change. Those consequences are becoming very real.

Secondly, genuine economic opportunities exist for us to invest in climate change technology and for our economy to reorient itself in order to become greener. In some respects, that may answer Sammy Wilson's question. Although many forms of renewable energy may not be cost-effective at present, as time moves on and we invest in more efficient technology, that balance will change. In this part of Western Europe, we must capitalise on the opportunities that arise from our natural environment — namely, the wind and sea — and invest in them. Solar power will not become one of Northern Ireland's main attractions.

I have concerns about whether the final Programme for Government will make a major contribution to the climate change agenda. I was disappointed that, despite the strong economic focus in the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget, the green economy was not referred to; Northern Ireland needs to have a green economy.

In some respects, we are a developing economy, so there is a natural desire to invest in our infrastructure in order to bring our economy up to speed with that of many of our competitors. However, in doing so, it is critical that we bear environmental concerns in mind and that we do not allow ourselves to get trapped into the notion that a contradiction exists between economic growth and protecting the environment. As a society, we must make a choice. In fact, the two issues go hand in hand.

Transport particularly concerns me. My colleague Mr Ford referred to the Energy Saving Trust's report, which highlighted that certain local authorities in Northern Ireland have some of the largest carbon footprints in the whole of the UK. Although there may be differences in the methodology of our baseline studies, that report indicates a number of problems, not least a heavy reliance on private transport compared with elsewhere on these islands.

The draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland states that, in the first three years, around 60% of the transport budget will be invested in private transport — that is, on roads — and only around 40% in public transport. That is almost the opposite of the situation in Great Britain. However, over the 10-year period of the investment strategy, we are to invest 80% of the transport budget in private transport and only 20% in public transport. That sounds like a twentieth-century solution to our transport problems rather than a twenty-first-century solution. In welcoming the motion, we must be

realistic about what this society needs to do in order to get up to speed. We must set not only a 60% target but an 80% target; it is very much needed.

1.15 pm

Mrs Foster: I thank Members for their positive contributions to the debate. Some good and serious points were made on the legislative consent motion.

Mr McGlone spoke as the Chairperson of the Environment Committee; I thank him and all the Members of the Committee for their constructive approach to the legislation. As I did, the Committee wanted to send out the message that it aimed to tackle the problem of climate change, which it achieved through its positive engagement with me and my officials.

Mr McGlone was correct to highlight the fact that there are enabling powers in the Bill. At the request of Northern Ireland and Wales, the Bill places a duty on me and the Welsh Minister for Environment, Sustainability and Housing, Jane Davidson, to report on action and adapt to climate change, which we will do.

Peter Weir, who is a Member of the Environment Committee, spoke about the broad purpose of the Bill and placed on record his thanks to officials for working with the Environment Committee. I too place my thanks on record. He acknowledged the international context and the contribution that this part of the kingdom will make in efforts to reach the national targets.

As was mentioned during the debate, the Department has a lot of work to do on Northern Ireland baselines. I hope that that information will be available in April 2008 so that we can decide how to move forward. For example, many Members have mentioned establishing a subcommittee on climate change. When the baselines are available, we will decide the best way forward. Mr Ford is correct to say that we do not have to wait for three years, but can instead objectively look at the figures when they are available next year.

The important factor will be the lines of accountability and communication between the Department and a climate change subcommittee. There will be a two-way discussion because the Department will seek expert advice on how to adapt to future climate change and deal with some of the issues to which Dr Farry referred in respect of how to meet our targets.

Mr McKay spoke of the need to deal with CO₂ emissions and referred — as did other Members — to the Stern Report and the acknowledgement that, if climate change is not dealt with now, there will be “dire economic consequences.” That should be borne in mind because although many people think that combating climate change will cost the Government a lot of money, if it is not dealt with now, there will be a greater cost in the future.

Mr S Wilson: The Minister is correct to say that there will be a lot of costs involved in combating climate

change, including increased building costs and increased fuel costs for individuals in Northern Ireland. Does the Minister appreciate that many people find those costs difficult to accept when those who preach about climate change — and the harmful effect of CO₂ emissions — have descended on Bali in the past week and created more CO₂ emissions than Chad does in a year?

Some environmental groups have sent between 40 and 50 members to that idyllic location. I doubt that the same numbers would have attended had the location been Birmingham, instead of Bali. Can the Minister understand why some people might be a little cynical about that exercise?

Mrs Foster: I hope that the Member is not suggesting that politicians do not generate hot air from time to time, because there is a lot of it in the Chamber. I also hope that he appreciates that I made the sacrifice of not going to Bali. We are well represented at the conference in Bali by three Government Ministers: the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and two other Ministers are representing the UK case.

Mr McKay, Mr Gallagher and Mr Brian Wilson — among others — raised the issue of targets. It is important to recognise that, since the Royal Commission's report in 2000, science has developed considerably. That is why the Bill has been amended so that, for the first review of the 2050 target, the committee on climate change will be able to take into account all developments in scientific knowledge since the Royal Commission reported in June 2000.

The committee on climate change will decide whether the target for reducing carbon dioxide emissions should be increased to the 80% level that Scotland has decided to go with, and I have spoken to the sustainable development commissioner about that. The committee will look at the scientific evidence and decide, and I think that it is the right body to make that decision.

Mr Burnside also mentioned the talks in Bali. It seems that a lot of the politicians in the Chamber today wish that they were in Bali, but we are here and dealing with the issue of climate change. He said that the US has a huge impact on carbon emissions. Mr Ford responded to that when he said that most of the impact from carbon dioxide emissions is caused by one half of the world but felt most severely by the other half. The Assembly should consider that when thinking about the Climate Change Bill [HL].

Mr Ford also spoke of his worry about Northern Ireland's focus if we were involved in the UK climate change committee but did not have our own. I listened carefully to his comments on what the Welsh are doing about climate change, and I am willing to look at that. I will look at the Welsh example, but I want to be sure of our figures. I will look at it again in April when we have those figures. I know that Mr Ford will be after me in April to see what I am planning to do.

Mr Gallagher spoke about the implications of not dealing with climate change. I agree with him: adaptation is an important issue with which the Assembly must deal. He also spoke about the all-Ireland single energy market. I will speak to him about that when I have spoken to my colleague the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment about the issues he raised. I am sure that there is a problem of harmonisation in relation to HM Revenue and Customs, but I will refer the issue to the appropriate Minister.

Sammy Wilson regretted my absence from the talks in Bali. I hope that he did not mean that he would have preferred I was there rather than in the Chamber progressing the Bill. I am sure that that is not the case. He mentioned Scotland's climate change targets; I hope that I have answered that question. Mr Durkan, Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, spoke about the many issues around climate change and its impact in the field of renewable energy. He also mentioned the all-Ireland single energy market, and — as I said to Mr Gallagher — I will speak to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment about that, but I imagine that the difficulties are related to fiscal policies.

Dr Farry mentioned the target for reducing carbon dioxide emissions, and I hope that I have addressed that. He also mentioned the interaction between climate change and the draft Programme for Government, and the need to invest in a wider range of renewable energy. Dr Farry will be aware that my Department recently put PPS 18 out for consultation. He is right to state that the Stern Report recognised the economic consequences of not doing anything about climate change. However, there are now economic opportunities for Northern Ireland, particularly with our history in engineering and innovative skills. I hope that we rise to the challenge — especially with regard to tidal and wind energy, because there are not many openings for solar energy here.

The environment is at the heart of the draft Budget and the draft Programme for Government. I have been saying exactly what Dr Farry said: a better environment and a better economy are not mutually exclusive — the two can sit easily together. We have had a good debate. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension of the provisions of the Climate Change Bill [HL] to Northern Ireland.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007: Prayer of Annulment

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): I beg to move

That the Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 (S.R. 2007/442) be annulled.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This statutory rule is made under the powers conferred by articles 4(8) and 14(4) of the Higher Education Order 2005.

That Order capped fees at £3,000, subject only to inflationary increases. The effect of the statutory rule is the application of an annual inflationary increase to the basic and higher fees that are charged by our higher education institutions for qualifying courses in the academic year 2008-09. The statutory rule will increase the higher amount from £3,070 to £3,145, and the basic rate will increase from £1,225 to £1,255. Other rates for other specific prescribed courses will increase on a pro rata basis at around 2.5%.

Under article 4 of the 2005 Order, increases to basic and higher fee rates are subject to rises linked to inflation until 2010.

I know, go raibh maith agat, that this is a basic point, but I remind Members that this motion is to annul proposed fee increases. However, it does not address the principle of variable student fees. Should the statutory rule be annulled, the current higher rate fee of £3,070 will be payable by students next year, and other fees will remain at their present levels.

The Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 were laid in the Assembly Business Office on 5 November. The Committee considered the statutory rule at its meeting on 21 November, and officials from the Department were present to explain the position. At that meeting, I forwarded a proposal that a prayer of annulment be brought to the Floor of the Assembly. It is important to note that there was division in the Committee, with six members agreeing to the annulment motion, and three members against. During this debate, when I refer to “members”, I mean those who voted in favour of proposing the motion.

Members expressed a number of serious and specific concerns on the statutory rule during the Committee’s deliberations, and I will highlight those.

First, and more importantly, the Department stated that it proposed to conduct a review of student finance, including fees, some time during the academic year

2008-09. The review has been presented as a reason why fee increases should go ahead, in line with the primary legislation, in advance of the research and review findings being made available.

However, the opposing argument is surely stronger. How can fee increases be justified in advance of knowing precisely what impact they will have on take-up or drop-out rates on prospective, or existing, university students? There is a particularly serious concern that those most disadvantaged in our community are being put off by fees, particularly when they see increases coming forward in the absence of due consideration of their impact. Even before the research and review was decided on, there was evidence of a drop in the numbers applying to universities after fees were introduced in 2006. Members of the Committee agreed that the need for research and review was paramount, and I ask the Department to bring that work programme forward at the earliest opportunity.

However, to increase fees on an annual basis in an information vacuum is surely taking us down a path from which it will become increasingly difficult to retreat. Should the research show major impacts on particular categories of the population, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds, radical action would be required. Continuing on a path of increasing fees will make reform difficult.

A number of Members and I are concerned about the impact of fee increases on a particular section of the community. The Committee was informed that a full equality impact assessment would have been completed with respect to the primary legislation, and that no adverse impact was assessed at that time. The Committee was therefore told that there was no need for a full assessment of the statutory rule.

Although I accept that that approach may be procedurally correct, I am surprised that no form of — at least interim — equality impact assessment has been conducted. Student fees are an extremely important issue in our society, with major financial implications for students.

The lack of further work on the equality impact is linked to the general lack of information that I mentioned earlier. There should not be any increase in the current level of fees until the appropriate information is available.

1.30 pm

The Committee’s briefing on the statutory rule coincided with a briefing on the draft Budget. Some Committee members, including myself, found it somewhat ironic that, during the Budget briefing, officials said that the Department did not have the money to fund changes to maintenance grant provisions that would provide parity with the position in England and benefit local students. The Committee was told that, in the absence of such funding being made available locally,

a university student in England whose parents had a combined income of less than £25,000 would receive £2,835, while a student here in similar circumstances would receive only £1,877. I mention that because this statutory rule is seeking parity with England. In this case, parity means that students will be penalised with fee increases — yet they will not reap the benefits of an increase in maintenance funds, since that form of parity cannot, we are told, be funded. That is clearly a lose-lose situation for local students.

The Department made the point that the equivalent Statutory Instrument in England — The Student Fees (Amounts) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2006 — has been passed and that students from here who choose to study in England will be penalised, as they will be paying a higher fee than if they had chosen to stay and study at our two universities. Committee members opposing this statutory rule did not necessarily accept that, and the point was made that it could be easily addressed in appropriate legislation — for example, by amending the primary legislation under which those fee increases are made.

The point was made in the Committee that the proposed review of student finance, including fees — which I referred to earlier — might result in the lifting of the cap on variable fees, thereby allowing the universities to charge whatever they wish. At present, however, there is no way of knowing the outcome of that review. Therefore, I propose that the statutory rule be annulled in advance of a full review of student finance — both fees and maintenance — so that any further detriment to the position of prospective and existing students can be avoided. I remind the House that on 21 November 2000 it backed a report from the Committee for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment — as it was then — calling for tuition fees and means-tested grants to be abolished. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Spratt: I rise to speak against the motion as a private Member, not as the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning.

When this motion was brought before the Committee, I believed strongly that the best way forward, in the interests of both the universities and the students, was to await the impending review of the whole matter. Unfortunately, some members of the Committee chose to pre-empt the review, and so we are in this position today.

Much valid concern was voiced by local universities when the Committee decided to table the motion for debate in the House. By proposing to annul rises in line with inflation for the next three years, those parties in favour of such a proposal are engaging in headline-grabbing opportunism without thinking through the consequences of their actions.

It is necessary to review some facts and figures in order to put the issue into perspective. The regulations, as they stand, provide for an inflationary increase in tuition fees with effect from 1 September 2008. Such an increase would see the fees of undergraduates rise from £3,070 to £3,145. When a rational approach is taken, it is clear that the rise is relatively small. The amount of the increase will not be the deciding factor between someone choosing to go to university and someone choosing not to go. To believe seriously such an argument is to fail to engage in reality.

Although the increase in fees for an individual may be £75, it is imperative, in the context of this debate, to consider the financial impact that that would have on local universities. Should the Assembly choose to annul the 2008-09 increase, the combined loss to Queen's University and the University of Ulster, over those three years, will be £7 million. Furthermore, recurrent income for the universities would be reduced by that total until 2011-12.

Consider the impact of that income reduction on universities. The funding available to our two universities would fall significantly behind that available to other UK universities. On such a tight settlement, our attempts to help those universities to match other UK universities' funding, to attract the best academics, and to encourage research will be greatly inhibited, and, inevitably, students will suffer.

All parties signed up to the draft Programme for Government, which places the economy at the heart of driving Northern Ireland forward. Cutting university funding would jeopardise the competitiveness of the top-class teaching and research that the universities provide in support of the Northern Ireland economy. Any reduction in the standards of university courses here would increase, rather than solve, the brain-drain problem.

Only two weeks ago, we witnessed the First Minister's and the deputy First Minister's attendance at the opening of the new cancer research centre in Queen's University — a truly world-class facility at the cutting edge of research. If university finances are cut, such ventures may be in jeopardy. We should work with universities to ensure that such projects are possible, and that Northern Ireland can be at the forefront, as it is in cancer research and care.

Under the current student-fees regime, 30% of students from a household with an income of less than £17,501 are entitled to the maximum Government maintenance grant, as well as to a university bursary. There is a sliding scale of assistance for students from households with incomes of up to £32,501. Fees are not the basis on which the disadvantaged are deterred from entering third-level education. The increased number of university applicants clearly shows that young people realise the

huge academic, financial and cultural value of a third-level education.

The DUP is not in favour of any measures that would increase the burden on students. In line with fees increasing with inflation, we envisage proposals for maintenance grants to rise in line with inflation. Therefore, the burden on students will not rise.

The DUP is in favour of a top-class education system that encourages our young people to stay in Northern Ireland and go on to support our economic prosperity. I implore Members to reject the motion, to set aside headline-grabbing opportunism, and to await the outcome of the impending review before engaging in debate on the whole issue. I oppose the motion.

Mr B McCrea: The Ulster Unionist Party asks that Members reject the prayer of annulment. However, the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning and Mr Spratt raised several issues on which there is some agreement, and it is worth investigating and discussing the right way forward.

First, there is clear evidence that students with higher qualifications earn more, have better job satisfaction, live longer and healthier lives, and contribute more to society.

Is it any wonder that Governments around the world try to encourage more and more people to achieve third-level qualifications. However, it is surprising that some people reject that premise. Perhaps they are worried about the distant promise of future potential as against an immediate pay packet, which is much more attractive to young people despite the fact that it may not be the best long-term solution for them.

People must be forgiven for thinking that way, because, regrettably, recent news has shown that some of our major employers, such as Seagate, are having difficulties competing in the global economy. Young people will ask themselves why they should invest in gaining skills when there is no certainty that those skills will be relevant in the future. Why should they take on debt when there is no guarantee that they will get a job that will get them out of that debt?

We are all keen to encourage people from socially deprived areas into further and higher education, but the accepted wisdom in such areas argues against taking risks. Strong communal ties encourage people to stay in the areas that they know. Yet that limits the opportunities that are open to young people and reduces their horizons, and that is not what we want.

The Assembly must examine ways to encourage people in those areas to take up further and higher education. It must discover what must be done to empower them and release their potential; it must examine what will enable them to succeed where earlier generations have failed. If we are to increase participation rates, many people will be the first in their families to have entered

higher education. The real challenge for the Assembly is to confront lack of ambition and find ways to break the cycle of deprivation and enable all the people of Northern Ireland to unlock their potential. The answers should come from the Assembly.

People have come up with various ideas; and the recent trip to the USA, which focused on the economy, was most successful. However, improving our economy will not be sufficient to solve our problems, because we have relatively low unemployment, and we must work out how to increase productivity. Unless we can find more people, those that we do have will have to earn more or work longer. Personally, I favour the option of earning more.

No doubt others would argue that equality is the fundamental challenge facing the Assembly. However, speaking with considerable experience of international commercial activity, the world is not fair, equitable or equal; it is a competition, and we must ensure that all our young people have the skills and abilities to compete in that world.

The only enduring, competitive edge is having a good education. That is why the process is fundamental to us. The Ulster Unionist Party is committed to ensuring the increased participation of all of our people in all stages of education, but particularly in further and higher education.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning alluded to evidence that some potential students from areas of social disadvantage might be put off going to college by debt. The trouble is that we do not have all the evidence yet. Top-up fees were introduced only one year ago, and their impact is by no means certain. As I understand from the current figures — and, no doubt, the Minister will clarify this — it is not possible to see a trend at this stage.

Nevertheless, there is a genuine concern. That is why my colleague on the Committee for Employment and Learning, David McClarty, voted with other members to try to find a way of not passing on fee increases. He did it with the best of intentions in the hope that the resources could be made up elsewhere. Sadly, that does not seem to be the case. If the prayer of annulment is passed, universities will lose £2.5 million this year.

In the proposed tight comprehensive spending review (CSR) settlement, that will impact significantly on our universities. It is by no means certain that it will have any particular benefit for the students whom we are trying to help. Therefore, there is definitely a loss and no particular gain. The sum of money that has been referred to represents only a modest increase, in line with inflationary pressures. As my colleague Mr Spratt has mentioned, that will be offset by other measures.

1.45 pm

The most fundamental problem with the proposal — which smacks of tokenism — is that it is untargeted and will not address the issues that ought to be addressed. Student fees represent only a fraction of what it costs to deliver courses. Many students' earning power will be increased as a result of going on to further education. The type of uplift to which I am referring is approximately 80%, or £13,000 per annum. Therefore, there is a real economic reason as to why individuals should pay the fees and go on to higher education.

Those fees help our universities to compete in a modern world — and they must compete. The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning has spoken about parity. However, there is an anomaly in that; even if the Assembly accepts this prayer of annulment, the fees paid by students from Northern Ireland who go to universities in Great Britain will increase, but our ability to give them support will not increase. Therefore, that will lead to a lack of parity between two sets of students, which surely is unhelpful.

Many of the issues that have been raised are linked, which indicates that some form of integrated fundamental review of the process is required. That is exactly what the Minister has suggested should happen.

We are blessed to live in a land of outstanding natural beauty. However, we lack natural resources. The only natural resource that we have is human capital, which is what will enable Northern Ireland and its people to compete in the world. If our people are going to compete, it will be on the basis of knowledge-based industries.

Our universities are our global brands and our champions, and they will take the lead in enabling people to compete. Now is not the time to remove their resources or those of students; now is the time to invest. If the Assembly does not reject this prayer of annulment, money that is badly needed by students and universities will be taken away.

I have made a conscious effort to try to address issues that Members have raised. All Members want to move in the right direction. However, this hotchpotch, chancing-one's-arm approach is not the right way to proceed. A fundamental review of fees, higher education and further education is required, and that is what is going to happen. Therefore, I urge all Members to reject the prayer of annulment.

Mr Attwood: As Mr Spratt and Mr McCrea have outlined in their contributions, our further and higher education colleges will have to be at the heart of the economic and wider development of this part of Ireland. All Members should agree with that.

As Mr Spratt said, the economy has to be at the heart of driving this part of the world forward. Unfortunately, the draft Budget does not reflect that. Although the

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) was the clear winner in the Budget stakes, it is clear that our further and higher education colleges are the also-rans.

I would take seriously what Mr Spratt said, had he also stated that the Department for Employment and Learning should receive more money in the final Budget than it had been allocated in the draft Budget, to ensure that Queen's University, the University of Ulster, the Open University and the FE (further education) colleges are at the heart of the economy. The draft Budget does not send out that message. It states that there will be 300 more PhDs by 2011, yet there is not 1p in the draft Budget to fund those PhDs.

The Irish Government have offered the Assembly £34 million of their money to enable Queen's University and the University of Ulster to participate in an all-Ireland science foundation, yet there is no money in the draft Budget for that.

I could demonstrate my point in other ways. Regardless of the motion, there should be agreement throughout the Chamber that if the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is to be the driver of the economy, the Department for Employment and Learning, and further education (FE) and higher education (HE) colleges, must be its partners. That is not reflected in the draft Budget.

Regardless of the loss that might be incurred by Queen's University and the University of Ulster if the prayer of annulment is agreed to, it is not as significant as the funds that FE and HE colleges need from this year's Budget to ensure that they are at the heart of the economy, producing the PhDs and the innovation that will be the engine of growth and opportunity for all our people.

I do not wish to detract from the universities' need for proper funding, but why is that not demonstrated in the draft Budget? Why is the Minister of Finance not funding the initiatives that have been taken by the Minister for Employment and Learning to put development at the heart of the North's economy?

I wish to deal with some arguments that have been advanced in respect of the motion. I thought that we could have a debate that would be free from more exaggerated terms. However, Basil McCrea used the term "tokenism" and Mr Spratt referred to "headline-grabbing opportunism". This is a more substantive debate than such terms suggest.

I accept and understand that if the annulment motion is passed, there will be a loss of funds to universities in the North. I have said to Queen's University that it should fund that loss from its reserves, so that universities in the North send out the message to the students, pupils and parents that those institutions acknowledge that student debt and loans are a major concern.

Queen's University will avail itself of any opportunity to increase student fees when the cap is removed, or even before that. The universities, and Queen's University in particular, should send out a message to students and their parents that they understand the problem and accept that, for a period of time, there will be a shortfall in their budgets. In that way, those institutions will indicate their best intentions with respect to student funding. I am concerned that one university in the North intends, over time, to try to increase its fees to a premium. I say that because Queen's University has joined an elite school of universities, known as the Russell Group. It follows that it will try to increase fees.

There is another reason why it is important that the Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 be annulled. It is said that there is no evidence as to how access to universities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds is being affected. If that were the case, why has the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) in England — the sister Department of the Department for Employment and Learning — announced major reforms to student funding, even though fees have just been introduced?

Therefore, despite fees having been introduced recently, that Department has already recognised that there is a need to respond to the perception, and to the reality that people who wish to go to university may be put in a disadvantageous position. DIUS has announced higher income thresholds in order to increase the number of students eligible for maintenance grants; a repayment holiday for up to five years after graduation for students in receipt of loans; and the introduction of HE student-support guarantees for students who are in receipt of an educational maintenance allowance.

To be fair to the Minister, he is aware of all that, is examining it and is working through the potential consequences. However, even though fees have only recently been introduced, DIUS is already taking remedial action, because evidence of a problem has already come to light. In that context, it would be fair for the House to annul regulations that introduce fees, because to do so would be to send out a message to our students and their parents —

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a moment, Sammy.

The message that would be sent out would be that Members are concerned and will be seen to respond. Yes, we should be seen to respond in much more fundamental ways, and for that reason I welcome the review, which the Minister says will be initiated in the next academic year.

However, at the present time in the development of our education system, for the Assembly to pray against

the regulations would be a strong and appropriate symbol to project to our students and their parents of how Members see the future of student finance.

Mr S Wilson: I took the opportunity to look at the Member's contribution on the subject when student tuition fees were introduced in the Assembly in November 2000 by his SDLP colleague the then Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, Dr Seán Farren. Interestingly, the Member was arguing back then that the abolition of not only the increase but of student fees entirely would not necessarily help the disadvantaged. Indeed, he said of a Sinn Féin Member in that debate:

"However, he ignored the evidence from the Republic of Ireland on the abolition of tuition fees and the fact that access is still being denied to under-represented groups". — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 7, p263, col 1]*.

Therefore, if, in 2000, the abolition of student fees would not help, and was not perceived as a way in which to help disadvantaged individuals, why does the Member now claim that to do away with the increase would help disadvantaged groups?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his point and for reminding me of what I said, which is consistent with what I am saying today, for the following good reason: when it comes to guaranteeing access to third-level education, a menu of options must be put in place in order to ensure that students — those from disadvantaged backgrounds in particular — are able to avail themselves of educational opportunities. One size does not fit all: a number of options must be available in order to ensure that a person whose family has had no member go on to higher or further education receives every encouragement to do so. It is a matter of ensuring that the fees do not exist, or are set at a smaller level; that grants are set at a higher level; and that childcare facilities are available for those who require them. When it comes to guaranteeing access for disadvantaged people, there must be a menu of options, which is the same point that I made in November 2000.

In any case, the evidence from England is that intervention is necessary to mitigate the impact of student fees, so surely we should also realise that we should intervene to mitigate their impact. That will come in part through the Minister's review, but we can take other measures now, such as stopping the student-fee increase on the basis of inflation, in order to send out a strong, clear message to students and their parents.

I shall now return to the Chairperson of the Committee for Education's comments. Those students from here who study in England, where the fees have already been introduced, face a problem. It is not beyond the wit of the Assembly draftsmen to draft regulations to assist those students who would be disadvantaged otherwise, while at the same time advantaging our own students by not increasing the fees in line with inflation.

2.00 pm

My final point is this —

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: No. I have given way already.

This issue nearly brought down a Government. When the Bill that introduced student fees was going through Parliament, it came down to a handful of votes. For that reason alone, it is not opportunism to state that we should annul fee increases. This issue runs so deep and has such an impact on people's decisions about going into higher education that — on its own merits, never mind the wider context that I have outlined — the Assembly should vote to annul fee increases as outlined in the motion.

Ms Lo: The Alliance Party supports the prayer of annulment.

In the past, there has been all-party support in the Assembly for the abolition of university tuition fees. I note, in particular, the DUP's past support for that goal.

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Ms Lo: No.

Tuition fees are not a product of Northern Ireland's political system; they are a product of New Labour's bankrupt social policies, one of the hallmarks of which has been to be more Thatcherite than Thatcher herself would have ever dared to be. We should also remember that tuition fees have trebled in the past few years, and we are in danger of moving to the American model whereby universities are for the rich, and where social mobility is frozen.

Northern Ireland has been vastly more successful than England in ensuring that young people from low-income backgrounds go to university. Given that context in particular, we must develop a Northern Ireland solution that reflects our unique circumstances. We should look towards the Scottish system for a working model. That system expects those who have benefited financially from higher education to make a contribution to society and future generations of students after they graduate. That system does not encumber students with upfront debt, and would free those who have received higher education but who choose to go into poorly-paid but socially worthwhile occupations such as social work, the clergy and the voluntary sector from carrying debt for the span of their adult life.

I appreciate the argument that universities should not be penalised for the sins of the Westminster Government, or indeed for those of our own Minister of Finance and Personnel. I appreciate that the draft Budget has already set a very tough first year for universities in the next spending round. However, no injustice can be corrected by its continuance. If we agree with the principle that tuition fees are unjust —

Mr S Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way, and I note what she said about all-party consensus. Would she accept that tuition fees were introduced by a party that is now going to support the prayer of annulment? Over the past number of years, the percentage of people from all classes in Northern Ireland going into higher education has increased. Where is the injustice?

Ms Lo: Many students emerge from university with debts of between £12,000 and £20,000. That is very worrying for many low-income and middle-income families. The Member's view would certainly discourage that section of society from attending university.

If we agree with the principle that tuition fees are unjust, no Northern Irish students should have to pay them. It is not logical to add to the burden of a system that we have committed to abolish.

As Basil McCrea said, Northern Ireland has no significant mineral resources. Our most significant natural resource is the skills base of our people. In a world where global competition is ever more cut-throat, we must have the best-educated workforce possible. In that context, the perpetuation of a system that puts off some of our brightest young people, simply because they come from a poor family, is a false economy.

At the risk of sounding like a broken record, I believe that, if the costs of segregation were tackled, the resource constraints that face the higher education sector could be addressed. If the draft financial settlement for universities is poor, the solution to the problem lies with the Executive and the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Students should not be penalised for the failures of our political leaders.

Mr Ross: Student fees are a serious issue that should be examined when we are in possession of all the facts, figures and costings. It is interesting that the motion on the prayer of annulment was proposed to the Committee for Employment and Learning before all those facts and figures were available.

Members from all parties asked questions of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) about how many young people were now applying to university compared with the number before the introduction of student fees. Members asked how many people dropped out of university because of financial problems and also about the specific costs of freezing tuition fees. Many of those questions were not answered. The Department either did not have the information available or stated that it was far too early to answer some of the questions. Most of the available information stated that, in recent years, university admissions were on the rise. In the Chairperson's opening remarks, she used the phrase "should the research show". That demonstrates the fact that the motion is not based on fact or research.

Many elements of DEL's budget bid are not being funded, yet Sinn Féin, the Ulster Unionist Party, the SDLP and the Alliance Party — the parties that supported the motion in Committee — wish to create an additional shortfall of some £2.5 million. The DUP is not advocating an increase in student fees per se. However, this statutory rule would allow student fees to rise at the same level as inflation and in parallel with student maintenance grants, which are rising at the same rate. It concerns financial responsibility. The DUP believes that an increase in tuition fees would not create additional barriers that would prevent young people from lower-income families from going to university. As my colleague Sammy Wilson said, there is evidence that more young people from lower-income families in Northern Ireland go to university than elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

It would be interesting to know what cuts those parties that wish to freeze tuition fees will make to other areas of the DEL budget. Sinn Féin opposes this statutory rule because the rule might be perceived as support for student fees, which the party in fact wishes to abolish. Sinn Féin has not explained from where it would find the £2.5 million shortfall if fees were to be capped let alone the £90 million to £100 million shortfall if student fees were abolished.

Questions about the financial impact of decisions in this area are not new. My colleague Sammy Wilson referred to Mr Farren's actions in 2000. In November 2000, the then Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, Seán Farren, tried to stop a motion —

Mr Newton: Is it not the case that the SDLP introduced tuition fees? Is its position today not one of political hypocrisy and budgetary irresponsibility?

Mr Ross: That is correct. The SDLP did introduce tuition fees.

In November 2000, the then Minister of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, Seán Farren, stopped a motion because it left a number of questions about cost unanswered. Today's motion is supported by the SDLP, but those issues of cost are still left unanswered.

Mr S Wilson: Given that the Member has done his research on Seán Farren and his statement to the House in November 2000, will he note that the point that the current Minister for Employment and Learning makes about anomalies was also made by the former Minister?

Mr Attwood said that the parliamentary draftsmen must be able to find some legal way around the problem. However, the former SDLP Minister Dr Farren found that there was no such way around the anomaly, and he concluded that if his proposals were not accepted, the result would be disadvantage to — and discrimination

against — those who wished to study outside Northern Ireland.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for his intervention. Of course, as always on such matters, he is absolutely correct.

Mrs Hanna: I succeeded Seán Farren as Minister for Employment and Learning. Our student-support package was built around raising the thresholds at which students and their families pay fees. We are keenly aware that middle-income families often suffer most: people just above the benefits threshold. Our policy was to continually raise those thresholds. Indeed, our policy was supported by National Union of Students (NUS) and USI (Union of Students in Ireland) as the best student-support package in these islands.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for her intervention. It seems as though the SDLP policy has changed ever so slightly over the years, depending on what positions it holds. However, at least the SDLP has changed its policy over a number of years; the Ulster Unionist Party, on the other hand, changed its policy in a matter of weeks. Only a fortnight ago, the Ulster Unionist representative on the Committee for Employment and Learning supported the annulment, yet today we heard Basil McCrea argue against it. There seems to have been a change of opinion by the UUP in only a matter of weeks, whereas the DUP Committee members have taken a financially responsible view, which we maintain today. That is a consistent theme of the DUP in the Administration: we are financially responsible in all areas of government.

The Committee had the Minister before it only a few weeks ago. He confirmed during that meeting that a review of the entire area of student finance was to take place that would include consideration of fees and grants. That, of course, is to be welcomed. We should all be patient and wait to see the findings of that review before we make any decisions that would result in a tighter squeeze on the departmental budget. I listened to Mr Attwood argue that there was not enough money in the DEL budget, and that we needed more for this, that, and the other. However, he then went on to say that we should create a further shortfall in that budget by supporting the motion. That seems hypocritical.

If the motion were passed, universities would lose a substantial amount of funding, which is used to ensure that the quality of courses is at the right standard, that the range of available courses is at the right level, and that there is adequate funding for research and development. My colleague Mr Spratt mentioned the cancer centre in Belfast, which is widely recognised as a centre of excellence. Such developments come, in part, from our universities, and that shows the important role that our universities play.

The draft Programme for Government places a strong emphasis on the economy; indeed, it has the economy at its heart. Considering the size of Northern Ireland, our two campus universities play a vital role in that economy. Northern Ireland cannot afford to see our universities fall behind others in Scotland, England and Wales in respect of funding. I congratulate Queen's University on joining the Russell Group. Rather than viewing that as a bad thing, I contend that that is a very good thing.

We must realise that the barriers that prevent young people from going to university are not all financial — there are social issues that prevent young people from going to university, and, of course, many simply do not achieve the necessary grades. There is a problem of underachievement in working-class areas, particularly unionist areas, and that must be addressed.

I listened to the Alliance Member Anna Lo talk about not wanting a system for the rich. That is somewhat bizarre, considering the fact that her party supports an education system that will lead to just that. Rather than academically gifted children from working-class areas being able to go to grammar schools, the Alliance Party supports a system that would see only those who can afford houses close to the good schools gaining places at grammar schools. That is a little bit of hypocrisy on the part of the Alliance party.

Ms Lo also mentioned the cost of segregation. That is another point on which the Alliance Party is hypocritical because it supports the setting up of Irish-medium schools, which cost a substantial amount of money, and cater for only one section of the community.

2.15 pm

In conclusion, I do not support the motion — I do not see how it can be funded within the current departmental budget, and I do not wish to see other DEL initiatives going unfunded in order to make up the shortfall. None of us wants to see students in financial hardship, or barriers put in place to prevent people from learning. However, we should act responsibly and work within the resources available to us. I look forward to the launch of the review next year, and hope that Members will wait until then, rather than acting irresponsibly now to create another financial shortfall in the DEL budget.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún i dtaca le táillí múinte. Nuair a bhí an t-ábhar seo os coinne an Choiste labhair mé ina choinne.

I am disappointed that some parties that gave a commitment a couple of years ago to oppose tuition fees have now done a U-turn. This debate concerns the fundamental issue of how we fund the further-education sector. Creating a well-educated workforce is all about creating a good student experience, but we do not have

that at the moment. Some parties on the Benches opposite are making excuses about why universities should be able to charge tuition fees. In the past year, we have seen students incurring far more debt than ever before. There is an agenda to bring the marketplace to universities. There is talk about some universities in Britain wanting to increase tuition fees by as much as £10,000. There is division between vice-chancellors, particularly in England, over whether tuition fees are the right option. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr S Wilson: Obviously, in an ideal world, we would want university education to be free at the point of use. However, we must live within budgetary constraints. With what policy would the Member fill the gap that would be left if tuition fees were not charged in Northern Ireland? What impact would that have on the many disadvantaged people who gain university places through bursaries and other forms of help with tuition fees? The universities would not be able to pay for those if the fee income were not available.

Mr Butler: Well, first of all, we do not know the impact of tuition fees. We can say that there should be a rise because of inflation, yet the Minister — and I have written to him several times — does not know what the impact on disadvantaged groups would be. He does not even know whether there is going to be an increase in variable tuition fees. Queen's University and the University of Ulster could raise those fees. If we do not know that, why are some parties advocating the defeat of this motion?

I am concerned about the proposed review. Will it be independent? Will students have an input? I hope — after listening to Basil McCrea, for example — that this matter is not going to be manipulated in such a way as to show that tuition fees can be justified. I have real concerns about how we can have a totally independent review of tuition fees. If the review is entirely independent, and if it shows that tuition fees discourage people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, will the Assembly abolish them? We must examine those issues.

Tuition fees bring the marketplace to universities. Some Members on the other Benches are trying to justify that, but it is unacceptable. Third-level education should be there for people from all backgrounds, particularly disadvantaged backgrounds, to avail themselves of, without being lumbered with debt when they go out into the workforce after three or four years at university.

Queen's University has received somewhere in the region of £90 million in one year. What is the quality of the education that students are receiving? Have the courses improved? What about the facilities? Has employability improved? We do not know the answers to any of those questions.

Nevertheless, the Assembly has gathered to debate an increase to tuition fees, albeit at the rate of inflation. The Assembly must, however, send out the message, as Mr Attwood said earlier, that it is opposed to tuition fees. That has been Sinn Féin's consistent position throughout the ongoing debate on tuition fees of the past several years. Indeed, my party has proposed the motion. I appeal to Members to oppose an increase in tuition fees.

Mr Lunn: This has been an interesting debate. I do not wish to repeat other Members' arguments. However, there are so many issues that relate to tuition fees that what is really needed — as Ms Ramsey said — is a full review of the entire matter. I note with interest that every party seems to have opposed tuition fees back in 2000 and 2001 — long before I was elected to the Assembly. A bit of consistency is not a bad thing. Ideally, there should be — and I get the feeling that there is — unanimity on that issue. Theoretically, perhaps, it is impossible to take a decision, because the Assembly does not know from where the necessary finance will come.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member agree that, before the establishment of the current Assembly, the DUP promised the electorate a £1 billion bonanza from Gordon Brown, which has not materialised?

Mr Lunn: That could be the answer. Many promises are made at certain times during a four-year cycle. Another £1 billion is represented by the cost of segregation, which was identified by my party and is continually referred to in the Chamber. Recently, that figure was amplified to £1.5 billion by Deloitte. Perhaps there is scope for the necessary money to come from that total.

In the meantime, however, my party believes that the situation is characterised by too many imponderables and questions that must be answered by a proper review. Therefore, the only sensible course of action is to support the prayer of annulment and not to add any further burden to graduates, even if that burden might be small, in hard cash terms. The Assembly must send out a signal that, if the amount involved is just £2.5 million, which is not a huge amount, surely it could be covered by the universities for one year. Alternatively, perhaps, if the Minister were to obtain a better deal from the Department of Finance and Personnel, that shortfall could be covered by the DEL budget. I certainly hope so. In the meantime, the Alliance Party will support the prayer of annulment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Standing Orders require that Question Time must take place at 2.30 pm. Therefore, I propose that Members take their ease until that time. This debate will recommence at 4.00 pm, when the Minister for Employment and Learning, Sir Reg Empey, will speak.

2.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Single Equality Bill

1. **Ms Lo** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to make a statement on a single equality Bill, in light of the draft Programme for Government. (AQO 1204/08)

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): The single equality Bill was a Programme for Government commitment of the previous Executive, and a significant amount of work has been completed as a consequence. Since that commitment was made, additional equality legislation has been introduced that provides further protections across a range of grounds. We have not yet taken decisions on policy proposals; any policy proposals for single equality legislation will be considered in consultation with the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and the Executive.

As I said, the single equality Bill was a Programme for Government commitment of the previous Executive. The intention was that it would provide a clear and accessible framework of equality law for Northern Ireland in one legal instrument, which, as far as was practicable, would harmonise existing provisions. Northern Ireland has a significant body of equality legislation, so this represents a significant and complex piece of work.

There have been significant consultations to date on the Bill, and two public consultations were held — in 2001 and in 2004. In line with the commitment in the St Andrews Agreement to develop policy proposals for an incoming Executive, there was further engagement with key stakeholders. Subject to a ministerial decision, it is anticipated that there will be a formal public consultation on final policy proposals. At present, officials are engaging with advisers and preparing a submission for Ministers on potential options.

Ms Lo: I thank the First Minister for his response.

Given that there is not a single mention of a single equality Bill in the three-year draft Programme for Government, is this another case of the political differences between the First Minister and the deputy First

Minister leading to a freeze on any legislation that they regard as controversial?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The First Minister: I have given the full position of our stand on this issue and the work that is being done on it. Our targets are to introduce measures to work towards the total elimination of the gender pay gap and to work across Government to reform the tribunals system to enhance the enforcement of rights.

Mr K Robinson: Given that the Equality Commission is the enforcer of any equality legislation and that it is a body for which the First Minister has oversight responsibility, what significant steps will the First Minister take to ensure that the commission will address the problem that its staff is 34·5% male compared with 65·5% female, and is made up of 35·43% Protestants compared with 63·3% Roman Catholics, despite its declared mission to advance equality and promote equality of opportunity?

The First Minister: I am glad that the Member has raised this matter. I will take it up with the chief commissioner, and we will test it out with her.

Mr Kennedy: With him.

Mr Durkan: Will the First Minister clarify whether Members would be wrong to read his earlier response as an indication that all the statements on equality in the draft Programme for Government do not amount to a commitment to a single equality Bill?

Does the First Minister agree that the various statements on equality in the draft Programme for Government provide a policy cover, or policy basis, for the statement that was made by the Minister of Education last week regarding the future of post-primary education?

The First Minister: It is for the Executive Committee and the Assembly to take action on those matters. This is the place in which to settle those matters — they cannot be settled by something done in the past. This House is the final appeal court of the country.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Third International Conference on Services and Innovation

3. **Mr McFarland** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to make a statement on its recent participation in the third international conference on services and innovation.

(AQO 1193/08)

The First Minister: The third international conference on services and innovation was an important event, which focused on the significant economic opportunities presented by the growth of the services sector, and on how innovation can help to build competitiveness in

that sector and drive overall economic growth. It took place at the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham, Dublin, on 7 and 8 November 2007 and was attended by representatives from business, policy agencies and development agencies from most EU member states.

The deputy First Minister and Mr Brian Cowen TD delivered the opening addresses of the conference. A press release outlining the deputy First Minister's attendance at the conference was issued at the time and is available from our joint Office's website.

Mr McFarland: I note that on day two of the conference, the delegates discussed how to develop a supportive and flexible enterprise environment for service providers. What is the First Minister, in his role as the Executive's economic policy co-ordinator, doing to achieve that objective in his draft Programme for Government?

The First Minister: We must address structural weaknesses in our economy and become innovative and productive. Our focus will be on growing the private sector, including attracting high-value foreign direct investment, supporting indigenous enterprises and promoting growth in well-paid, high-skilled jobs that will be sustainable in the longer term. The draft Programme for Government aims to increase the skills of our workforce, reduce economic inactivity and enable our companies to become more innovative and invest more in research and development.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the First Minister for his answers on this important issue, but I want to probe a little further. He has commented at length on the private sector, but I would like to draw attention to the public sector and our Civil Service. Is he aware of the current state of progress on e-Government? What plans are there to implement modern electronic methods of customer service by our Departments? I realise that this is a complicated question, but will OFMFDM make an early statement on the matter?

The First Minister: The Member admits that it is a complicated business. It must be discussed carefully and thoroughly by the Executive and debated by the Assembly. We will take any opportunity that arises to announce progress, but we must make progress before issuing statements. There is no use in making covering statements. Let us get to the heart of the matter.

Mr Hamilton: Will the First Minister tell the House which key industries are being targeted by the Executive in order to attract new investment to Northern Ireland?

The First Minister: Being greedy, we are targeting all of them. Many parts of our economy need help, and as I have said elsewhere, we must lift our economy from dependence on so many low-paid jobs and strengthen its infrastructure.

It is not a job that is done in a day. I might say that Rome was not built in a day, although that is a bad analogy in this affair.

Public Appointments

4. **Mr Burns** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm that all public appointments should be based on the principle of merit. (AQO 1258/08)

The First Minister: Ministerial appointments to public bodies are, where appropriate, made in accordance with the code of practice published by the independent Commissioner for Public Appointments. The code of practice sets out appointment procedures, which are founded on the principles of selection based on merit, independent scrutiny in the selection process, equality of opportunity and a process that is open and transparent. The code of practice also requires Departments to comply with their statutory duty under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 when making ministerial appointments to public bodies.

Mr Burns: Can the First Minister assure the House that that will be the case in respect of the appointment of the Victims Commissioner? Will the Minister give an update on the appointment process?

The First Minister: On 8 October 2007, the deputy First Minister and I announced our intention to extend the appointments process for the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors. That process is almost complete, and we hope to announce the appointment before the end of the year.

Mr Lunn: If the First Minister accepts the principle of merit as pre-eminent in public appointments, does his Office's insistence in reopening the process of appointing a Victim's Commissioner not constitute political interference, given that the persons who made the shortlist under the previous selection process were all deemed — in his own words — to be:

“appointable and of high calibre and commitment”?

The First Minister: My office is dedicated to the defence of victims, and we believe that, having seen a change in the political background of our country, the people who would not have put forward their names under the last regime of direct rule, will do so now, and they have done so. Everyone should co-operate with that fact, and everyone is entitled to put his or her name forward. I believe in merit, and I regret that the beginning of the process did not stick to merit. If it had stuck to merit, the facts that have been given by an honourable Member today for investigation would not be before the House.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: The First Minister has answered part of my question; nevertheless, I shall ask

it. Will he explain how appointments are made to the central appointments unit in OFMDFM, how many officials are involved in the unit, how they are recruited, to whom they are answerable, what audits have been carried out on their performance in the past five years, and whether those audits are made public?

The First Minister: I will be happy to write to the honourable Member and give him all the facts that he wants. We have nothing to hide. In fact, I have not yet met some of the officials that I am supposed to be dealing with. When there are over 500 of them, that cannot be done in a day.

2.45 pm

Trip to the USA

5. **Mr Easton** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to make a statement on its recent trip to the USA. (AQO 1173/08)

The First Minister: Last week, the deputy First Minister and I visited New York and Washington DC at the invitation of President Bush.

We met political and business leaders to promote the clear message that we had come to develop economic opportunities and to invite companies to invest in Northern Ireland and also to attend the investment conference here next year. The junior Minister Ian Paisley Jnr accompanied us throughout the programme, Minister Nigel Dodds joined us in New York, and Mr Danny Kennedy met up with us in Washington DC.

We attended over 20 meetings and met more than 150 chief executives from companies that are involved in the financial services, information technology and services sectors. The businesspeople confirmed their intention to visit us and were supportive of our new message that Northern Ireland is open for business and that Northern Ireland is good for business. Our mission generated substantial publicity in the targeted business media.

New York's business community invited the deputy First Minister and me to open day trading at NASDAQ. CNN, Bloomberg Television and Fox News broadcast live television coverage of the event to many millions of viewers, and our message that Northern Ireland is open for business and is good for business was seen across the world. That event was also displayed on a seven-storey-high screen that overlooks Times Square in New York. The two people who appeared on the screen may not have enhanced the message, but the proof of the propaganda was there for all to see.

We met the editorial boards of 'The Wall Street Journal' and 'The Washington Post', who questioned us at great length on our business proposition and on why US companies should consider working with us. We

were able to convince those hard-nosed business journalists that Northern Ireland offers a viable product.

We were fortunate to meet New York's mayor, Michael Bloomberg, who is an extremely busy man and a successful businessperson in his own right. He accepted our invitation to lead a business delegation to Northern Ireland next year to build on our economic relationship with the United States. We also met the Secretary of Commerce, who committed his Department to supporting the conference next May.

Several private meetings were held with senior business leaders who are interested in visiting Northern Ireland to investigate business opportunities. My colleagues and I invited them to contact us any time if there is anything that we can do to assist them to locate here.

The political attention that we received in Washington DC was unprecedented. Over 20 Members of Congress broke off from an important debate to meet us. They congratulated the Assembly on its work and pledged their support for strengthening the links between the Assembly and Congress. Indeed, the Speaker of the House of Representatives left the Chair to spend some time with us.

Senator Kennedy hosted a briefing with eight Senators, with whom we had an open discussion on future work priorities. The Senators asked how they could be of use to the Executive, and we discussed several economic issues and funding opportunities. Everyone in the Chamber is aware of the pressures that politicians face during election campaigns, and we were delighted when Senator Clinton took time out from her campaign to meet us — usually people go to see her, but she came to see us. The Senator was delighted with the progress that has been made in Northern Ireland and said that, if she becomes President, the door of the White House will always be open to us.

Senator Chris Dodd broke off from his election campaign to meet us and offer his support. We were delighted to receive an invitation to meet the President, and we were so engaged in those discussions that the meeting lasted for over an hour, even though it was due to last for only 12 minutes. We asked the President to consider sending senior representatives of his Administration to the conference, and he agreed to use his personal influence to encourage companies to come to see us.

The political access that we had throughout the visit was a surprise to many. Even Senator Kennedy said that he was amazed at our level of access and at the people whom we met. That is a solid demonstration of the interest from the United States, and we must build on that for the good of our people. Many business people and politicians who spoke to us about our investment message said that we were now speaking

the language that they wanted to hear. We have made many new friends and potential business partners, and we look forward to their visiting us and investing in us.

I thank all my Assembly colleagues who accompanied us and who helped to make the visit so successful. I include the deputy First Minister in that remark, as he would wish to be associated with it.

A man came up to speak to me at a conference and told me that he was my third cousin, so we traced back our history. Then, I was told afterwards — I wish that I had known at the time — that he had just sold his business for over £700 million.

Mr Burns: He was definitely a relation. *[Laughter.]*

The First Minister: I would not say that, but I hope that he will do what he promised, which is to help us to get businesses to invest in Northern Ireland. That man will be attending the conference.

Mr Easton: I thank the First Minister for his detailed reply. Does he feel confident that Northern Ireland will benefit from this trip? Can I suggest that North Down might be a good location for a golf course?

The First Minister: I hope that a certain billionaire will also think along those lines, and will come to help us.

There were a number of purposes to our visit: first, to raise the general awareness of Northern Ireland as a business investment location among the wider US business population — we think that we moved forward on that difficult proposition; secondly, to open the doors to specific business boardrooms to gain access to the key decision-makers and to present tailored propositions; thirdly, to talk to individual business leaders and invite them to come to the investment conference; and, finally, to provide ministerial support and endorsement to businesses that are in discussions with Invest NI.

A number of firms are in negotiations with Invest NI, and we have assured them of the Executive's support in coming to Northern Ireland. We hope to continue our contact with the chief executives of those companies and to support Invest Northern Ireland in securing that investment over the coming years.

Mr Kennedy: I congratulate the First Minister and thank him for his detailed reply. I, too, commend the important economic initiative that took place last week in the United States of America. I express my personal thanks to the First Minister, his deputy, and their ministerial colleagues for the consideration that was shown to me during the Washington leg of that visit.

How does the First Minister see external relationships being developed by the Executive, the Assembly and the Committees?

The First Minister: I thank the Chairperson of the Committee that, from time to time, looks at and investigates what we are doing. I am glad that he was able to

join us and that he saw the benefits that we can reap from what we have sown in the harvest that will come.

Of the many propositions that were discussed, one of the most interesting was the revival of the Scotch-Irish lobby in America. Even those on the other side said that we should help to develop that lobby. It will be most helpful when both parts of Ireland have people in the United States working together for their benefit. Therefore, I would like to see the Scotch-Irish lobby being developed.

When speaking at meetings, I had to keep reminding those present to remember the Scotch-Irish. One man told me that he was Scotch-Irish but that he had not known some of what we had said about the Presidents that the Scotch-Irish have sent to the White House. I replied that I had not said whether those Presidents had been good, bad or indifferent. Although we met politicians, we kept out of the political arena — just as we would not want people interfering in our land, they did not want us to interfere in theirs, particularly during an election campaign. We kept clear of that, but we did meet representatives from all sections of the community, and we found universal interest and hope that Ulster would come through and that we would succeed in our aims.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the First Minister for the detailed report that he gave in the short time available to him. Was the plight of the undocumented Irish in America raised with President Bush? If so, was there a satisfactory response?

The First Minister: Yes; that matter was raised with the Senators who came to see us. There was a discussion on the issue, and our views were strongly expressed.

Constitutional Issues

6. **Mr Burnside** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline what discussions it has had on constitutional issues with the First Minister of Scotland. (AQO 1157/08)

The First Minister: The Member will be aware that the deputy First Minister and I met the First Minister of Scotland earlier this year. At that meeting, we acknowledged our shared culture, history and interests, and discussed greater co-operation between our two Administrations for mutual benefit.

By “constitutional issues”, I assume that the Member means the position of Scotland and Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom. Such issues were not discussed. The Union is secure. The First Minister of Scotland has well-known views on the future constitutional position of his country. However, that is for him — and his party — to take forward with the people of Scotland, and has no bearing on the future government of our country.

3.00 pm

Mr Burnside: Will the First Minister withdraw his support for the Scottish First Minister’s statement that he wished in the future that The Queen should become queen of Scotland? That could only take place after the ending of the 1707 Act of Union. Will he disassociate himself from those remarks and give a commitment that the only queen that we will have in the future in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland will hold a unitary crown — one crown, and one queen for the whole of the United Kingdom?

Mr Speaker: Please be brief, First Minister.

The First Minister: The Queen is the queen of Scotland, and I would like her always to be the queen of Scotland. However, Scotland has a right to decide for itself, and whatever it decides is not our business. Everybody knows that I believe in the Union and stand for the Union; a union of Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland. However, that does not prevent me from speaking to the First Minister of Scotland. The First Minister of Scotland is a member of the Privy Council, and I advise the honourable Member to read the oath of the Privy Council and then decide a person’s loyalty.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Procurement of Local Produce

1. **Mrs McGill** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what progress is being made in securing a strategy of procurement of local produce by other Departments. (AQO 1216/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Strict restraints on public procurement are set out in EU legislation. Nevertheless, I believe that the North produces a wholesome quality product that more than meets the public procurement criteria. Our challenge is to ensure that the agrifood industry is in a strong position to tender for contracts and that contracts are accessible for small and medium-sized businesses to deliver.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education are key players in the procurement of food contracts, and that is why I met recently with Ministers Ruane and McGimpsey to discuss the possibilities for increasing public-sector procurement for local food. My officials are working with the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) and Central Services Agency (CSA) to assist in the development of a range of guidance to support and encourage the participation of small and medium-sized enterprises in competition for Government business. They are also

looking at how to integrate sustainable development considerations into public-sector contracts.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer. What action is her Department taking to ensure that small and medium-sized enterprises can engage in public procurement contracts? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Gildernew: Departmental staff are continuing to provide technical support and advice to individual farmers, processors, producer groups or co-operatives — large and small — to help them engage in public-sector contracts. I have also approved a new processing and marketing scheme under the 2007-2013 rural development programme, which will provide assistance to improve competitiveness of the agrifood sector and enable it to compete for such contracts.

Staff from the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) at the Loughrey campus have supported CPD 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's initiative that aims to improve the nutritional quality of food in hospitals. CAFRE also provides a comprehensive range of education and training programmes for producers and processors to 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.

My Department is also contributing to the success of the renaissance of Atlantic food authenticity and economic links (RAFAEL) project that aims to encourage local authentic food producers to develop new markets. The aim of the initiative is to promote the use of local food as a firm foundation for public health and ensuring that local food has been brought to the attention of consumers.

Dr W McCrea: On 22 October, I wrote to the Minister — in my capacity as Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development — asking about her Department and other Executive Departments taking the lead in the promotion and purchasing of Northern Ireland-sourced products.

As yet, the Committee has not received any response. Will the Minister indicate whether she will formally respond to my Committee, or is it now a matter of policy that it will not be consulted? Is this strategy the only ministerial response to the dire findings of the Red Meat Industry Task Force, or is the Minister insisting that diversification is the only salvation for the farming industry?

Ms Gildernew: On the first point, I have signed that letter of response, and the Committee should receive it today or tomorrow.

Secondly, the strategy is not a response to the Red Meat Industry Task Force, but represents one of the points in the UFU's (Ulster Farmers' Union) five-point plan, which it put to all the parties before the last Assembly election.

My departmental officials are working very closely with the Central Procurement Directorate, which has a key role to play. To date, we have developed guidance to support and encourage integration of sustainable-development considerations into public-sector contracts. That work is not being done solely in response to the Red Meat Industry Task Force, but in response to several issues.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Can the Minister assure the House that all meat, fish and vegetables that are served in canteens in Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) premises are procured locally?

Ms Gildernew: The Department of Finance and Personnel is responsible for managing the Civil Service contract-catering arrangements. There are three DARD catering contracts that incorporate the Government's aims and objectives for sustainability in farming and food sectors, and they are contributing to a better environment and to healthy and prosperous communities.

Where appropriate, or possible, the contractors should use products that are environmentally friendly and that have been recycled or organically produced. There is also a stipulation that the use of local produce should be considered, where possible, and the Department wants to see that enhanced. The answer to your question is yes.

Decommissioning Package: Prawn-Boat Sector

2. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what money is available to deliver a phased decommissioning package for the prawn-boat sector. (AQO 1210/08)

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I have no plans to introduce a decommissioning package for the prawn fleet. The rationale for such schemes is to combat overfishing, and achieve a better balance between fishing effort and available fishing opportunities.

Irish Sea prawns are being fished sustainably and, just last year, the European Commission raised the total allowable catch for nephrops by 17%, based on the scientific evidence gathered by the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute. There is, therefore, no reason to

introduce decommissioning for the prawn fleet, and the Commission has proposed that the same total allowable catch be set for 2008.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What financial help might be available from the European Fisheries Fund? Will the Minister visit the Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co-operative Society in Toomebridge, and perhaps encourage the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to do the same? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Gildernew: The European Fisheries Fund (EEF) will make £12.76 million available for the local fishing industry, and that will help us to achieve the overall aim of a strong fishing industry that supports local communities in the long term.

The EEF can also be used for processing in aquaculture, and I hope that we will work with Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) on some inland fisheries. I will certainly be pleased to accept an invitation from the Lough Neagh co-op.

We are required to match the money that is available from the EU with national funding, and there are a number of activities that can be supported under EEF, including marketing, vessel modernisation, etc. The focus will be on providing a sustainable future for the fishing industry through innovation and technology, and that will be achieved in a number of ways, including new investment, and wider use of the latest technologies, alongside improvements in the supply chain and environmental awareness. Some of that new funding will be used to help tackle social exclusion and promote prosperity in areas that are traditionally dependent on the fishing industry, when support cannot be provided in any other way.

My Department is currently working on a draft operational programme that will guide the implementation of the EEF. That will be subject to a 12-week public consultation beginning in February 2008.

Mr Shannon: I know that the Minister is aware of the dire problems facing the prawn-boat sector of the fishing industry due to red-diesel fuel costs and that fishermen are working for 78p an hour as a result. Will she confirm what money is available through any grant or otherwise to ensure that assistance is given to enable our fishing fleet to remain?

Ms Gildernew: I have received several questions for written answer and other correspondence on the matter of high input costs in the fishing sector. I am aware that the sector is facing difficulty because of the lower price for prawns and increasing fuel bills. Under current arrangements, fishermen enjoy derogation from the EU to use rebated red diesel in their boats. Beyond that, it is not possible to offer any further direct fuel subsidy to fishing vessels. The European Commission confirmed last year that member-state subsidy of the cost

of fuel constituted uprating aid and would, therefore, be incompatible with EU law.

It is also likely that fuel costs will continue to rise. That has been the trend over the past few years. The fishing industry must devise how to adapt to the longer-term economic situation and the most preferable means of dealing with rising fuel prices by becoming more fuel efficient.

The new EEF will provide opportunities for the fishing industry to become energy efficient through measures such as grant aid for the purchase of more fuel-efficient engines. Other fuel-saving measures might include the use of biofuels in fishing vessels, gear technology that reduces fuel consumption, the audit of vessels to identify where fuel can be saved and vessel engineering solutions that reduce fuel consumption. The Department will look at how it can tackle the problem. I am aware of the hardship that high fuel costs are causing fishermen at the moment.

Mr McCallister: I thank Mr McElduff for raising the issue. I am sure that he will be disappointed, given the impact that prawn-boat fishing has on his West Tyrone constituency.

Has the Minister held any discussions with her fellow Ministers from the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland and with the European Commission about getting support for the fishing industry in Northern Ireland with respect to the forthcoming European decisions on fishing quotas and days at sea?

Ms Gildernew: I want to be a strong voice for the fishing industry here, and I have been working closely with ministerial colleagues Richard Lochhead MSP, Elin Jones AM and Jonathan Shaw in Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to ensure that Irish Sea issues are given due importance in the forthcoming December Fisheries Council from a negotiating position. I visited the three ports last week to hear the views of local fishermen. Last Friday I met with Mary Coughlan to discuss how we could work together on issues of common interest at the forthcoming EU Council. I also had a video conference this morning with Jonathan Shaw and Richard Lochhead in advance of our meeting with Joe Borg on Thursday. The fishing issue is taking up a lot of time in the run-up to the Fisheries Council. I am pleased to say that we have had a very good level of engagement with all Ministers involved.

Crossnacreevy

3. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the business case for the proposed sale of Crossnacreevy. (AQO 1185/08)

Ms Gildernew: I announced to the Assembly Committee on 12 June that I was seeking the strategic disposal of land at the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute's (AFBI) site at Crossnacreevy. That followed a review of AFBI's needs and utilisation of the estate, the conclusion of which opened up the possibility that the current site could be disposed off without any adverse impact on AFBI's activities. The Department has moved to the next phase of the study, which includes the preparation of the business case and relocation plan. At this stage, the business case has not yet been fully developed, but when completed it will be made available at an appropriate date.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for writing to me recently in English only, as I requested. It was deeply appreciated.

Crossnacreevy is in my glorious constituency of Strangford, and I find the Minister's reply somewhat disturbing. I wonder about her interpretation of "strategic", and I am sorry that she has not, as yet, reached the ability to have a business case put together. I hope that she will come back to me on that.

Has the Minister considered any alternatives to the sale of the entire Crossnacreevy site — such as selling only a portion of the site? In addition, beyond what is required for the farm-nutrient management scheme, can DARD — as I would wish — retain any excess money from the Crossnacreevy sale?

3.15 pm

Ms Gildernew: When considering solutions to the problems with the farm-nutrient management scheme, we obviously considered not only the Crossnacreevy land but the entire DARD estate. As the Member knows, I negotiated with the Department of Finance and Personnel and got its agreement to my continuing to approve applications and give commitments to farmers for grant aid for the farm-nutrient management scheme. Obviously, any money left over from the sale of the AFBI site — and, at this stage, I do not know how much that is likely to be — will go back to the central pot, and I, along with other Ministers, will be able to bid for part of it. I am content with the fact that Government Departments must be as pragmatic and sensible as possible when dealing with such problems —

Mr McNarry: Why sell more than you need?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor.

Ms Gildernew: The discussions with DFP concerned the site itself. I am satisfied that we have solved the problems with the farm-nutrient management scheme and that we have given commitments to find an alternative site for the valuable work of the AFBI staff at Crossnacreevy, which we wish to continue.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her answer. However, I share Mr McNarry's bafflement. Although

it has been selected as the ideal site to sell, is the Minister telling Members that, as yet, there is no firm business case for the sale of Crossnacreevy? Furthermore, is the Minister suggesting that more money than that required by the farm-nutrient management scheme will be received from the sale of Crossnacreevy, and that that money will be returned to DFP and not retained for urgent requirements within DARD? If those are the facts, how does the Minister expect Members to believe that the issue has been seriously considered?

Ms Gildernew: None of that should be new to the Members; I am sure that they were present when I previously answered questions on the subject.

In advance of the 12 June announcement, DARD and ABFI jointly committed to a review of ABFI's needs and the utilisation of the estate that it occupies. As part of the initial scoping study of that review, the usage of land and buildings at Crossnacreevy were examined. That scoping study concluded that the relocation of the activities and facilities at Crossnacreevy was feasible, which opened up the possibility that the current site could be disposed of without an adverse impact on ABFI's activities.

Members must also recognise that the Executive are working on behalf of all of our people. Although I would have loved to have been able to retain the additional money, we do not know how much money there will be, how the land will be valued, and what planning issues might arise. We hear from all the parties about the other financial pressures around the Executive table, and, therefore, we must be wise about how Government money is spent for the betterment of all people. A joined-up approach from the Executive will be of real benefit to the people of this place.

Mrs I Robinson: What benefit does the Minister envisage for the people of Crossnacreevy in particular, and Strangford in general, from the sale of this land?

Ms Gildernew: As the Member knows, the land is currently agricultural land. There are several potential benefits. Having land available for further economic development can bring benefits to the people of both Crossnacreevy and the wider Strangford constituency. I hope that whoever buys the land will consider the needs of, and how they might interact with, the community. Therefore, there will certainly be benefits.

We are looking carefully at how staff are affected by the sale as well as the people who live in the cottages at Crossnacreevy. I am taking all that into consideration and keeping a close eye on how the situation develops.

Pig Meat Sector

4. **Mr Brolly** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assistance is being given by her Department to the pig meat sector. (AQO 1223/08)

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. My Department continues to support the pig sector in every way in which it can. The Department's pig technologists are dealing with individual farmers to assess areas of potential improvement in production efficiency on farms. The pig grading information system (PiGIS), which I launched in June 2007, was developed jointly by the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise and the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute. PiGIS has been widely used by producers to assess carcass specifications. Already there is evidence that, through the use of various measures, significant savings can be made on farms.

CAFRE provides a comprehensive range of education and training programmes that develop technical and business-management skills for producers and processors. It provides benchmarking support and delivers the pig challenge to address inefficiencies and maximise competitiveness at farm level. College staff also assist with product specification, product development and the adoption of new technology. Furthermore, over the past four years, the Department's supply-chain awareness programme has seen the involvement of farmers and others in investigating supply-chain issues and marketing models in Ireland, Britain and Germany.

The Department has agreed with the industry to co-fund a review of key issues that impact on the pig sector, and that review will be undertaken by the Ulster Pork and Bacon Forum.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat. To what extent will the introduction of export refunds help to stabilise pig prices?

Ms Gildernew: I met with industry representatives recently, after which I was left in no doubt about the pig sector's extreme financial situation, which has largely been caused by the increased production costs as a result of high cereal prices. The private storage aid scheme that the EU Commission introduced at the end of October failed to bring about stability. I am delighted that the EU management committee for pigmeat has agreed to reintroduce export refunds for pig meat. That illustrates that the major difficulties facing pig producers across the EU have been recognised. The commencement of that subsidy is an essential first step in trying to restore some balance and stability to the sector. It will increase the amount of pig meat that is exported from the EU and, hence, increase market prices. I hope that that marks a turning point for the sector, and I will continue to monitor the situation closely over the coming weeks and months.

Mr Irwin: Has the Minister discussed with the Ulster Farmers' Union possible ways in which to help pig farmers who are suffering unsustainable losses? Will she assure the House that she will leave no stone

unturned when examining ways in which to help the pig sector at this time?

Ms Gildernew: Absolutely. EU funding and support will be available for the industry to develop and expand profitable and sustainable markets and to encourage better co-operation and communications among all sectors of the food industry. That support will be delivered under axis 1 of our rural development programme through the agricultural marketing development grant scheme and the supply-chain development programme.

The industry has also undertaken activities to help itself. Food Promotion Northern Ireland is a group that has been formed from a range of sectors, including the Ulster Farmers' Union and the Livestock and Meat Commission, to take forward jointly and fund a domestic marketing campaign. One of its objectives is to develop and deliver a domestic promotion and marketing campaign that is aimed at delivering sustained growth, increased market share and maximisation of profitability for businesses here. It complements the regional food programme, which aims to promote quality regional food by assisting the industry to develop and expand profitable and sustainable markets, and by encouraging better co-operation and communication among all sectors of the food industry.

Mr Dallat: I am sure that the Minister will agree that the crisis in the pig-meat industry requires a great deal more than a nod or a grunt. Will she explain why the gap between the farmgate price and the price that the consumer pays is widening? Does she have a solution, and will she support an inquiry into the cause of that disgraceful state of affairs?

Ms Gildernew: First, as the Member knows, I do not control prices. However, I have been working hard with all levels of the supply chain in order to get the best deal for producers. I wrote to all the supermarkets to express my concerns about returns at producer level, given the rising cost of feed. I am aware that there has been a subsequent rise, albeit a small one, in some retail prices.

That is a welcome trend, as it provides an opportunity for increased returns to work their way back through the supply line to the farm-gate price.

Additionally, I met the senior management team of a leading pork processor to learn at first hand of the difficulties in that sector. I have also been working with the UFU and the industries to ascertain how to narrow the gap to which the Member has referred.

Farm Nutrient Management Scheme

5. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the business case for the continued processing and financing of the farm nutrient management scheme. (AQO 1186/08)

Ms Gildernew: The business case for the continued processing and financing of the farm nutrient management scheme (FNMS) provides economic justification for funding all FNMS applicants and quantifies the additional funding that is required for the scheme. The economic analysis demonstrated the value for money that can be achieved by enabling the agriculture industry to invest in slurry storage facilities in order to comply with the EU nitrates directive while maintaining livestock numbers and viability.

The funding gap was estimated to be £89 million above the existing scheme's budget, and a bid for that amount has been submitted through the investment strategy for Northern Ireland. The additional funding will prevent a reduction in livestock numbers to comply with the EU nitrates directive and the consequent loss of the value added to the economy from those livestock. Unsatisfactory implementation of the nitrates directive could result in European Commission infraction proceedings against the North, with a possibility of daily fines.

DFP approved the business case in June 2007. Since then, I have allocated additional staff resources to the scheme, and I am happy to say that good progress has been made. To date, some 3,200 pre-approval inspections have been completed, and over 2,400 FNMS applicants have been issued with approvals and offers of grant aid.

All eligible applicants should have received an initial visit from an inspector or DARD adviser before Christmas. All approvals should be issued by the end of March 2008, provided that farmers supply any new information that is needed following a pre-approval inspection. More than 1,000 claims for completed tanks have been submitted so far. Therefore, a significant increase in the construction rate is necessary. The Department's target of issuing all approvals by March 2008 gives a clear indication to the construction industry of the urgency in getting the works completed by 31 December 2008. It is vital that that deadline is observed, as there is no prospect of allowing the 60% grant to be extended beyond that date.

Mr Armstrong: I thank the Minister for her long-winded answer. Given the importance of the farm nutrient management scheme, has the Minister considered what options are available for financing the scheme, especially given the problem of the sale of the Cross-nacreevy site? Furthermore, is the Minister of a mind to extend the scheme beyond 2008, bearing in mind the environmental impact that would result if there were not enough tanks for farmers to store their farm nutrients in?

Mr S Wilson: That was a long-winded question.

Ms Gildernew: Yes, that was a long-winded supplementary question, and I thank the Member for it. I think the Member was asking whether further money

will be made available. That cannot happen; the Department can give only the 60% grant. To do otherwise would be extremely unfair to the people who received a 60% grant one year ago and built a tank.

There will be problems with building all the tanks for which we will be giving approval. I accept that finding the 40% to go along with the 60% that the Department is making available will be a financial consideration for some. However, it is important that farmers build those tanks as quickly as possible if they are going to avail themselves of that 60% grant aid.

Mr P J Bradley: With strong winds blowing here and from the other side of the Chamber, I am in the eye of the storm.

Will the Minister tell the House whether she has been in touch with her ministerial colleague in the Department of the Environment regarding planning applications for storage tanks? It is important that approvals are granted in time to allow the work to be completed before the December 2008 deadline.

Ms Gildernew: My Department has had discussions with the Department of the Environment. Planning permission is no longer necessary for the majority of tanks. Therefore, that should not be a consideration in holding up the work. Other factors are holding up the work, including getting contractors out and making slots available in order that it can be completed. That means that finishing the work is becoming problematic.

In answer to the previous supplementary question, which I did not catch in full, from January 2008, we will be in the period of extension. The original deadline for the work to be completed was December 2007. One year's extension has been granted. I have made enquiries, both in Europe and among my ministerial colleagues, and I have been told that the extension is to December 2008 only, and that we will not be able to go beyond that. I am trying to get that point across to farmers, some of whom still feel that there might be two or three months' grace. There will not be.

3.30 pm

Mr McCartney: The Minister has already answered my supplementary question.

Mr Speaker: The Member whose name is next on the list of those to ask questions is not in his place.

Energy Crops

7. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps her Department is taking to encourage the growing of energy crops.
(AQO 1202/08)

Ms Gildernew: My Department has assessed the potential for energy production from crops in its

renewable energy action plan. In 2004, Forest Service established a three-year challenge fund to encourage landowners to establish willow coppice for an energy end-use. Under that scheme, 950 hectares of willow coppice were established, or approved for establishment, by 45 rural businesses. A short-rotation coppice scheme, as outlined in the rural development programme, will replace the challenge fund.

The Department supports the growth of crops for energy under the EU aid for energy crops scheme. Uptake for that scheme has been limited. At present, the arable sector can secure a better return from growing cereals than energy crops. Work is currently under way to establish a renewables centre of excellence at the AFBI site in Hillsborough. That demonstration and research facility will further identify the potential for energy production from crops.

Mr McCarthy: What encouragement is given to farmers to co-operate in the growing and marketing of energy crops? Will the Minister take account of what is happening in the South of Ireland to see how co-operation in this sphere can be encouraged and expanded?

Mr Speaker: I ask the Minister to keep her response brief. Time is almost up.

Ms Gildernew: I will.

My Department, AFBI and Teagasc have worked together closely on how to develop markets. We will also have to work on the taxation of biofuels to ensure that the scheme is cheap enough for farmers to take up. We are working very closely across the island on this issue.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Sports Strategy

1. **Mrs Hanna** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to comment on whether the sports strategy can be implemented, in the context of the funding allocations in the draft Budget. (AQO 1231/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): Sport Northern Ireland will have an important role in the delivery of the sports strategy for Northern Ireland. The funding allocation to sport in the draft Budget will help to ensure that a start can be made on implementing the 10-year sports strategy. Under the draft Budget, it is proposed that core funding, including capital, for sport should rise by £23 million in 2008-09, over £29 million in 2009-10, and £42 million in 2010-11.

However, full implementation of the strategy also depends on the willingness and ability of all stakeholders to contribute to its delivery. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and Sport Northern Ireland, therefore,

seek commitment from the stakeholders to implement the sports strategy as part of the current consultation exercise on the draft Northern Ireland strategy for sport and physical recreation 2007-17.

Mrs Hanna: We are all particularly concerned about the loss of local sports and aware of the importance of sport in participation and promotion of better health. Does the Minister anticipate the closure of any local facilities? That would reduce capacity and the potential for financial remuneration for local clubs and sporting facilities.

Mr Poots: One can never rule out the closure of facilities. I am confident, however, that over the period of the strategy, new facilities will be opened and others will be enhanced. Within the budget that has been allocated, we can have an improvement in the sporting infrastructure.

Mr McNarry: The Minister's responses so far have been interesting. He has said that we need to raise the current level of sports funding by £206 million to realise the 10-year sports strategy. Has he developed strategies to acquire that very substantial funding? What performance targets will be built into the strategy to measure whether we have realised the 24 priorities that he seeks to establish and which I support?

Mr Poots: The first building block of the required additional funding comes from the central block Budget. Over three years, and in year 3 in particular, we will see a significant uplift in that central Budget. I will continue to make the case, and put the argument, that sport and physical recreation can contribute to significant savings, in particular in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. My Department will take that matter into consideration regarding funding; we will also consider the private sector and the delivery of sport and physical recreation by local government. I hope that we can get a combination that will produce the required figures to develop and deliver sport as identified in the draft sports strategy.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister will be aware that, last year, there was a huge underspend in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's budget. Will the Minister assure the House that that money will be used for other capital schemes in sports and the arts, including the sports strategy, and will not be snatched away by the Minister of Finance and Personnel, or the Treasury across the water?

Mr Poots: Were the Member aware of his facts before he put his question, he would have realised that a significant element of that money related to the Ulster Museum. The development of the Ulster Museum would have started sooner had it received earlier planning permission, but there were objections to the planning permission. The objections concerned the removal of a shuttered wall, a structure that is like a

silo wall. Ultimately, that was a key reason that that funding did not go ahead.

Another reason for some capital funding not going ahead is that the Department is waiting for the Lyric Theatre and the Old Museum Arts Centre — which have been allocated funding — to come up with other funding. The Department is using public, central Budget money to leverage other funding that should come from the private sector and from Belfast City Council, which will make a decision soon. Dr Martin Naughton has donated £1 million to the Lyric Theatre, which is very welcome, and other private donations have been received.

Let us use our money wisely and bring as much as possible into the central pot to redistribute throughout the fields of arts and sports. I would rather spend money wisely than spend it quickly.

Mr McCarthy: Will that money be handed back to the Treasury?

Mr Poots: No, it will not.

Lottery Funding: Grant Aid

2. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm whether sports clubs in Northern Ireland, whose parent bodies are not associated with the Olympic Games, will receive grant aid for their development programmes, due to lottery funding's being redirected to the 2012 Games.

(AQO 1149/08)

Mr Poots: Sport Northern Ireland is responsible for the distribution of grant aid to sport in Northern Ireland. It will be able to continue to invest in development programmes for non-Olympic sports clubs through a combination of lottery and Exchequer funding.

Mr P J Bradley: A range of groups in my constituency has raised a number of concerns about the redirection of funds. It is easy to understand their frustration, because they were told that their development plans had been accepted and that their applications for funding had been successful, only to learn that the funding identified for their projects is London-bound. What are the Minister's financial proposals to allow those clubs to pursue their five- and 10-year development plans?

Mr Poots: I share the disappointment of a number of clubs that money is being diverted to the Olympics. That decision was taken in London — not by me. Nonetheless, we are left with the aftermath: a number of clubs would not have been eligible in any case, but some clubs were eligible and should have received funding, but they did not.

We are looking to the capital realisation task force to see what Government capital assets may be realised over the next few years. Should we be successful in

that realisation, for which clear targets have been set, the money may be used to reinvest in sport, which is something that we wish to pursue.

Mr K Robinson: To what extent does the Minister feel that the diversion of lottery funding to the 2012 Olympics will derail or delay his sports strategy for 2007-17 and will weaken participation rates at club and local level in all sports?

Mr Poots: The diversion of lottery funding to the Olympics will certainly neither derail nor delay the strategy. The sports strategy is still a draft document, which does not have the Assembly's final approval. That has yet to be achieved.

On the basis that the Assembly approves the strategy, significant funding is available in the early years to assist the Department in its delivery. The required rises in spend must be incremental. The Department must continue to ensure that further funding and increases are achieved beyond 2011 in order to allow the sports strategy to be fully developed. The Department did not anticipate, for example, that there would be a £206 million spend over a 10-year period. It did not anticipate spending £20 million per annum during the first three years in any event: that will have to be built up. Ultimately, therefore, I do not envisage that the strategy will be either derailed or delayed.

Olympic Elite Participation Programme

3. **Mr S Wilson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what progress has been made on the Olympic elite participation programme.

(AQO 1153/08)

Olympic Centres of Excellence

10. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the original amount of funding announced by the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in relation to Olympic Centres of Excellence; and (ii) the amount of funding that is available under the draft Budget for these centres.

(AQO 1244/08)

Mr Poots: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer Mr Wilson's and Mr Burns's questions together. In March 2006, the then Sports Minister, David Hanson MP, announced that approximately £50 million had been provisionally allocated for high sports priority infrastructure projects. Since then, two separate competitions have been held, seeking expressions of interest from anyone who is interested in developing elite Olympic and Paralympic facilities in Northern Ireland.

As a result of the first competition, North Down Borough Council has been identified as the preferred developer for Northern Ireland's first 50m swimming

pool. As a result of the second competition, a further 15 projects have been identified as being suitable to proceed to the next stage of the competition. There will then be a further shortlisting exercise to determine the final list of approved projects.

The proposed Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure capital investment during the next three years under the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2, which was published in November 2007, identifies £218 million of capital projects, of which £112 million relates to sports projects. I will consider priorities carefully during coming months and, in particular, any comments that are received during the current consultation. That consideration will include elite facilities.

Mr S Wilson: Some applicants who have got through the second round are concerned that, although the next step is to present their business case and assessments, submit their planning applications, etc., to the Department, they have been told not to do anything at present. Time is running out. Can the Minister tell the House when it is envisaged that the second-round applicants must have submitted all the necessary paperwork to the Department? What is the time limit before which allocated money must be spent? Is the Minister sure that, apart from large local authority projects, smaller clubs will have the time and the resources to be able to compete fairly in the second round of the competition?

Mr Poots: Deliverability by 2010 was one of the elite programme's key criteria. I understand the Member's concerns on that particular issue, especially where, in some instances, applicants could become engaged in protracted planning applications that could cause considerable delay. I speak, in particular, of some cases in which the Environment and Heritage Service is involved and in which pressing issues must be dealt with. The Assembly must be cognisant of that. I assure the Member that I will work closely with Sport NI and clubs that are making applications. I am happy to discuss the matter with him in due course to identify how progress can be made.

Mr Burns: Can the Minister confirm that it will still be possible to fund all the shortlisted projects if the draft Budget is approved? If not, what impact will that have on the draft Programme for Government's plans to host 10 international teams in Northern Ireland during their Olympic Games preparations?

3.45 pm

Mr Poots: We are arguing that capital-realisation funds should be directed towards elite facilities, in conjunction with the funding that has already been achieved. Therefore, I do not intend to opt for any diminution in the amount of funding for which we have applied. Although we do not have the full £53 million at present, I will continue to pursue that.

The significant factor in the proposals is that many of them can be delivered on time. That is somewhat different from many other capital projects that are being proposed. In future years, capital money that has not been spent must be returned to Westminster. Therefore, it is in our interests to take forward projects that can be turned around quickly, to use up capital that might otherwise be lost to Northern Ireland. I intend to use that argument as a means of leveraging further funding for that important project.

Mr Burnside: The Minister made a good point about the £53 million that was allocated for those elite facilities: if planning decisions were delayed and the right business-plan proposals did not win, we might not secure the amount of money that is available. Will he re-emphasise the point that those facilities are available and the finances are available to make a considerable contribution to the Olympic Games?

How does our funding allocation compare with that of Scotland and Wales?

Mr Poots: One of the most significant benefits of spending money from the Northern Ireland block Budget in the way that I have outlined is that that will actually lever further money from the clubs or the local authorities that are involved. Therefore, the return on the money that we invest is significant, and much greater than the original outlay. That is hugely beneficial for Northern Ireland.

Scotland is in a completely different situation because not only is it preparing for the Olympic Games in 2012, and how it can benefit from that through the development of its facilities — it has won the right to stage the Commonwealth Games in 2014. Therefore, Scotland will have a more significant financial outlay. I confirm that I am meeting my counterpart in Scotland later in December and that we will be discussing the Commonwealth Games and what opportunities they might present for Northern Ireland — whether in acclimatisation for competitors, or other elements of that event — considering that Belfast is the closest capital city to Glasgow. There should be significant opportunities for Northern Ireland.

Reception for David Healy

4. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether he plans to host a reception for David Healy, following his record achievement of scoring the most goals in a European Championship qualifying campaign. (AQO 1190/08)

Mr Poots: I place on record my congratulations to David Healy on what is a magnificent achievement.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Poots: To become the highest goal scorer in the European Championship qualifying campaign is a

remarkable feat, by any standards. I have already written to David to offer my congratulations. I confirm that it is my intention to host a reception for David and his fellow team members as soon as that can be arranged. We are in discussions with the Irish Football Association (IFA) about the details of those arrangements.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response. That is something that everyone has wanted to hear. Many believe that his reward should go even further, and that he should be awarded an MBE. I am one of a growing number of people who believes that. He has also received the BBC Northern Ireland Sports Personality of the Year award.

He comes from Killyleagh, which is part of the constituency of Strangford, which I have the pleasure and privilege of representing. Killyleagh is the only village in Northern Ireland that has ever produced three Northern Ireland international footballers who have played in matches against England: Hugh Davey, who played for Northern Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s, when they lost 2-1; Terry Cochrane, who played for Northern Ireland against England —

Mr Speaker: I detect that a question is coming.

Mr Shannon: A question is coming. Terry Cochrane played for Northern Ireland against England, in a match that ended in a 1-1 draw. Of course, David Healy scored that magnificent goal in Windsor Park, not so long ago, in that famous victory over the mighty English.

David Healy's success has been as a player in the Northern Ireland team — and this is the question, Mr Speaker, you will be glad to hear. Can the Minister comment on FIFA's eligibility proposal, which would dismantle the very process that enabled David Healy to excel? What steps is the Minister taking to address that issue?

Mr Poots: As the Member knows, FIFA's eligibility proposal will be debated in the House tomorrow. It is public knowledge that I have already written to FIFA, and I have offered my support to the IFA, and I will take its advice on this matter.

Over the years, and during the worst period of the Troubles, the Northern Ireland football team has been made up of people from both sections of the community. The Northern Ireland football team can look back on many great players from both sides of the community, including the likes of Pat Jennings, Martin O'Neill, Pat Rice and Sammy Nelson, and the more up-to-date players such as David Healy, Steve Davis and others. Football crosses the political and religious divides, and it is critical that that be noted. It would be hugely unfortunate if others interfered with a team that has been successful and that has brought our community together. It would be a sad day for the people of Northern Ireland if we went down the route proposed by FIFA,

which might, for example, result in Protestants or unionists playing for Northern Ireland, and Catholics or nationalists playing for the Republic of Ireland. That would be detrimental to all in our community.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I, too, congratulate David Healy.

Is the Minister willing to contact his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland about staging a joint event for the teams from the North and the South to wish them every success in the next World Cup campaign? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Poots: I do not know how appropriate it would be to hold such an event, particularly given that the manager of the Republic of Ireland football team has just left because of the team's lack of success. I can hardly bring people together to celebrate success when the Irish Republic's football team is having one of the worst runs that it has ever had. In this instance, I will stick with the successful recipe — led, of course, by David Healy, popping in the goals.

Mr Kennedy: I warmly welcome the Minister's remarks on David Healy and on the wider issue.

Will the Minister consider establishing a new soccer hall of fame to honour Northern Ireland's international footballers, past and present, with a view to really celebrating Northern Ireland's rich contribution and heritage in soccer?

Mr Poots: That sounds like an excellent idea, and if we had a modern, up-to-date stadium we might be able to incorporate such a hall of fame.

Arts Council: Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland

5. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the ongoing programme of work and co-operation undertaken by the Arts Councils in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

(AQO 1213/08)

Mr Poots: The Arts Council of Northern Ireland and the Arts Council in the Republic of Ireland meet in plenary session once a year and operate a joint subcommittee to pursue matters of mutual interest, including co-operation on international arts promotion. The two councils currently fund 22 organisations or projects on a cross-border basis.

In addition, arrangements have been made for exhibitions in two partnership galleries: the Douglas Hyde Gallery in Dublin and the Void in Londonderry. The first exhibition took place on 6 December. Other projects that are currently being piloted include an Turas, a scheme to promote traditional arts, and a scheme with the Verbal Arts Centre for literature tours

across both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The two councils have also jointly commissioned a major research project on the living conditions of individual artists in Ireland.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his reply and for his co-operation. Will he give details of specific programmes and examples of best practice carried out by the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism in the South, and how he could use those to develop ideas in the North?

Mr Poots: I mentioned the two verbal arts programmes, An Turas. Twenty-two programmes were involved, and it would take too long to describe them in detail today. I will write to the Member about the projects that have been involved in the past year.

Mr McCausland: Will the Minister ensure that such cross-border co-operation takes full account of our cultural diversity, including the Ulster-Scots and Orange cultural traditions? Will he also encourage the Arts Council of Northern Ireland to enhance its co-operation with the other arts councils in the United Kingdom, so that there is a similar level of co-operation between Northern Ireland and all the other parts of the British Isles?

Mr Poots: I am sure that my colleague will be able to talk to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland about cultural diversity and encourage it to promote the Ulster-Scots tradition, in which he has a particular interest. I will speak to the Arts Council about its links to similar bodies in the United Kingdom, and what is happening in the nation as a whole.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the Minister's reply, because it gave a good flavour of what is being done jointly by both arts councils, North and South. It was useful to share that information with the Assembly and I welcome it. I have two questions. First, does he believe that we can learn lessons in the North about the living conditions of artists? The Government in the South gives various forms of assistance to artists to ensure that they stay in the country and make a contribution to the economy. Are there examples of improving living conditions for artists in the South that could be followed in the North?

Secondly, given the importance of developing the creative industries, will he comment on the fact that although the draft Programme for Government suggests that there should be a 15% increase in employment in the creative industries in the North, there is, as yet, no provision in the Minister's budget to enable funding for that increase to be achieved in the next three years?

Mr Poots: The responsibility for budgets for the creative industries is shared by my Department and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). Funding is available in the DETI budget for Northern Ireland Screen and for the Northern Ireland

music industry; so opportunities to promote jobs in the creative industries do exist.

Funding to create better conditions for artists has increased significantly in the Republic of Ireland in the past 10 years, but was made possible by economic growth. The Executive have made economic growth a priority. Ultimately, if we can deliver a stronger and more vibrant economy, we can put more money into the arts, sport and many other pursuits. Nevertheless, the arts have a significant contribution to make to the development of our economy, and I will continue to make that argument and identify those areas of the arts that can make that contribution. I trust that my good friend the Minister of Finance and Personnel will be able to assist me in achieving that objective, and that other Departments, such as the Department for Social Development (DSD) or the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), will not gobble up finances to the detriment of other valuable areas of Government.

Per Capita Arts Funding

6. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he had to reallocate resources towards bringing per capita arts funding into line with Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 1205/08)

Mr Poots: I have secured an indicative increase in arts and creativity revenue funding in the draft Budget totalling £6.75 million for the three years between 2008 and 2011. I have secured an additional £32.5 million for capital projects, which is a significant commitment for investment in the arts and cultural infrastructures.

4.00 pm

Although it has not been possible to bridge the gap with the rest of the UK and Ireland in per capita arts funding, the draft Budget allocations ensure that arts and creativity funding will at least keep pace with inflation in years 1 and 2. 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. As well as the arts securing an uplift in Government funding, I am pursuing ways in which to lever in additional resources from the private sector and from philanthropic sources.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his response. Given that the arts is a dynamic economic sector that drives economic growth, especially in our tourist industry, does the Minister think it logical to leave arts funding at a lower per capita level than that of our neighbours in Scotland and the Republic, whose arts funding levels match their successful tourist industries?

Mr Poots: I have been making the case for an uplift in arts funding. Ultimately, my Department aims to reach the same funding levels as our counterparts across the United Kingdom. The arts have a significant contribution to make to tourism and economic development — those points have been clearly made. If people visit Northern Ireland only to find that the arts infrastructure does not exist in our capital city of Belfast, that means that a gap in what can be offered to tourists exists where there should be none.

The arts also contribute to economic development. If we are to attract higher-value jobs, the people who will take up those jobs will expect a certain quality of life. In attempting to grow the economy, we are seeking such jobs for Northern Ireland. We must create the right quality of life if we are to create an economy that is based on higher-value jobs.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister explain why his Department, in returning money to the Department of Finance and Personnel, has effectively surrendered £10 million in the past year, when our arts community is crying out for funding in order to survive?

Mr Poots: I thought that I had explained that, although I am not sure whether the Member was in the House when I responded to Mr McCarthy's question. Most of that money was for capital spending; it has been rolled over, and quite a lot of it is being spent on the Ulster Museum. The Department spent around 98% of its revenue budget, which is fairly close to 100%. Therefore, there was little revenue underspend, which is how it should be. There was some slippage in spending of the capital budget, but the Department is making up the ground.

Mr Speaker: That ends Question Time.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007: Prayer of Annulment

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

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 (S.R. 2007/442) be annulled. — [*Ms S Ramsey.*]

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): It is my task to respond to the proposal from the Committee for Employment and Learning. I am opposed to the motion, and I will explain my reasons for that.

I listened carefully to the debate, and a number of Members' contributions surprised me. Many of the facts out there must be misleading, because almost every Member who spoke said that his or her aim was to ensure that people from disadvantaged backgrounds could access higher education. Members said that reducing student fees would help those people to gain that access.

Alex Attwood questioned why the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) in London introduced new measures in the autumn. He suggested that that indicated that student fees were not working. First, Northern Ireland has an excellent record in attracting people from less-favoured backgrounds to higher education. In our universities, 41% of our students come from that general background, compared with 29% in Great Britain. Therein lies the answer to Mr Attwood's question. The reason that new measures are being introduced in GB is that it is not delivering to the same extent as we are.

Through the CSR, I have also secured an additional £500 for the grant, which, in the United Kingdom, is unique to Northern Ireland. The Department works with the universities, and its access agreements with them mean that students have access to bursaries that have been set at £300. Indeed, those agreements include a legal liability on the universities to pay those £300 bursaries. I am happy to say that both universities currently pay bursaries of £1,000, which I strongly support — but for how much longer will they pay that amount? Members must be careful about what they agree to today.

If today's motion were agreed, £2.5 million would be taken out of the universities' pockets on top of, unfortunately, the £3 million that they will not receive next year as a result of the CSR. At this stage, it appears that in year 1 of the CSR, the funding for higher

education will decrease by 5·2% in real terms, which is a substantial reduction, although it will pick up in subsequent years.

Mr Attwood said that the Assembly wanted to send out a “strong, clear message”. By agreeing the motion, we would send out a signal that the Assembly will continue to take money from the universities, and, moreover, will increase the amount that it takes. If Members were in the shoes of those who run the universities and were looking forward to the next two or three years, they might assume that that amount of money would be taken from them in future years as well. Members must be extremely careful.

The second area in which the motion would create an anomaly relates to students from Northern Ireland who study in England and Wales. They pay more towards the upkeep and success of the universities there than they would if they studied here. How large a loan will those students get to pay for that? My information is that the value of those students’ loans will be based on levels that have been set in Northern Ireland and that they may face a shortfall as a result. That must be examined more closely. We are sending out the wrong signals.

Everyone, including me, wants people from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate in higher education, not only because it is in the interests of the Northern Ireland economy, but for many other reasons, such as getting people out of poverty and ensuring that they are at no disadvantage. However, I fear that the motion is part of a haphazard approach that may pre-empt the review that I have already announced. We cannot send a message to the universities that we back them one minute yet take the money out of their pockets the next.

Mr Attwood expressed a fear that universities would increase their fees. A university becomes a member of the Russell Group by invitation rather than application. The Higher Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 set out the level of tuition fees until 2010. Thereafter, as fees will be the Assembly’s responsibility, and the universities will not be able to set fees unilaterally, Mr Attwood’s fear is unfounded.

Mr Attwood: The facts confirm the Minister’s statement that people from disadvantaged backgrounds in the North have greater access to universities than their counterparts in England. However, the Minister must address the fact that, following the introduction of tuition fees in England, in November 2007 DIUS began to reshape radically how people gain access to university in Britain. It increased to £25,000 the family-earning limit under which students receive a full grant, and it has found it necessary to increase the upper limit from £35,000 to over £60,000.

I suggest that those figures reveal that in England, where those from disadvantaged backgrounds have problems accessing university, the Government have

had to perform radical corrective surgery. On the basis of the inadequate tuition-fee strategy in Britain, it is reasonable to conclude that similar surgery will be required in the North.

Sir Reg Empey: I normally listen to Mr Attwood’s speeches with great care, but perhaps his timing belt is not quite right, or his fan belt is not in the correct position today, because the opposite is actually the case. He may not have listened to my previous answer. We are succeeding in Northern Ireland, with 41% of our university students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. By comparison, that figure is only 29% in England. Therefore, we have a success story to tell.

My departmental officials and I are examining the announcement that was made by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills. We are doing that in the context of the comprehensive spending review. I made some comprehensive spending review bids in that regard, but they were unsuccessful. The DIUS gave my Department one hour’s notice before it made its announcement, but the detail of what it will deliver is unclear. We should proceed in a logical manner through the review process, with a structure through which we can consider all the issues.

Paul Butler asked whether the review would be independent. An independent commission has been set up in England, responding to Parliament. We will examine that model to decide whether it will fit here. I want the review to be meaningful, and not merely a play-acting exercise. I have made that commitment to the Assembly and to the Committee on several occasions. We are creating anomalies by putting our students who study at universities in England and Wales at a disadvantage in the short term, against students who study here. Some £2·5 million has been taken from universities; therefore, they are no longer able to attract the highest-quality researchers.

Members said that that money should be taken from reserves, and that is fine if reserves exist. Our universities have no reserves to meet revenue deficits. Members must pay attention to the fact that universities are giving £1,000 bursaries to every student from a disadvantaged background. However, under the access agreements, they are only required to pay £300. We cannot force them to pay £1,000 — they are doing that voluntarily. It would be outrageous and a great shame — and it would have the opposite effect of what Members want — if they were to reduce that bursary to make up the losses that they would suffer from paying the fees. I am sure that is not what they intended. I do not believe that they intended to create the anomalies that will exist whereby students from Northern Ireland who study in England and Wales may face a shortfall in the loans that they will be able to acquire to pay their fees in England.

The current situation is a product of measures that have not been thought through in their entirety. Therefore, it is better to start the review, for the sake of a year. That review will be comprehensive, and it will deal with all of those issues, including the anomalies that are being created. It would be better for us to follow that course than to take a precipitative decision. The figures that were released this year do not sustain the argument that there has been a fall-off in access.

We will not find out the final figures until next month, but the indications are that the number of students at universities is increasing. That is good, considering that the cohort of 18-year-olds has dropped by 5.5% in Northern Ireland. We will have to analyse those figures closely when we receive them, but there is nothing to sustain the argument that freezing fees will increase access for people who are currently unable to get it.

The key thing that we must defend is the £500 differential in the maintenance grant that we have secured. We must ensure that the highest quality of university research and education is provided to drive our economy.

We must try to avoid the discrepancies and anomalies that exist between our students and those studying in the rest of the UK. As regards the announcement by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, I am reviewing all of those questions and will bring suggestions to Members in due course. Until the comprehensive spending review is complete, and I know how big the cake is, I am not in a position to determine the Department's internal priorities.

4.15 pm

With respect to PhDs and the other issues raised, I am consulting with the Minister of Finance and Personnel and his Department because there are funding issues that are outside the CSR process. Mr Attwood referred to the money from the Irish Government, of which I am acutely aware, as are my colleagues in DETI and in other Departments. We are constantly considering that money and have been in regular contact with the Irish Government and my two counterparts in Dublin. I hope to bring proposals to the House in due course.

Now is not the time to take unilateral action — it has not been thought through. Although I understand the concern and rationale behind what many are saying, at this stage the facts do not support them. It would be a terrible mistake to risk bursaries from universities — who are paying well above what they are legally obliged to — to save £70. That would be a perverse outcome. I urge the House to reject the motion.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank Members for taking part in the debate, which has been interesting in spite of only having been allotted 20 minutes in the indicative timings. I thank Sammy Wilson, who was up and down with so

many interventions that people got confused about who was speaking. That brought some humour to the debate.

I agree with those Members, and the Minister, who said that we should wait for the review. However, I disagree with those who said that fees should be increased until then. A balance must be struck. Two Members said that the motion was about headline grabbing. Anyone who knows me will know that that is not the case. The motion is about honouring manifesto commitments, which some Members should try to do.

In opposing the prayer of annulment, Basil McCrea gave his party's view. For the record, one of the Ulster Unionist representatives on the Committee for Employment and Learning supported my proposal in Committee, because he knew that the legislation was wrong but was in line with his party's policy on student fees.

Some Members said that maintenance grants are increasing, which I said at the start of the debate. However, the Department told the Committee that it could not match the increase in England, which caused us concern.

Some Members do not seem worried about financial implications when they are attacking other Ministers such as the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Whether Members sit back and say nothing or attack when others are trying to achieve goals seems to depend on which party holds the DFP portfolio.

Mr Spratt raised an issue about the position in Scotland, and Alistair Ross spoke about facts and figures. Instead of fees, for several years students in Scotland have had to pay a graduate endowment fee — for academic entrants this year that will be just under £2,300. Compare that to the bill of £9,000 that students here will face when they graduate after a three-year degree course. Some Members mentioned the lack of statistics on that: research in Scotland has shown a decrease in young Scots entering higher education from 51% in 2001-02 to 47% in 2005-06.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Member agree that, as the Minister said, the situation in Northern Ireland is not the same as that in Scotland, England and Wales? Northern Ireland leads the way in that 41% of its university students come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Evidence to date suggests that things are improving, although we are seeing a 5% drop in the cohort. Does the Member agree that the situation should be handled properly — as she said earlier — and that the advantages should be explored to help get the best possible outcome for everybody?

Ms S Ramsey: Absolutely; let us wait for the review, and not increase student fees. Let us get it right. I agree with the Minister: we should get it right from the start. A higher proportion of people live in disadvantaged areas here than in other regions, but the social profile

is very different. There is a higher proportion of our population in that category already, so let us see what facts and figures the research produces. Basil McCrea talked about parity, but such an issue is only raised on the Member's Benches when it suits him. I have some research from Scotland, and I want to read it into the record.

The proportion of young Scots in higher education has fallen from 51% in 2001-02 to 47% in 2005-06. The decision to withdraw the graduate endowment fee draws on research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2003, which showed that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are often deterred from entering and completing full-time education because of the economic hardship that they would suffer as a result of debt. Over the past five years, Scotland has monitored the proportion of young people from disadvantaged areas in higher education and decided that the abolition of the graduate endowment fee is a necessary step to increase the numbers coming from those backgrounds. Until the review is complete, we should hold off on increasing student fees.

Like Sammy Wilson and Alastair Ross, I looked at the report of the Assembly debate on this issue in November 2000. The DUP and the Ulster Unionists supported the call for tuition fees and means-tested grants to be scrapped. It was a former Member of the Assembly who brought the proposal on behalf of the Committee. The DUP and the Ulster Unionists called for fees to be scrapped — there is an issue of Members changing policy when it suits them.

Anna Lo mentioned the American model —

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Ms S Ramsey: I said earlier that Sammy Wilson had made a lot of interventions during the debate. I will not give way; I have put the jack-in-the-box to bed.

I agree with Anna Lo that we might end up with a two-tier system in which some universities attract students regardless of the fee, and others struggle. Some Members mentioned student debt. It is estimated that students leave university with debts between £12,000 and £20,000. Members talk about the housing market — how are students supposed to get on to the property ladder if they come out of university with debts of around £12,000 to £20,000?

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Ms S Ramsey: No, I will not give way. Sammy Wilson can jump up and down all day.

I thank the Minister for Employment and Learning for attending the debate; we have a good relationship outside of this one. *[Laughter.]*

The laughter of Members gives me time to find my last page. It is a pity that in the mouth of Christmas our relationship is going downhill; I might not get a present.

The Minister is right that the outcome of the review is being pre-empted by the proposal before the House. I believe that increasing student fees — regardless of whether it is in line with inflation — is pre-empting the outcome of the review. The debate has shown that the quicker that review gets under way, the better, but I am disappointed that we did not get more details on it. Further to Paul Butler's comments, the review should be as independent, transparent and open as possible.

I thank Members for taking part in the debate, and I thank the Minister for attending. I urge Members to support the motion.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 39; Noes 51.

AYES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, 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 Doherty, Mr Durkan, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Maskey, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Butler and Ms J McCann.

NOES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Burnside, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Armstrong and Mr Kennedy.

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr S Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Were there any apologies from the Members opposite who absented themselves during the Division, or was it simply the case that the parties opposite

wanted to have their cake and eat it — to oppose the regulations, but ensure that they went through?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order, and I am sure that Mr Wilson would not expect me to comment on it.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. On 5 December, I had occasion to submit to three Ministers a question for priority written answer concerning a statement issued by the Minister of Education on 4 December. In order for me to raise the matter during questions to the First Minister, and because there is a debate on the topic tomorrow, it was important for me to receive the responses within two days. Two of the three Ministers to whom I submitted a question for priority written answer did not respond, and the one response that I did receive arrived too late, which meant that it was useless to me.

Mr Deputy Speaker, will you make a ruling on how this regrettable state of affairs might be resolved?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That matter has been raised with the Speaker, who has asked his officials to investigate. If the Member raises that issue with the Speaker outside the Chamber, I am sure that he will respond.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Delivering Choice for the Terminally Ill

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 are called to speak will have five minutes.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern that 75% of terminally ill people in Northern Ireland are unable to die in the place of their choice, whether in their own home or the home of a family member; and that many terminally ill people are admitted to hospital on multiple occasions, unnecessarily, during the final weeks of life, causing stress to their families and carers; welcomes the positive results emerging from the Delivering Choice Programme which Marie Curie Cancer Care has operated in Great Britain; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide the necessary resources for a pilot programme aimed at ensuring that patients, and their carers, receive the necessary support throughout the palliative care period.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I wish to thank the hospice movement and Marie Curie Cancer Care, in particular, for allowing us, after a series of meetings, to bring forward the motion on their behalf. We sought this debate with deep concern, in the knowledge that terminally ill people will continue to be unable to die in their place of choice unless action is taken soon.

In the North of Ireland, 3,959 deaths a year occur due to cancer, and it is noted that, of the 64% of terminally ill people who chose to die at home, only 25% are able to do so. We desperately need a programme, such as Delivering Choice, to address that inequality and to pioneer a new approach to the provision of palliative care for terminally ill people that will make the wish to die at home a reality.

The motion originated after the success of the Delivering Choice pilot project, which was launched in October 2004 in Lincolnshire. Now, well into its third phase, that project has gone to great lengths to improve provision so that greater choice can be extended to a wide range of terminally ill patients who wish to die at home. Following the pilot scheme's success, the Delivering Choice programme has been rolled out to four more areas in Britain. It is hoped that such a project could be introduced here, and I thank the Business Committee for providing the opportunity to debate the issue.

As Members know, cancer is a difficult disease to live or cope with. There is no doubt that the introduction of the Delivering Choice scheme would relieve the incredible pressures on individuals who suffer from that illness and their families. At this stage, I appeal to any Members who have suffered from cancer, or who have ever known a person — whether a friend or loved one — who has suffered from cancer, to take a moment

to think about the differences that the Delivering Choice programme would make. Such a programme would deliver palliative care across all communities.

As many Members may be aware, Marie Curie Cancer Care is a leading charity, which, although specialising in cancer care, provides care to people suffering from life-limiting illnesses. Following its inception in 1948, the organisation was given charitable status in 1952 and has since gone from strength to strength. The first hospice centre was established in Belfast in 1965, and, undoubtedly, it has been a fantastic help to families across the North who have had to deal with cancer. Therefore, Marie Curie Cancer Care has earned a reputation as an organisation that delivers to those in most need. Its past successes include the completion of the Living Rooms appeal, which funded a £3 million hospice redevelopment that included accommodation for 18 patients, 16 newbuild single rooms and one double room, each with en suite facilities and a spare bed to allow a relative to stay overnight.

The Delivering Choice programme goes one step further, and the introduction of such a programme here would vastly improve the Belfast hospice's ability to provide palliative care across the whole of the North, giving people here the choice of a home death.

I am pleased to announce that, over the past few months, representatives of Marie Curie Cancer Care met several MLAs in a bid to secure cross-party support for this motion. I understand that those meetings were very successful and that the comments received were constructive and hugely positive with regard to support for the motion.

I remind Members that the majority of terminally ill individuals are unaware that they have a choice about where they die.

Professionals are often reluctant to support end-of-life home care, and services are often not sufficiently well developed to ensure that patients can be cared for safely in the community. If people genuinely want to die at home, the individual and their families should have access to the services needed to make that feasible.

4.45 pm

According to research findings from the King's Fund, the Lincolnshire pilot programme allowed for a rise from 17% to 42% in the number of home deaths. I am confident that the introduction of a Delivering Choice programme here would provide the support needed to enhance the organisation of those services and would increase the provision for nursing-at-home services, which will enable more terminally patients and their families to make their wish to die at home a reality.

Members should be comforted by the fact that, after the service remodelling that would take place as part of the Delivering Choice programme, terminally ill patients

who choose to die at home will receive the same outstanding standard of care as they would have if they were in hospital.

In the Lincolnshire pilot programme, 66% of terminally ill patients expressed a desire to be cared for at home, even if they required complex palliative care. Not only is a home death the preferred option but patients who are cared for at home, or by specialist palliative care teams, have received similar or better symptom and pain control, and a better physical quality of life, than those who received conventional hospital care.

In addition to those social benefits, the Delivering Choice programme offers numerous economic benefits. Some financially pressed localities may argue that we cannot afford to invest in a specialised palliative care programme that supports an individual's right to die. However, it has been shown in places such as Italy, Spain and across the United States that spending in that area would release funds that could be used elsewhere in the NHS and would ultimately relieve financial pressures, particularly in hospitals.

Research has also shown that individuals who spend the last fortnight of their lives in hospital may be estimated to require approximately £4,200 worth of services compared with a spending of £2,500 for an intensive community support package for the same period of time.

Marie Curie Cancer Care is undertaking economic research to realise the precise extent of such savings and believes that, in the medium to long term, for every £1 invested, £2 will be released to go towards hospital services. The Delivering Choice programme also goes some way to addressing the issue of ambulance hours, hospital waiting lists and bed-blocking issues, of which I am sure that all Members are aware.

The Delivering Choice programme offers rapid response as an essential component. Poor access to palliative care services, such as 24-hour nursing and Marie Curie nursing services in certain localities, makes it likely that critical situations will arise that cannot be handled by the carer. Access to crisis care at any time of the day — particularly out of hours — is therefore crucial to avoid the escalation of symptoms that might otherwise lead to emergency admission.

In the Lincolnshire pilot programme, the rapid response team prevented more than 550 unnecessary hospital admissions in the first year of its implementation. Not only does that help to achieve the wish of the patient but it helps to ensure that ambulance hours are not wasted. Furthermore, it ensures that approximately 3,000 occupied hospital beds are freed up — a monetary saving of £90,000 in the acute sector.

In conclusion, a LeasCheann Comhairle, the £50,000 that has already been committed and allocated to the

Northern Ireland Cancer Network (NICaN) is welcome. However, further financial support is needed to sustain the project for three years. In the North, the programme will cost £150,000 annually for phase 1 and phase 2 of the pilot project, which will develop into a three-year programme. The initial work will be to identify the level of need in a local area and to map out current service provision. New services will then be designed and implemented to address any gaps.

I ask all Members to support the motion and to support the need to commit funds to support the Delivering Choice programme. In anticipation, I thank Members for that support. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): I support the motion, and I congratulate Carál on securing the debate. I also place on record my sincere gratitude for the outstanding work that Marie Curie Cancer Care does in delivering front-line services for palliative care.

Increasing the availability of palliative-care services at home fits with the general thrust of directing services away from acute hospitals and into the community. At the start of the decade, 'The NHS Cancer Plan: a Plan for Investment, a Plan for Reform' acknowledged that support for patients with advanced cancer who live at home is sometimes poorly co-ordinated and may not be available 24 hours a day.

The Preferred Place of Care initiative was introduced across the water, and through that plan, a patient-held record follows the patient on his or her path of care into the variety of health- and social-care settings that are available. It records a family profile and carer's needs; the patient's thoughts about their care; their choices and preferences; services that are available and that the patient is accessing in their locality; and changes in care needs.

By placing the patient at the centre of the care plan, autonomy and control are maximised, and many patients perceive that those have been taken away from them during the terminal stages of disease. A plan of that nature avoids the situation, for instance, where an out-of-hours GP, who does not know the patient well, admits them to hospital without realising that it is their preference to remain at home. That can lead to significant adverse effects on relatives, such as regret and guilt, if the patient does not ultimately have the opportunity to die at home.

There is also an economic argument for refashioning services. Reducing hospital admissions and enabling patients to decide to die at home can reduce financial costs to the NHS and, as has already been said, improve the quality of life for patients and carers.

Some studies have indicated that every extra £1 that is invested in hospice care at home can release £2 in

hospital services. Dr Keri Thomas, in the introduction to 'The Gold Standards Framework: A Programme for Community Palliative Care' stated:

"Caring for the dying... is a measure of our success, not our failure as healthcare professionals."

She went on to say:

"palliative care represents the best of all medical care, bringing together the clinical, holistic and human dimensions of primary care".

The 2003 Department of Health paper, 'Building on the Best: Choice, Responsiveness and Equity in the NHS' accepts that if people genuinely want to die at home, they and their families should have access to the services that are needed to make that possible.

Palliative care must be more readily accessible. It continues to be financed, to a large extent, by the charitable sector. There are marked geographical variations in its provision across the UK. Marie Curie Cancer Care has suggested that it is unable to provide for 30% of those who seek its home-care services. However, there is a long history of excellent palliative care in the United Kingdom. That must be expanded and restructured to ensure that as many of those who wish to die at home have the opportunity to do so.

Occasional demands for assisted suicide tend to acquire a high profile, but they are the exception. The vast majority of people dying in the United Kingdom, even from diseases such as motor neuron disease (MND), do not want assisted dying. The 1,000 MND patients who die annually in the UK in the main do so comfortably and with good palliative care.

Approximately 95% of people using hospice or palliative care have cancer. Some 300,000 people with other terminal illnesses are prevented from benefiting from that care on account of their conditions.

It is essential that we restructure and improve end-of-life care to meet the needs of our aging population. Some foolishly imagine that the skills that are required for that crucial work cannot be learned and that they occur naturally. However, communication-skills training for healthcare staff releases them from avoidance behaviours that have been acquired through their cultural upbringing and from the innate fear of death that is present in everyone.

Only then can they be genuinely warm and supportive and able to interpret the complex physical and psychological interactions in their patients.

Those involved in palliative care deserve our highest praise. I support the motion.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I join other Members in welcoming the motion. The care of patients must always be at the heart of the Health Service; without that guiding principle, it becomes a matter of simple economics, which leaves the patient aside. That principle must apply to the palliative care of terminally ill patients, just as it

applies to waiting lists and hospital cleanliness. Patient care must not be simply an objective of the Health Service: it must be an intrinsic part of its culture.

Of all Departments, the Department of Health, Social Service and Public Safety touches areas to which no easy cost can be affixed, and the care of terminally ill patients is one such area. However, the use of robust health economics models for the home-based management of terminal illness has begun in the public domain. The Sheffield School of Health and Related Research was commissioned to develop such a model in 2003. Evidence from the USA, Spain and Italy suggests that a home-based terminal model may lead to cost savings.

For that reason, the Minister should consider the commission of his own study to establish the real situation and to create financial and health economics models to address it. Too many of the available studies relate to outside the UK, let alone Northern Ireland.

Almost £400 million is spent on palliative care in England. We must establish the overall figure for Northern Ireland to give a ballpark figure to work towards; within that provision there is a broad range of services to consider. The indications are that the uncoded value of informal carer inputs to the system is approximately £2,500 per carer.

Much has been said in admiration of the work of the Marie Curie nursing service. I, too, praise those who have gone into that service in order that people who are terminally ill may be cared for properly; I also take into account the contribution of many family members. Marie Curie Cancer Care estimated that end-of-life care at home would double its existing spend; a fact that may give us a handle on what is involved.

Whatever the facts, they will be satisfactorily collated only by a specialist ministerial working party that will give us real, practical and logical figures from which to work.

Of one thing we may be sure: we must always take into account the wishes of those who are coming to the end of the journey of life. In my experience in another life, I found that one of the things that touched me most was the despair that one sees sometimes in a hospital bed in a patient who cannot be at home among family to end the journey of life. With that in mind, I fully support the call for a pilot study so that we can put the care of the patient and the family first and ensure that a person who is coming to the end of their life is given some peace of mind and good care.

Mrs Hanna: I support the motion, and I thank Carál Ní Chuilín for tabling it.

Dignity, family support, and more choice between hospice and home care for terminally ill patients are issues of concern. More attention must be paid to the needs and wishes of patients who have terminal illness

and how those might influence the end-of-life treatment considerations for them and their caregivers.

I want to praise all of the good work that is being done by the Northern Ireland Hospice, Marie Curie Cancer Care and, of course, the family support that helps to bring all of that sensitive care together.

5.00 pm

In my experience of nursing patients and several of my own relatives who had terminal illness, equality of treatment is essential. The utmost support should be offered. Giving care at home can be particularly challenging, especially when mental ill health is present as we have been told by the relatives of people who have Alzheimer's disease. Although there are many variations in end-of-life experiences, the vast majority of patients and carers want to speak to a healthcare professional when they must make distressing choices as a person approaches the end of his or her life. That advice and help must be available to all who ask for it. It is particularly important that choice, and as much information as possible, are offered in a positive manner.

The patient's journey, and the experience of the family and friends who care for that person, is of the utmost importance. The rapidity of illness can result in some patients and caregivers having to adjust their lives significantly over a short period of time whereas a longer period of palliative care may be required for patients with terminal cancer. Carers looking after such patients and, indeed, those who have reached old age, may have different and more long-term needs and requirements.

Regardless of a patient's circumstances, the need for advanced planning to avoid inappropriate management and, in particular, unnecessary admissions to hospital is extremely important. The role of the primary carer must be strengthened in order to provide him or her with the knowledge and the expertise to apply appropriate end-of-life care and, in particular, a heightened awareness of the sensitivity, dignity and respect that is needed at that time.

Many patients who are nearing the end of their lives convey fears of the loss of independence and dignity, as well as expressing feelings of being a burden on family and friends. Many patients believe that pain is more frightening than the fear of death, especially when suffering from long-term illness. Healthcare professionals do not deal well with pain. That issue needs particular attention.

Members have referred to the first pilot — the Marie Curie Delivering Choice programme. I welcome the Minister's comments on the possibility that the scheme could be piloted in Northern Ireland. It makes economic sense to reduce the number of admissions to acute hospitals and, crucially, it gives patients more choice.

Good communication between patients and their general practitioners is absolutely essential. GPs need appropriate training in order to continue the service. With a more holistic approach, the highest possible quality of care can be reached. An important part of good palliative care is, as I have mentioned, the control of pain. If a good community-based approach is taken, without unnecessary and expensive hospital stays and insufficient treatment time, the dignity, family support and choice that should be available for all patients will be ensured.

Mr McCarthy: I thank Carál Ní Chuilín for bringing this important issue to the House. I want to put on record the Alliance Party's thanks and appreciation to all of those organisations who carry out such excellent service, not only to people who are in the final stages of their lives, but also to their families and carers during a stressful time. I also want to express my appreciation that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is present in the Chamber.

On the Order Paper, the motion is headed:

"Delivering Choice for the Terminally Ill".

That wording is most appropriate, because this issue must be acknowledged for what it is. Most of us spend our lives making choices in all sorts of ways. Choice is recognised as part of a civilised and democratic society, and that is all the more reason why people should be given a choice — as far as humanly possible — when they reach the end of their lives.

It is estimated that, when the end of their lives is near, the majority of people wish to be at home with their families. However, that is sometimes impossible because of the nature of their illness. We must all ensure that patients are given every care and attention right up to the end of their lives, regardless of where those patients might be.

The Delivering Choice programme, which was introduced across the water by Marie Curie Cancer Care, has been successful. That being the case, Assembly Members wish to see the same programme being introduced across Northern Ireland. I had the pleasure of meeting officials from Marie Curie Cancer Care recently. Those officials, with their vast knowledge and experience, believe that much work remains to be done. They hope to secure the Assembly's support to further the aims of their group, on behalf of our entire community.

We are often reminded about the huge cost to the Health Service of admitting patients to hospital. Here is an opportunity for the Department to invest a small amount of money that will produce massive savings in the long run. At the same time, such investment will provide the patient and his or her family with what they require. That can be done only in conjunction with the local organisations who are experts in that field. Once again, I pay tribute to their work, dedication

and vital assistance to all concerned at a critical time for all of our people.

The Marie Curie Delivering Choice programme, which has been in operation in Lincolnshire, clearly proves that it represents value for money and recognises the wishes of the patients and their carers. Approximately 42% of patients were able to pass away in their own homes. Deaths in hospitals were reduced to 45% and the cost of caring for terminally ill patients fell by 8%. Those are the facts. I hope that the Minister acknowledges those results. The highly eminent Professor Mike Richards has said that the results:

"demonstrate that close partnership working between the NHS and the voluntary sector can give major benefits for patients at the end of their lives, and can be cost effective."

Let us move forward together and, for a little investment, the rewards can be high. I support the motion.

Mr Easton: I am sure that almost everyone in the House has direct experience of the death of a close family member or loved one. Some Members may be dealing, currently, with the impact of that situation. Whether death comes suddenly and unexpectedly, or at the end of a long, terminal illness, its impact is devastating and traumatic for the family. In the case of terminal illness, the pressure on family and carers can be prolonged and difficult, particularly if it involves repeated admissions to hospital as the health of the patient declines. The additional stress that that creates for the person who is dying, and for his or her family, is easily imagined and understood.

In Northern Ireland, we are extremely fortunate to have the Marie Curie Cancer Care organisation. Its work, dedication and commitment to the terminally ill in our community has provided enormous support to families, and allowed many people to die with dignity while surrounded by the most skilled and sensitive nursing and medical care. More than 200 Marie Curie nurses, across the Province, provide daily care for terminally ill in the place of their choice. That care is funded in part by the Government — and also by major charitable support — and is free of charge to patients and their families. The Minister is well aware of the work that is done at the Marie Curie hospice in east Belfast where care for terminally ill patients includes inpatient and outpatient care, day therapy, home nursing and residential space for family members.

I am sure that the Minister is also aware of the Marie Curie Delivering Choice programme, which aims to develop and provide the best possible service for all palliative care patients, allowing them to be cared for in the place of their choice. That includes the provision of totally free, high-quality specialised nursing, so that all terminally ill patients can have the choice to die at home, supported by their families.

Central to this charitable thinking is the view that the right to a good death is fundamental, and that patients have the right to choose their place of care and their place of death. Research shows that given the appropriate conditions and level of support two out of every three people would choose to die in their own home. Sadly, that happens for only 25% of those who express such a wish. I am sure that most of us, when faced with the knowledge that we are terminally ill and given time to reflect, would want to reduce the pain and stress to our families. We would hope to be able to make a free choice about where our lives would come to an end.

The Marie Curie Delivering Choice programme was initiated in 2004, with the objective of providing services that would enable patients to make an informed choice regarding their place of treatment and eventual death. The programme already operates in several locations on the mainland and seeks to achieve its objectives through improved planning and co-ordination, and through the uptake of existing local services. It works with local organisations to apply best-practice in healthcare and social care.

In that context, palliative care in the community can become a genuine option, reducing the level of treatment and deaths in hospitals and increasing the levels of community care. It may have some additional outcomes, such as reducing the demand for hospital beds for critically ill patients and reducing the stress placed on those working at full stretch in the hospitals as they nurse and minister to patients who are close to death.

The project has three objectives: first, to develop patient-focused, round-the-clock models of palliative care that serve the local need; second, to assess and evaluate the economic impact on healthcare services of more people receiving such care at home as opposed to in hospital, and third, to disseminate its findings to other health and social care providers across the UK so that the need and hopes of the terminally ill, and their carers, can be met. Initial reports are positive and very encouraging.

I join with other Members in calling on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide the necessary resources for a pilot programme aimed at ensuring patients and carers receive the necessary support through the palliative care process. We must all work towards the day when all palliative care patients in Northern Ireland can make the choice to die at home, and we must ensure that that wish will be supported and resourced by the Government. I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: I also support the motion. I am sure that there is no one in this Assembly whose life has not been affected by the suffering or loss of a loved one, whether it a close family friend or a relative. It is estimated that one in three people will either suffer from cancer or lose an immediate relative to the illness. It is

a horrible fact that every year 4,000 people in the Province die of cancer. It can, and does, strike any of us and it does not respect creed, colour, sex or age.

On 8 May, the Assembly was restored, yet the day was tinged with a sense of sadness, as one of our esteemed colleagues, George Dawson, lost his battle with cancer only the night before. George was a great family man and a great constituency man, and his loss is still felt within our ranks. George was one of those who were able to die at home.

It is estimated that 64% of people wish to die at home, and yet only 25% achieve their wish. None of us is under the illusion that there need be no budgetary restrictions. However, the question that I posed was; how much does it cost to give a dying person their wish? I looked into Marie Curie's Delivering Choice programme, and, while I hate to reduce this issue to one as basic as money, I was surprised to learn that to spend the last two weeks of life in a specialised palliative care centre in hospital would cost the Health Service £4,200, yet the Delivering Choice programme costs only £2,500. So the question now is; how we can refuse to put in place a programme that is cost effective and gives patients what they want? The programme scores on both points. Not only is the final wish of the patient and the family addressed, which is the prime concern, but beds are also freed up in hospitals. That means smaller waiting lists, and, hopefully, an end to people lying on trolleys in the accident and emergency unit for days at a time, as has happened on many occasions in the constituency that I represent.

One of the regions that tested the scheme discovered that, on average, 550 unnecessary hospital admissions were saved in the first year of the tests, and 3,000 bed places were saved in the same period for admissions that had usually been taken up by the sufferers of end-stage cancer.

5.15 pm

The care of those who made use of the programme in the test areas was found to be of a higher and more dedicated standard than that found in the local hospital. That is in no way a reflection or a judgement of the level of care offered by the hospitals. Hospital staff do a brilliant job in the circumstances, yet dedicated home care has been proved to be better, not only for the patients' peace of mind and the stress levels of their families, but also for the more efficient running of the health system.

Marie Curie Cancer Care is well known for aiding the families of people with cancer. The support and guidance it offers cannot be commended highly enough. Many of my constituents have praised its input and have told me that they could not have coped without the Marie Curie scheme. The Delivering Choice programme is yet another way in which Marie Curie Cancer Care provides the best and most effective care

for patients and their families. The programme aims to improve the planning, co-ordination and uptake of existing local services in partnership with local organisations in order to apply best practice in health and social care. They want to work with the healthcare system to achieve the best for everyone concerned.

There are, of course, those who have no desire to die at home. The choice of hospital care should always be available to those families who are unable to cope with the death of a loved one under their roof. However, the option offered by groups like Marie Curie Cancer Care should be provided for those who wish to die at home. For that reason I urge the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to work with Marie Curie Cancer Care in order to introduce the Delivering Choice programme to Northern Ireland. Nothing can take away the pain and the frustration caused by watching a loved one die, but there are ways to ease the strain. By backing the Marie Curie Cancer Care scheme, we can show our support for those who need it most.

I ask that a pilot scheme similar to the five schemes operating on the mainland be implemented in the Province to assist those who suffer and those who watch their loved ones' lives slip away. Let us do what we can, and offer this option. I commend the motion and ask Members to support it.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the motion and thank Carál Ní Chuilín for proposing it. The tone of the debate suggests that there is widespread support for motion. Unfortunately, many Members have had some personal experience of this matter. It is an extremely thought-provoking and sensitive debate, and raises matters that are of great importance to the people we represent.

The motion states that:

"many terminally ill people are admitted to hospital on multiple occasions, unnecessarily, during the final weeks of life, causing stress to their families and carers".

It is imperative that we find a way to limit the stress and heartache felt by people who have to endure and cope with a loved one who is seriously ill. It is accepted by health professionals, cancer sufferers and the families of those who are ill that home is the best place to spend the closing days of an individual's life. However, according to a 2004 Marie Curie Cancer Care survey, the biggest perceived practical obstacles to dying at home are the time constraints and physical pressure that it puts on family members and friends. The survey also noted that half the respondents felt incompetent to provide care to a dying relative. It was felt that the help of a nurse would considerably ease that pressure.

Although hospital admissions at the end of life can, on occasion, be vital, there are considerable concerns that a significant proportion of admissions are the result of poorly co-ordinated or otherwise inadequate palliative and supportive care services available at

home, which lead to problems such as poor symptom control and carer fatigue.

Beginning in March 2004 in England, Marie Curie Cancer Care launched its Supporting the Choice to Die at Home campaign. The launch came close to the publication of results from a YouGov study, which stated that 64% of people would choose to die at home if they had a terminal illness. Only 25% of cancer patients are able to do so. The campaign aimed to double the number of patients who have the choice to die at home. Marie Curie Cancer Care drew its economic conclusions from a University of London opinion paper, which demonstrated that to double the number of patients cared for at home in England alone would cost up to £75 million.

As other Members have mentioned, it is important that we, as an Assembly, acknowledge and pay tribute to the vital role played by the Northern Ireland Hospice, which provides help and support to cancer sufferers and their families in the closing days of life, one of the most difficult and agonising times for any family and close friends. We owe a great debt of gratitude to the Northern Ireland Hospice and Marie Curie Cancer Care, and I am sure that the House will support that sentiment.

In response to the wishes of patients, the hospice-at-home nursing service provides nursing care to patients who would prefer to spend their last days in familiar surroundings at home. It offers practical nursing care, day and night, in the patient's own home. The most common need is to give exhausted carers a break, especially when the patient's condition deteriorates rapidly or when distressing symptoms are difficult to control.

I thank the proposer for bringing this worthwhile motion to the House and look forward to hearing the Minister's response. At such a difficult stage for families, it is one of the most important issues to get right as it can leave a great legacy for families as they try to get over a truly awful period in their lives.

I support the motion.

Mrs M Bradley: To care for and watch a family member clinging to life is a heart-wrenching trial for anyone. Such an experience is loaded with stress and emotion, and sometimes it can also be a character-building experience that, at the time, does not appear to be so. Only families who have made that journey with their loved one can fully understand and appreciate the value of having the professional help to allow the sufferer to die at home and with dignity, surrounded by family and friends.

At one stage or another throughout life, I am sure that we have all been touched and have witnessed the death of a family member or friend from the awful effects of a terminal illness. I can recount numerous stories from my constituents, who are at great pains to tell me of the help and care that they received from the

hospice nurses and the Marie Curie nurses. The nurses visited daily, for perhaps an hour in the early stages of the experience and for hours on end in the latter stages, and carried out shifts so that the patient and the family were accompanied and comforted throughout. Those families could never have survived, either physically or emotionally, with the pressures involved in providing freedom of choice and the comfort of home, without the help and emotional support that they received from the nurses.

In this day and age, the world of medicine is such that we are more fortunate than ever before as more and more cancers are curable. However, the choice, life and dignity of people who are unfortunate enough to receive a terminal diagnosis must be respected at all times. Their wishes must be delivered to the best of our health providers' ability. I am sure that many of our constituents will find some form of comfort in the fact that we are debating an issue that for many years was ignored as the fight to find cures and raise funding for research was paramount in the minds of social-health providers. That area of research must not be allowed to suffer, just as the help and care necessary for the delivery of a dignified death must not be sacrificed.

The two should be justly and appropriately funded and receive equal priority in the health budget: it should not be a choice between one and the other.

Now that we are supposed to be in a new political era, there is a huge amount of ground to cover to catch up with the rest of Europe's policies on providing care at home. People should be able to choose where they die. Such freedom of choice should, and must, be applied across the entire Programme for Government.

I am proud to state that my Foyle constituency is blessed with a former GP whose vision — many years ago, I should add — was to deliver exactly what is being debated here today. The motto on the Foyle Hospice website is:

"Even when days can't be added to life Foyle Hospice aims to ensure that life is added to days."

The hospice delivers a daily programme of care to those who wish to stay at home and operates an in-house programme for those unable to do so. Those services, added to its provision of a respite facility and day care, make Foyle Hospice one of the most popular health facilities in Northern Ireland. However, it is run almost entirely through donations and fundraising. Such funding is outdated and must be supplemented by health providers, and I am sure that many similar facilities also require Government funding. I urge the Minister, in considering the motion carefully, to apply lateral thinking across all the health boards.

The ethos of caring for the dying at home is an old one. I recall, in my youth, countless grandmothers and grandfathers who were cared for in their ailing years

and dying days by their families. Today, agencies such as Marie Curie Cancer Care and the hospices care for both the patients and the emotional well-being of the families.

I ask the Minister to accept the Assembly's call for appropriate funding. What he gives in monetary terms will determine the quality of those added days for terminally ill patients. They deserve the finest care and the utmost dignity in their final weeks, days and hours. I welcome and support the motion.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Facing up to the challenge of being diagnosed with a terminal illness is a daunting and frightening prospect for individuals and their families and friends. Of the 14,000 people who die in Northern Ireland each year, 4,000 require specialist palliative care, such as hospital or hospice services. Many others suffer from life-limiting illnesses and could be cared for in the community, but currently are not. Surveys show that 56% of people would prefer a home death, but only 25% die at home. Generally, that is because the appropriate services are not available to support the patients and their relatives and carers.

Today, I announce the development of a regional model for supportive and palliative care across Northern Ireland. Its aim is to provide people with choices as to where to spend their final precious days. Society has a duty to provide the best possible care and support for those affected by such illnesses. I have spoken to carers and patients about the support they receive and how services can be improved. Their clear message has been that every effort must be made to help people spend precious time with their families at the end of their lives.

The diagnosis of a family member or friend with a life-limiting or terminal illness is an emotive subject, and one that has directly affected many in the House. To any individual who receives such a diagnosis, dignity means choosing how to manage that illness. That should be a right, not a privilege.

Help for carers must be an essential element of the service provided. To look after a dying loved one is difficult and stressful and, therefore, carers must have access to respite care. Hospital care should be easily accessible to those who require it, but the aim should be to return patients to their homes as soon as possible. Their care can continue there, which is where they want to be. By keeping access to all those services open, the burden on carers and patients is reduced.

In today's motion, concern is expressed:

"that 75% of terminally ill people in Northern Ireland are unable to die in the place of their choice".

That is not where we want to be. I want to ensure that the wishes of the patients and their families are paramount.

5.30 pm

In recent years, there has been progress in the care of people with terminal and life-limiting illnesses. Some actions include improved training in palliative care for staff who work in the community, and enhanced care packages to support people. Macmillan facilitators are now in place to train and support GPs. Rapid-response and 24-hour nursing teams have been established, and healthcare professionals have undergone training in breaking bad news. Many trusts have provided education and training for staff in nursing homes, and some have attached district nurses to nursing homes to care for people in the final stages of their illnesses.

I want to build on the excellent work that has been developed to date. As well as providing high-quality care, I want to ensure that patients are fully informed and involved in decisions about their care. To deliver on that, the Department has been liaising with the Northern Ireland Cancer Network (NICaN) and others in the health and social care field to inform our policy on palliative care. I have asked the four boards to work with NICaN and the University of Ulster to develop a regional model for palliative care to provide quality, comprehensive, consistent services across Northern Ireland. The new model must ensure that future services are responsive to the needs of patients, carers and their families.

We must determine the demand for additional care; then we will be better equipped to respond and to ensure that those who choose to spend their final weeks of life at home can do so. We must ensure that we have appropriate staff and expertise in local communities so that standards of care are maintained and more people can be supported safely at home.

We must learn from organisations such as Northern Ireland Hospice Care, Newry and Foyle Hospices, Macmillan Cancer and Marie Curie Cancer Care, which have wide-ranging experience in supportive and palliative care.

A vital element of the project will include consultation with people living with a terminal illness and learning from the experiences faced by patients, families and carers. The project will also work in partnership with the excellent Marie Curie Delivering Choice programme to share learning and experience. To date, my Department has contributed £50,000 towards the development of the model. I anticipate that it will be in place and piloted during 2008-09, and the project team will report back to me with recommendations by the end of 2009.

The project will include an assessment of need and the implications of providing a model across the whole of Northern Ireland for all terminal conditions. My Department is currently developing best-practice standards for palliative care. Those standards will ensure that patients are correctly identified, that services

are designed around their needs, and that they, their families and carers are given the physical, emotional, social, financial and spiritual support that they need. As work begins to develop this vital model, there is much that can be taken forward in the meantime.

In order to properly deliver services in the community, we must continue to develop a dynamic and integrated primary-care service. Providing healthcare that is closer to a patient's home and is more responsive to their needs and expectations is the key to the future delivery of health services. Patients must be at the core of service delivery. They must have a greater say in how that care is delivered and be empowered to make informed choices.

People with life-limiting and terminal illnesses deserve the same levels of choices as others in respect of their care, particularly about where they spend the last days of their lives, based on their needs and wishes, and considerations for their families and carers.

I have tremendous admiration for those who have been at the forefront of planning and developing supportive and palliative care services, be they in the statutory or voluntary and community sector. I want to ensure that all those with a terminal illness are afforded the best possible care and support, so that they can make the most of every minute they have left with their loved ones.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend my colleague Carál Ní Chuilín for bringing the motion before the House. I also thank the Minister for attending and everyone who contributed to the debate — it has been very positive.

The Delivering Choice programme aims to make it possible for terminally ill patients to die in their place of choice. A number of contributors stated that although 64% of the population would choose to die at home if given the option, only 25% are able to do so. Most people will die in hospital because the decision is taken out of their hands and because there is no support system to make it possible for them to die at home. When people are dying, they have very little control over what is happening to them, therefore anything that enables them to choose where they wish to die must be welcomed and encouraged, and all of the contributors have agreed with that.

Several projects across England are aiming to make it possible for people to choose to die in their own home. The projects provide the appropriate support for those who are dying and their family and carers — it was earlier called the holistic approach. Such projects have one common theme: that the main focus is on the person who is dying, their family and their carers.

Guidelines produced by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) recommend that professionals identify the needs of people who are

dying. One way to do that is through a care model such as the Lincolnshire project, which other contributors referred to. There is also a Liverpool care model that covers all aspects of care, including: keeping the patient comfortable by controlling symptoms; when to prescribe certain drugs to prevent symptoms; when to discontinue certain treatments and aspects of care; psychological and spiritual support; and support for the family. The idea behind the care plans is to care for all dying people in the same way, regardless of whether they are receiving treatment in hospital, in a hospice or at home.

I am grateful for the support outlined for all the organisations that provide support services to people and their families such as Marie Curie Cancer Care, Northern Ireland Hospice Care, Macmillan nurses — and GPs, who are often the first point of contact for families and patients. All of those groups alleviate anxiety and stress to patients and carers by offering practical help, respite and comfort. They offer an essential service and are mainly funded through — as Mrs Iris Robinson said — voluntary donations. As a society, we owe a huge debt of gratitude to the work of Marie Curie Cancer Care and the other organisations that I mentioned.

A significant proportion of hospital admissions at the end of life are due to poorly co-ordinated or inadequate palliative care and support-care services at home. That is unacceptable and must be remedied urgently.

Enabling patients to decide to die at home can reduce financial cost to the Health Service, as other Members have said. As Jim Shannon said, one does not want to be crass by comparing human suffering with economic cost. However, the figures are glaring and are something that the Department must be mindful of.

As Iris Robinson and Rev Dr Coulter stated, in the medium to long term every extra pound invested in the provision of care at home will release £2 in hospital services. However, savings will not be apparent until a large number of admissions is avoided, which is why I welcome the Minister's announcement of a regional focus to ensure that, regardless of where someone lives, there will be equal access to palliative care services across the North. That is something that has not been looked at for far too long.

Most Members know someone who has died due to cancer. The question is whether that person was given the choice about where they died or whether the decision was made for them due to insufficient services. If appropriate support structures existed to enable a dying person to choose to die at home, I have no doubt that a lot more people would take up that option and choose to die in the comfort of their home surrounded by their family and loved ones.

The rights of the person who is dying must dictate the care that he or she receives, which many Members have said. There is a common thread of opinion about choice, the right to a dignified death, and the necessity of advance planning to prevent unnecessary hospital admissions.

Members talked about the economic case and the need for an holistic approach to be adopted.

I thank the Minister for his announcement on the regional model of supportive and palliative care for those with cancer or life-limiting illnesses, and I welcome his comment on choice's being a right and not a privilege. The Minister also said that the patient's wishes and those of his or her family should be paramount, and that is necessary. I am grateful that he plans to consult with families and carers in order to take the project forward. I ask Members to support the motion, go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern that 75% of terminally ill people in Northern Ireland are unable to die in the place of their choice, whether in their own home or the home of a family member; and that many terminally ill people are admitted to hospital on multiple occasions, unnecessarily, during the final weeks of life, causing stress to their families and carers; welcomes the positive results emerging from the 'Delivering Choice Programme' which Marie Curie Cancer Care has operated in Great Britain; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide the necessary resources for a pilot programme aimed at ensuring that patients, and their carers, receive the necessary support throughout the palliative care period.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Deputy Speaker.*]

ADJOURNMENT

Home-Start Funding in the Ards, Comber and peninsula area

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the Member who tabled the Adjournment topic will have 10 minutes in which to speak and that other Members who wish to speak will have approximately five minutes.

Mr McNarry: I am grateful for the opportunity to raise in the Assembly the serious issue of funds to sustain the excellent work of Home-Start in Ards, Comber and the Ards Peninsula. I welcome the Minister to the debate and thank him for his time. Most of my comments will be for the attention of the Minister, so I trust that he is in a good listening mood and that I will be at my most persuasive in not only making the case for Home-Start but in convincing him to step up to the mark with crucial funding.

Home-Start in Ards, Comber and the Ards Peninsula not only desperately needs funding but its work demands sustainable support, and its caring staff and wonderful volunteers deserve the Minister's commitment. From its beginnings as a satellite scheme in 1997, Home-Start has expanded to what it is today — a vibrant, caring and well-managed voluntary organisation. In truth, Home-Start is really only managing what it can, in the full and open knowledge that many more families in the area require its help. However, it cannot deliver that help due to a lack of support funds.

The service that is provided through home visits by volunteers, a respite playgroup and a family group is open to families with at least one child under the age of five. It is a real service, for real families with real needs. Home-Start volunteers also get involved with families to provide necessary employment skills and to improve networking in communities. There is no shame in seeking help from Home-Start. Perhaps the shame lies in the fact that too many people do not recognise the need for the type of service that Home-Start offers. They therefore remain ignorant of the good work that it does daily.

I know the financial restraints that the Minister is under, and I am aware of the draft Budget restrictions forced on him. I commend and support his stand for more cash to be injected into his Department. However, I will put him on the spot: Home-Start in Strangford — an area that the Minister knows as well as anyone and better than most — should not be placed in the situation in which it finds itself. It is begging for funds

and competing for scraps of money. It costs £422 a year to support a child through Home-Start. That is a pittance compared with the cost of placing a child in care. Some 76% of referrals come from health and social services trusts, and 30% less is spent on families and children here than is spent in England. I am asking for the Minister's assistance, and I will also be asking his Executive colleague the Minister for Social Development to dip into her coffers. I also urge the Minister to ask his officials, and Ms Ritchie's officials, to pool their resources annually in a set-aside scheme solely for the purpose of funding Home-Start. Perhaps the Minister of Education could also be included, because that could mean a win-win situation for everyone.

A situation in which the general and mental health of families is improved, and in which families are kept together and children go to school in a positive frame of mind, is in the interests of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department for Social Development and the Department of Education.

One cannot leave out the Minister of Finance and Personnel. He should be asked to consider bringing to the Executive a proposition to reinstate the Executive fund, or something similar, for children and young people. I trust that the restoration of that fund, and the idea that there should be greater departmental collaboration and cross-pollination of funding, will be taken on board and an outcome brought to the Assembly in the near future. However, for the immediate future I will continue to press the Minister.

5.45 pm

The referrals to Home-Start in my area of Strangford come mainly from health visitors and cover a blend of communities from all over the Peninsula: the town of Newtownards and its surrounding housing estates, as well as Comber, Ballygowan and Killinchy. An extensive network of volunteers brings respite, relief and a caring approach to many families. Since it began its operation, the local branch of Home-Start has increased its volunteer force from 12 to 52. That not only shows dedication to providing the service, it shows how much the service is appreciated, and how major are the needs of those who benefit from the work of the local Home-Start volunteers. There is clearly a demand.

I have already mentioned competition for funds, and it seems that a ridiculous situation has arisen in the area. Complementary services exceed their remit, duplicate those services and become competitive.

As much as I support the volunteer work of Home-Start, I recognise the good work done by Sure Start. Sides cannot be taken when families and children lose out, because one organisation has strayed from complementing the service of another into duplicating that service and, in the process, attracting and securing

funds. That is seen locally as funds having been taken away from Home-Start by Sure Start.

I ask the Minister to examine that situation, because competition that undermines a tried-and-trusted service cannot be tolerated. Regrettably, it provokes ill-feeling between two organisations, both of which do tremendous good work in their respective fields of expertise.

According to a Home-Start circular, during the last year extra money was provided by the Government for Sure Start, enabling it to expand its services to the Scrabo ward in Newtownards. It has taken on extra paid staff to cover that, and to start a further programme for two-year-olds on the peninsula. There has been no further core funding from Sure Start to Home-Start, even though it is moving into an area already covered by Home-Start. An unknown source has disclosed that £60,000 was allowed for Sure Start's new programme for two-year-olds, which has been set up in St Mary's Integrated Primary School in Kircubbin, and is designed to accept 12 children a year for four mornings a week. It seems that there is no problem giving extra money to Sure Start; yet Home-Start, an existing and well-established family support organisation, constantly battles for core funding.

I do not know if the Minister is aware of that duplication, but without doubt, it hits Home-Start hard and causes it serious problems. That situation needs to be sorted out.

I trust that I have made a good case for Home-Start, and I know that the Minister recognises the value of its excellent work. I hope, however, that he will do more than offer deserving praise. I hope that he will come up with the cash Home-Start so desperately needs to stay on top of maintaining and sustaining the service it provides to the Ards, Comber and Peninsula area.

Home-Start needs and deserves funding. It cannot provide the service without sufficient funding. If I did not think it justified extra money, I would not have tabled this motion, and I would not be standing here pleading its case this evening. That case is justified. I invite the Minister to bring some good cheer to families in the peninsula area and the great band of volunteers who work with them, and for them.

I rest my case.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The business on the Order paper will not be disposed of by 6.00 pm. In accordance with Standing Order 10(3) I will allow business to continue until it is completed.

Mrs I Robinson: I support the motion, in the hope that the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and the Minister for Social Development might understand the important role played by Home-Start in Ards, Comber and the Ards Peninsula, and that they

might realise the impact that failure to attract funding will have on the local community.

The Home-Start organisation was founded over 34 years ago, and for the past 24 years it has been operating in Northern Ireland, which has 22 independent Home-Start schemes. All those schemes deliver a first-class service, none more so than Home-Start in Ards, Comber and the peninsula area.

Although some Home-Start schemes provide only home-visiting volunteers, the scheme in my constituency also provides the services of a respite family group and a family group. I have had great pleasure in working closely with the groups over the past five years in supporting their applications for funding to enable them to expand their services. Those services are vital for families that find themselves in need of support, not least parents with children under the age of five who are struggling to cope with life's pressures.

People need support for any number of reasons: post-natal illness, disability, bereavement, the illness of a parent or child or social isolation. People can feel isolated in their community; they may not have family in the area or they may simply have difficulty in establishing new friendships. They can also find it difficult to cope because of their own or a child's physical or mental illness, or they may have difficulty in coming to terms with the death of a family member or loved one.

At the heart of Home-Start's ethos is the belief that parents have the key role in creating a secure and happy environment for their children. In the Ards, Comber and peninsula area, hundreds of families have been provided with critical support and many hundreds of children have been helped as a result.

Home-Start volunteers visit families in their own homes to offer support, friendship and practical assistance; they can reassure parents that they are not alone and that support is available. They have a positive impact on the emotional well-being of parents, which is of ultimate benefit to their children. Home-Start volunteers provide a time for listening and talking, help with children, a break for parents, practical help and reassurance, and a chance to meet other parents in the same predicament.

As funding for children's services faces challenges, Home-Start schemes have increased, and it is crucial that funding be identified to ensure the future of Home-Start beyond March 2008. The value of the schemes has not just been recognised by those families who have benefited, but by statutory agencies such as social services, GPs, health visitors and other healthcare professionals. In recent years, Home-Start's continued success has depended on securing finances from the children's fund.

The frustrating aspect of the matter is that if the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety were to implement efficiency measures, as has been suggested, we might not have had to debate the issue in the Chamber. I urge the Minister to work towards identifying adequate funding for this very worthwhile scheme. In the meantime, I congratulate Joyce Ross and all at Home-Start Comber, Ards and the peninsula area, and trust that the scheme will continue to flourish in the coming years.

The previous Member talked about duplication. I would also like to talk about duplication for a few seconds: if the Department were to stop duplicating services in four boards and missing opportunities for the creation of one single authority and if it were to ensure value for money in efficiency savings and productivity, it might find the money in the Budget.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Mr McNarry for bringing the matter to the Floor of the Assembly. Although the Adjournment debate centres on the Strangford, Ards and Comber area, I come from the neighbouring constituency of South Down. Therefore I hope that I will be excused for mentioning some offices in that area, as I am familiar with their good work.

I am extremely concerned that the Home-Start satellite schemes in places such as Ballynahinch and Newcastle — and right across the North — have been placed at considerable risk as a result of Government funding being cut or reduced to levels where they cannot function properly.

For 2008-09, the Department of Health has advised that there is a budget of £3.8 million to fund projects — a £2.1 million reduction from the current budget, with further reductions likely in 2010-11. I am concerned that that will result in the closure of Home-Start schemes and a significant reduction in the quality of services.

In my constituency of South Down, through the dedicated work of home-visiting volunteers who give freely of their time, Home-Start provides an essential service to vulnerable families. In Down, local Home-Start schemes in Ballynahinch and Newcastle have been funded by the children's fund since it was launched in 2001, and are administered through the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

In recent years, the confidence shown in Home-Start by local government has been welcome, and, if funding were to be cut, two part-time, 25-hour schemes would be lost. Home-Start's work is closely linked to the Government's priorities of promoting tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being and of tackling inequalities.

Home-Start is the leading family-support charity in the North of Ireland, and its work is invaluable. Last year, across the Six Counties, Home-Start worked with

25 schemes to support 1,573 families and 2,908 children. The work of Home-Start volunteers makes a real difference to some of the most vulnerable people in society. In the North, each week, 650 volunteers visit families at home and support parents who are experiencing isolation, bereavement, the consequences of multiple births, illness, disability or parenting stresses. Last year, more than 90% of parents who were supported by Home-Start said that its intervention had made a positive contribution to their lives. Home-Start schemes require £186,000 a year to continue that service in order that vulnerable families do not lose that important lifeline. Home-Start NI — the regional organisation — also requires adequate funding to support schemes that are necessary for the continuation of that vital work.

The statutory services recognise that the early intervention of Home-Start is cost-effective — as mentioned earlier, 76% of referrals come from health and social services. On average, it costs £422 a year to support a child through Home-Start, compared to £83,950 to place a child in care. Members must also consider that, in the Six Counties, per capita spending on social services for families and children is 30% lower than in England.

If funding were cut, there would undoubtedly be major implications for many at-risk families. More than 600 children and 350 parents would lose a vital lifeline, and their physical and mental health would undoubtedly suffer. That would result in more costly statutory intervention, the loss of a vital community facility, and, if schemes close, redundancies for a dedicated group of people.

Home-Start schemes in Newcastle and Ballynahinch — and I am sorry to go on about Down when we are here to discuss Strangford — cover a wide rural area in my constituency and provide assistance for people in Dundrum, Castlewellan, Clough, Seaforde, Saintfield, Crossgar and Killyleagh. The scheme has been operating successfully for 10 years and, in the past 12 months, has provided support for 247 children and 90 families. The organisation has 48 local, trained volunteers from across the community, who provide a unique service in an area of limited family resources. Therefore, I urge the Minister — whose presence I appreciate — to give assurances that his Department will reinstate the Executive programme fund for children and young people. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr P J Bradley: Like Mr Clarke, I thank David McNarry for bringing the subject of Home-Start to the Floor of the House. Given that this is an adjournment debate, I accept that Mr McNarry was confined to addressing problems as they affect the area that he represents. With your permission, Mr Speaker, and with Mr McNarry's, I wish to include in the debate the Home-Start family-support charity groups in my constituency, which are faced with the same threats

mentioned by the honourable Member and others. The Kilkeel Home-Start scheme covers Hilltown, Rostrevor, Kilkeel and Annalong, and other groups in my constituency work in Newry, Banbridge, Ballynahinch and Newcastle.

To illustrate the work being carried out by Home-Start volunteers, I will highlight the group in my immediate area — Home-Start Kilkeel, which has operated successfully for more than 10 years. In the past 12 months alone, it has supported 78 children and their families. The group comprises 21 locally-trained volunteers from across the community.

6.00 pm

When we talk about Home-Start, we seldom stop to think about what we are referring to. The true worth of Home-Start cannot be measured; it is experienced by those who need the scheme's support. That valuable support includes reassuring parents that they are not alone in the world when they are dealing with their problems by explaining that many other families, even local ones, are going through the same ordeal. Some families require such support after a bereavement.

Support can be valuable to parents who find it almost impossible to deal with the demands of looking after a physically or mentally ill child. The volunteers often bring comfort and support to families that are emotionally drained because of pressures in the home, and that comfort brings real benefit, especially to the children of the house.

I had a brief look at the Home-Start website, and one phrase stood out:

“Trying to get the fun back into family life”.

Rearing a family can be very difficult, and without the fun that surfaces in the confines of the home, it would be even more strenuous. Our children's laughter is one of our greatest possessions. Home-Start volunteers are trained to gauge a situation, and, as its website states, they try to get the fun back into the family where necessary.

Mr Peter Hain attempted to address the problems that abound, but the new Executive's strange lack of commitment will result in the inevitable closure of the family-support service. That is difficult to understand, given that the statutory services recognise that Home-Start's early intervention is cost-effective, with three out of every four referrals coming from health and social services.

I am pleased to have this opportunity to call for adequate funding to be made available for a proper children and young people's service. Therefore, I call for the full reinstatement of the Executive's children's fund.

Mr McCarthy: I thank my colleague David McNarry for raising this important issue. Only last week, I raised the same issue at a meeting of Ards Borough Council, where I received unanimous support for my proposal to

bring the matter to the powers that be in the Assembly. I also welcome the presence of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Michael McGimpsey, during the Adjournment debate.

As Members have mentioned, the children's fund was established through the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and it might have been appropriate for someone from that office to be here this evening to hear the plea on behalf of all Home-Start users.

The uncertainty of funding and the threat to voluntary organisations cut across the whole of Northern Ireland, and I am glad to see representatives of other constituencies in the Chamber. I ask the Minister and the Executive to get on top of this disastrous situation immediately.

This evening, we are discussing the specific effects on the Strangford constituency, particularly on Home-Start schemes in Ards, Comber and the Ards Peninsula. I must emphasise the excellent work that is carried out by the staff and volunteers, who provide a brilliant service for the children of my constituency. In the past year, Home-Start has worked with over 109 families from Greyabbey and Newtownards, providing home visits, respite services, playgroup and family group sessions — all to help children get a better start in life. That vital service is provided across the entire community, in all locations. It is imperative that the service continues, but it requires proper funding to do so.

I was disgusted to discover that, under the draft Budget, the children's fund will disappear, and the grossly underfunded Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will be expected to manage and fund all Home-Start schemes with a much-reduced budget. Had the Executive given sufficient funding to the Health Service, that would have been a different ball game, but they are clearly not stepping up to the mark in relation to funding.

That cannot be allowed to happen. Home-Start funds will run out in March 2008. The Assembly must give a solid commitment to our Home-Start teams, so that they will have the funding to carry on their superb work on behalf of the children and families whom we represent.

Speaking in the debate on the draft Programme for Government a few weeks ago, the First Minister, Ian Paisley, said:

“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.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 25, p359, col 1*].

Ian Paisley should honour those words, put his money where his mouth is and secure sufficient funding for all the Home-Start and other voluntary

groups that serve the needs of the children that he spoke about. His wishes will then have been fulfilled.

I hope that the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and all the Ministers who control the purse strings will listen to the plea from the Floor of the Assembly this evening and ensure that our children will be saved from the destruction that will ensue if this scheme falls apart.

Mr Shannon: It's my pleesur tae be pert o' mony fien organisations in my bonnie area whut er ther fer tae help an haud up the people o' tha proavince an in pertickuler Strangford an aw what seek tae bring about a' better soart o' life fer aw whut leev heer.

It is my pleasure to be associated with many of the fine organisations in my beautiful constituency that exist to help and support the people of the Province — particularly Strangford, in this case — and that seek to improve the quality of life of the people who live there. I thank David McNarry for bringing this matter to the attention of the House and for giving us the opportunity to highlight the good job that Home-Start does.

My first association with Home-Start was back in 1990 when I was Deputy Mayor of Ards, and I had the opportunity to see the work that the North Down and Ards Home-Start did.

I have often stated — some of the other representatives here will agree with me — that we hail from potentially the most beautiful part of the Province. However, there will also be some who will say that we are certainly not without our problems. In Ards there are currently a large amount of young families and single-parent families who find it difficult to cope. Young mothers are trying their best to manage without the absent father. They find it hard to juggle taking care of the home as well as looking after the children and are under tremendous stress as a result. It is for reasons such as that that Home-Start began.

Home-Start is a community group comprising volunteers and paid co-ordinators who support families with young children in the Ards, Comber, Ballygowan, Killinchy and Peninsula areas. Province wide, over 650 visits are made by volunteers each week, and just under 3,000 children are supported through Home-Start Northern Ireland. They do a fantastic job.

Home visits are made by volunteers who help young mothers, mothers and fathers who are grieving, or those with multiple births or illness. The criteria is simple — anyone with a child under the age of five can get help from a volunteer who will come to do a few hours menu planning, to help with shopping, to carry out simple home tasks or to provide a caring, listening ear. It is no wonder that Members from constituencies other than Strangford are present to make their plea for Home-Start schemes in their areas.

Respite playgroups and family groups are available to families who find themselves in difficult situations. Over 90% of those who were visited by volunteers have said that their lives were positively affected by Home-Start's input into their family lives.

Home-Start is a scheme to which people can self-refer or be referred to by social services, GPs or through word of mouth. Indeed, 76% of referrals come from health and social services, which sees it as a cost-effective means of helping people and lightening the load, and reducing problems down the line for children who are placed in temporary or full-time care as a result of the nervous breakdown of a parent.

It is estimated that to place a child in care could cost just under £84,000. Many children would not have needed to go into care if the parent had been given the essential care and support at the very beginning. Many young mothers in Ards have told me that they were ready to throw the towel in until they were given help by volunteers who really cared. That help even extends to training people to enable them to get jobs, to get out of the house and get a little independence, which makes all the difference for those who are on the edge.

Home-Start has stated that to support a child for a year through its organisation could cost as little as £422. That makes some difference, not only regarding the monetary cost, but also to the emotional well-being of the child, who can feel the difference made in the home.

I cannot stress enough the importance of the scheme for individuals. Over 350 parents and 650 children in the Ards area currently rely on Home-Start for help. It is also important to the entire healthcare system, especially in view of the fact that prevention is better than cure. This organisation is a way of relieving the stress and pressure that leads to family breakdown. The scheme has served Ards for the past 20-odd years, and many families rely on it. It is funded by the children's fund, in conjunction with other sources of finance. The children's fund supplies the core funding, without which staff would be unable to provide the service on which so many depend. The organisation is currently applying for other funding, but so far it has had no positive response. Members can understand the precarious and worrying situation which the organisation is in. It is essential for it to further promote the facilities so that more people are aware that there are people out there who are willing and able to help them, to provide low-cost clothing and toys for families which struggle to make ends meet, and to generate income.

In conclusion, we cannot allow the funding to be cut. I stand alongside the other Members from my constituency to maintain that Home-Start does an exemplary job in our constituency and is an integral part of it. Strangford would be a poorer place without

the dedicated Home-Start volunteers. We must do all in our power to ensure that funding is made available.

Miss McIlveen: In my position as a member of the all-party Assembly group on children and young people, and as my party's spokesperson on the issue, I have had the great pleasure of receiving presentations from representatives of Home-Start. Undoubtedly, this is a charity that carries out a huge amount of incredibly important work with families throughout the United Kingdom.

6.15 pm

Home-Start's 2006 figures indicate that it was involved in 25 schemes that supported 1,573 families and 2,908 children. It runs a total of 350 local schemes around the United Kingdom, and Northern Ireland has great need of such a charity. In Northern Ireland it has 650 volunteers who give their time to provide assistance.

In 'Aiming High for Children: Supporting Families', HM Treasury calculated that a family experiencing social exclusion costs the taxpayer between £55,000 and £115,000 a year. Home-Start calculates that it costs approximately £1,000 to provide one-to-one visiting support to a family for a year in Northern Ireland, and, in 10% of those cases, the family moves out of social exclusion. Also, it costs the taxpayer £83,950 if a child goes into care. That is not to say that Home-Start is a direct alternative to care, but it can provide the support, guidance and assistance required to aid a family in such a way that costly and extremely stressful care proceedings can be avoided. Some 35% of the children aided by Home-Start are on the child protection register.

The support that the organisation provides to parents covers a wide range of matters, such as loneliness and isolation, lone parenting, first-time parenthood, post-natal illness, children's behavioural problems, and relationship difficulties. The support comes from weekly visits by a volunteer who is also a parent.

Research by James Henmann and the Work Foundation shows that intervening in the earliest years of a child's life to support parents brings dividends in terms of getting the best outcomes for children and preventing poor educational achievement. Schools and teachers are crucially important, but research shows that our parents, and what happens before we reach school, are most significant. If we want to change outcomes for children living in the most deprived circumstances, we must support the early-years work that Home-Start delivers.

The subject of this debate is funding. Until now, Home-Start has had ring-fenced funding from central Government. That has now ended, and five local schemes are in danger. If funding is not secured, it is proposed that the Ards, Comber and peninsula area scheme, with which this debate is concerned and which covers my constituency of Strangford, will become part time.

However, four other schemes — Armagh outreach, Kilkeel, Ballynahinch and Newcastle — will close. Much as I appreciate that the debate has been tabled and the representatives of Strangford have had an opportunity to discuss this matter, the issue is not confined to our constituency. As we have already heard, the problem is much wider. To keep those five schemes operating, Home-Start requires £186,000 per year. However, Home-Start NI also requires £195,000 per year to support and develop schemes in areas that do not have them.

It is difficult to quantify the total impact of the loss of the support provided by those schemes, but, undoubtedly, there will be an increase in statutory intervention, which is much more costly and has a greater negative impact on the child, in cases where such intervention could have been avoided.

The importance of such an organisation should not be underestimated, particularly when we consider that 76% of its referrals come from health professionals, who see the value in its work.

Home-Start is asking for continued parity of funding with the rest of the United Kingdom. Unfortunately, the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety was cut off mid-sentence when he was about to deliver bad news about the Ards, Comber and peninsula scheme during Question Time on November 5. Therefore, we do not know exactly how bad that news was.

As the Minister has been at pains to say, the Budget is at the draft stage, and is out for consultation. He has also been at pains to avoid making the decisions to cut bureaucracy and inefficiency in his Department. Last week, I was interested to hear his party colleague Basil McCrea inform a meeting of Queen's University graduates that such decisions had to be made, and that the current situation is not good.

On 5 November, the Minister stated:

"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 support that important work." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 25, p25, col 1].

Perhaps we will see those words translated into actions.

Mr McCallister: I thank my honourable friend the Member for Strangford Mr McNarry for securing the debate. I have some knowledge of working with the Home-Start programmes in my constituency of South Down, and it is a worthwhile programme.

It was disappointing that Mrs Robinson could not get through her remarks without taking a cheap shot at the Minister in respect of decisions about which he has answered questions both in the House and in Committee. Miss McIlveen did very well until the last 30 seconds of her speech. I was interested to hear her mention

parity. When he replies to the debate, the Minister may tell us how much healthcare spending it would take to reach parity with England and Wales.

Turning to the more important matter at hand, the Home-Start programme provides support, which is vital for a number of reasons. Miss McIlveen said that 35% of the children who are helped by Home-Start are on the child-protection register — a group that should be targeted. The programme provides tremendous support for families from different socio-economic backgrounds, and it is important that we get it right.

The Ulster Unionist Party has been at the forefront of recommending early intervention. On many occasions, it has been proven that outcomes and value for money are much improved by investing in early-years initiatives for children up to the age of six. That long-term impact on young people brings us towards the future on a much sounder footing. For that reason, I urge the Minister to support the programme, and I look forward to hearing his contribution.

Good family foundations are vital to building up the strong communities that we all want to see across Northern Ireland.

The existence of the support mechanism provided by early intervention is vital to help families and children deal with a variety of issues, and it improves outcomes and educational attainment. The Home-Start programme is an excellent model for the interesting mix between state funding and the huge contribution made by the voluntary sector. As we all know, volunteers who give of their time, talents and energy can make a huge contribution to families.

With the end of the children's fund, we also must examine the wider funding issue, as a 30% shortfall in funding for children's services has been identified.

Miss McIlveen mentioned some particularly relevant areas. A fellow South Down Member, P J Bradley, is also present. Obviously, Members from the South Down constituency, which takes in Kilkeel, Ballynahinch and Newcastle, are particularly anxious — as too are those from Armagh. Having visited Home-Start's Kilkeel branch with councillor Isaac Hanna, who is a party colleague, and having seen the work that it does at first hand, I am supportive of that worthwhile programme, which makes a huge contribution to communities and families.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank Members for the opportunity to reply to the debate. I have taken on board the useful comments that have been made by many of the contributors to the debate.

Home-Start was established in Northern Ireland more than 20 years ago. Its main aim is to provide support, through a volunteer-based home-visit service,

to families with children under five years of age, and which are experiencing stress. Children are a key priority for the Executive. My Department has special responsibility for 2,500 children who are in care, and 1,600 children who are on the child-protection register. Therefore, I am particularly aware of the duty to meet the needs of children and young people who are in care.

Indeed, one of the earliest debates in the Assembly was on one of the Department's key strategies — Care Matters. We all want to improve children's lives. As far as possible, we must ensure that they do not have to enter care in the first place. Care Matters is aimed at keeping children out of care, and supporting those who are in care, and those who leave care. A key aim is to support families who are experiencing stress in order to ensure that children are not taken into care, because the outcomes for children in care are poor when compared with the rest of the child population in Northern Ireland. Almost every relevant statistic shows that children who spend time in care are worse off than their counterparts.

Since April 2003, Home-Start in the Ards, Comber and peninsula area has been supported by the Department, through the children's fund. To date, grant-aid assistance in the region of £182,000 has been provided to support the salary costs that are associated with the posts of senior co-ordinator, respite co-ordinator, four part-time playgroup workers, and some administrative support. That assistance will continue until March 2008, when the current round of funding is set to end. The children's fund also supports locally based Home-Start schemes in Armagh and Dungannon, Newry and Mourne, and Down District. That funding will continue until March 2008. In addition to that, as part of the Department's core funding arrangements, it will provide support to Home-Start's regional office to assist with central running costs. That funding is currently in the first year of a three-year cycle.

I understand that the project continues to attract and train volunteer workers. It sees between 20 and 25 new referrals each quarter and would typically, during a similar period, provide around 20 families with respite by providing childcare. Its home-visit volunteers also support up to 50 families.

I am well aware of the concerns in the voluntary and community sector about the future of the children's fund after the current funding runs out. Before I comment on that, I believe that it is important that Members understand the background to the children's fund, and my Department's involvement. The fund was created by the previous Northern Ireland Executive back in 2001. It was established to provide project funding of up to three years' duration to voluntary and community groups for their work with disadvantaged children and young people. The 89 projects that are currently supported by the fund represent a wide range of activities that span the business areas of several Departments.

Although my Department administers those funds, it is not solely a DHSSPS initiative. The funding arrange-

ments to support the children's fund, reflect the cross-government nature of the initiative.

At the outset, the Executive made available £17.5 million from Executive programme funds to support the children's fund over the four years from April 2003 to March 2007. That funding was augmented from March 2007 by additional funds that were made available by the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Mr Peter Hain when he announced a children's and young people's funding package. All projects were advised that funding would not continue beyond March 2008. That contrasts with the voluntary and community sectors' commonly held view that the additional money was ring-fenced in the children's and young people's funding package to provide continuing support to groups that are working with children and young people, including children's fund projects.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is directly responsible for only 57 of the 89 projects that are currently supported. The four Home-Start schemes are included among those 57 projects. The other 32 projects are for other Ministers to consider. Members will be aware of the inadequacy of next year's proposed Budget allocation for my Department. As a result, I cannot guarantee that all existing projects will be supported in future or to the level that they have been in the past. It will simply not be possible to make firm decisions about individual projects until consultation on the draft Budget has been completed and final decisions have been taken.

In the meantime, I have asked my officials to liaise with the Department of Education, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Northern Ireland Office to see whether they can assist with funding. I know how important it is that existing projects are given early confirmation about their future funding. I assure Members that that information will be forthcoming as soon as possible.

The Home-Start fund comes under the children's and young people's funding package, which is being wound up next March. That is why we are in this situation. Four Home-Start schemes will be affected, one of which is the Home-Start scheme in Ards, Comber and the Peninsula; also affected are Home-Start schemes in Armagh, Dungannon, Down district and Newry and Mourne.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety administered funds that were provided from the centre; however, from March 2008 there will be no money. My Department is trying to manage the future; we are looking for funds. We should be able to manage until next year; after that, however, there will be serious problems, and we will not be able to manage. I am trying to look on the Home-Start schemes as inescapables because they are ongoing and employ people. One simply cannot tell people that the draft Budget has abolished their funding; there has to be a period for a soft landing. I am trying to do that.

The Budget will abolish the children's and young people's fund, and that is why we are in this situation. Members have heard me talk about the Budget and have heard me highlight the problems that I face with it. It was not a joke; I was not playing politics; I was not trying to be clever or to wind anyone up; I was not trying to be difficult. I told the truth. The cuts in funding to Home-Start schemes are one of the consequences — only one of them — of my Department's Budget allocation, and it is small when compared to the list before me.

Mrs Robinson — who is no longer in the Chamber — talked about efficiencies in the four health and social services boards as a result of amalgamations. As far as jobs saved are concerned, we have already reached the efficiencies for years 1 and 2. I have already said that I will reach the efficiencies on 3% CSR of £343 million. That will still not do it. Although £450 million of new money is coming into the health budget over three years, £700,000 comes out of it in unavoidable and inescapables.

6.30 pm

I am left with only £97 million over three years for service developments, and those moneys are to be found in the third year, as the efficiencies emerge. There is virtually nothing in year 1 and year 2. That is the problem with which I am faced, and that is why I am complaining. Despite accusations that I agreed to the Budget, the fact is that I never agreed to it — I refused to agree to it, and the minutes of the Executive Committee meetings fully exonerate me. I will continue to argue that point.

Members who talk about the draft Budget being a good Budget for health — as some have — need to consider their position very carefully. Every Member will be asked to make a decision about, and vote on, the draft Budget. It will be at that point that push comes to shove, and Members will have to justify to their constituents the consequences of agreeing to the allocations. The end to funding for Home-Start is one such consequence, and let me assure the Assembly that, as far as the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is concerned, it is one of the small consequences. There are bigger consequences to come.

Mrs Robinson suggested at last Thursday's meeting of the Health Committee that Belfast had too many hospitals, and that hospital closures were the way to fix the Health Service. That is not the way to do it. I am not up for shutting down hospitals and cutting back on services. I am in favour of maintaining the service as it is, because that is the service that the people of Northern Ireland need, desire and require. However, as matters stand, if the Budget does not change, the Home-Start scheme will be a casualty — and that is why I am arguing for change.

Adjourned at 6.31 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 11 December 2007

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Deputy Speaker: I wish to inform Members that there will be no lunchtime suspension of today's sitting because the Business Committee is not scheduled to meet.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council — Educational Format

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Education that she wishes to make a statement on the recent North/South Ministerial Council meeting in education sectoral format.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is mian liom an tuarascáil seo a leanas a dhéanamh ar an chéad chruinniú de chuid na Comhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas i bhformáid earnáil oideachais ó cuireadh an Coiste Feidhmiúcháin agus an Tionol ar bun arís. D'aontaigh an tAire Edwin Poots MLA leis an tuarascáil seo. Tionóladh an cruinniú in óstlann St Helen's Radisson SAS, Baile Átha Cliath ar 14 Samhain 2007.

I wish to make a report on the first North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in education sectoral format since the restoration of the Executive and the Assembly. This report has been agreed with Edwin Poots MLA. The meeting was held at the Radisson SAS St Helen's hotel in Dublin on Wednesday 14 November 2007.

I represented the Executive as Minister of Education, along with Edwin Poots MLA, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. The Irish Government were represented by Mary Hanafin TD, Minister for Education and Science, who chaired the meeting.

Déanfaidh mé achoimre ar na príomhphointí a tháinig aníos ag an chruinniú; cruinniú a dhírigh ar an réimse aontaithe i dtaca le comhoibriú Thuaidh/Theas san earnáil oideachais.

I shall summarise the main points of the meeting, which concerned the agreed areas of North/South education co-operation.

The Council welcomed progress in addressing educational underachievement, including successful initiatives to promote literacy and numeracy in schools. Officials were requested to develop proposals for consideration at the next North/South Ministerial Council meeting in education sectoral format.

The ongoing co-operation in the area of school, youth and teacher exchanges was welcomed by the Council, and it was noted that a formal review of co-operation on education exchanges and supporting mechanisms, including the North/South Exchange Consortium, was shortly to commence, with a view to identifying a range of options for future progress in the light of current and future funding availability.

Rinneadh plé ar shainriachtanais oideachais. Chuireamar fáilte fosta roimh thuarascáil ó phríomhfheidhmeannach agus ó chathaoirleach an

ionaid barr feabhais um uathachas sa Bhaile Láir. Rinne an tuarascáil cuntas ginearálta ar an dul chun cinn suntasach a rinneadh go dtí seo ar ionad barr feabhais a bhunú sa Bhaile Láir agus ar na pleananna atá ann chun próiseas comhairliúcháin a dhéanamh le gach páirtí leasmhar lena gcur ar an eolas faoin dóigh a soláthrófar na seirbhísí. Thacamar leis na pleananna don ionad sna todhchaí; pleananna a chuimsíonn soláthar seirbhísí oiliúna/comhairleoireachta agus seirbhísí eolais/taighde agus oideachais, agus seirbhísí foghlama agus tacaíochta atá réidh le tosú chomh luath agus a bheas an obair thógála críochnaithe.

Ministers welcomed a report on the establishment of a centre of excellence for autism at Middletown. The chief executive and chairperson of the centre outlined the significant progress made to date, and informed the Council of a consultation exercise, involving all stakeholders, to determine how services would be delivered. The Council endorsed the centre's future plans, which include training, advisory and information research services and education. Learning and support services will come on stream when building work is completed.

The Council discussed proposals for a 2008 joint conference on autistic spectrum disorder, and welcomed the distribution of parent-teacher videos, CD-ROMs and guidance material on autism and dyslexia.

Moreover, the Council discussed other joint projects in the field of special educational needs, including the cross-border school and parent community partnership programme, which was supported by the EU Peace and Reconciliation programme, and co-funded by both Departments of Education. The project began in September 2006 and will run until August 2008 and takes a cross-border schools-parents-community approach to the education and socialisation of children with special educational needs.

Rinneadh plé ar cháilíochtaí agus aoisliúntas múinteoirí. Rinne an Chomhairle suntas den dul chun cinn atá déanta ag an ghrúpa oibre um cháilíochtaí múinteoirí agus go mbeidh na comhairlí teagaisc ag comhoibriú ar na saincheisteanna san am atá le teacht de réir mar is cuí.

In respect of teacher qualifications and superannuation, the Council noted progress made to date by the teachers' qualification working group, and that teaching councils will co-operate on the issues, as appropriate, in future.

The Council recognised the significant changes to Irish language proficiency requirements for teaching posts, and that a specific professional development programme, funded by the Department of Education and Science, and developed in Marino College of Education, Dublin, has been introduced to address the needs of primary school teachers who take the scrúdú le haghaidh cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge, the Irish proficiency examination.

Ongoing co-operation between the inspectorates of both Education Departments in relation to sharing of best practice and research was welcomed by the Council. Furthermore, the Council acknowledged the outstanding contribution made by the Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South (SCoTENS), which provides support for all-island conferences; social, scientific and environmental education; initial teacher education; citizenship education; special educational needs; and for cross-border research projects.

Faoi choimirce na hEagraíochta um Chomhar agus Fhorbairt Eacnamaíoch, reachtáil an dá Roinn Oideachais comhdháil de na tíortha rannpháirteacha i mBaile Átha Cliath ar 7 agus 8 Samhain 2007. De thairbhe na comhdhála, fobrófar comhthionscnaimh taighde, agus é mar aidhm aici ceannairí scoile a mhealladh agus a fhorbairt.

Déanfar iniúchadh ar an tsaincheist a bhaineann le comhchláir ghairmiúla forbartha do ghrúpaí aontaithe.

Under the auspices of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development — the OECD — the two Education Departments hosted jointly a conference of participating countries in Dublin on 7 and 8 November 2007. As a result, a joint research initiative that is aimed at attracting and developing school leaders will be developed. Joint professional-development programmes for agreed groups will also be explored.

The Council discussed the issues that relate to teacher superannuation, particularly the question of transferring superannuation entitlements between both jurisdictions. It noted the decision that the North/South Ministerial Council made at its meeting in institutional format in October 2007 that the Council's joint secretariat will convene a working group of officials from relevant Departments, including Finance Departments, to consider the transfer of pension rights on a cross-border basis. That working group will report to a future meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council. The Council also agreed that officials from the Department of Education (DE) and the Department of Education and Science will participate in that working group and will report back to the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in education sectoral format on issues that are relevant to the education sector.

In closing, we agreed that the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in education sectoral format should take place in spring 2008. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr S Wilson: I welcome the Minister's statement, and I make it clear that, where it can, my party is more than happy to learn from good practice in other countries.

I notice that the Minister's statement referred to successful initiatives that have been undertaken to address

educational underachievement. During the past six months of the Minister's term in office, the Northern Ireland Audit Office has published a report on the poor performance of the numeracy and literacy strategy; the Committee for Education has identified that of the 660 teachers that have been trained in reading recovery, only 160 are being used in schools; and unrealistic targets have been set for numeracy and literacy in the Programme for Government. Given those circumstances, can the Minister tell the House what successful initiatives she discussed with her counterparts in the Irish Republic? What good practices did she learn from the Department of Education and Science that could be applied to the serious problem of educational underachievement in Northern Ireland?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. I thank the Member for that question.

Learning from other countries was useful, and the OECD conference was wonderful because we heard from people from Finland, Norway and other countries that have very good education systems. It is useful for us to learn from those systems, and that is why it was so helpful for Mary Hanafin and me jointly to chair and host the all-island conference for people from different parts of the world.

The Member mentioned literacy and numeracy and educational underachievement. Those are key areas for my Department and for my counterparts in the South of Ireland. The Member will be delighted to know that yesterday evening, Conor Lenihan, who is the Minister of State with responsibility for integration policy in the Department of Education and Science and who liaises with different Departments, and I launched 'A Toolkit for Diversity in the Primary School'. That toolkit will examine the issue of integration and deal with the special needs of newcomer children. We in the North need to examine that issue. I can certainly ensure that the Education Committee receives a copy of that very good pack. We can learn a great deal from the South, and the South can learn a great deal from us.

The Member will know that in recent months, my Department has been reviewing the school-improvement policy and the literacy and numeracy strategy.

We take very seriously the number of children who are being failed by our education system. That is why I announced last week that the last transfer tests will take place in 2008. At the moment we are failing 4,000 young people every year. In the debate later today on the transfer procedure, I will bring more figures to the Assembly.

10.45 am

It is essential that we get our strategies right; that we make sure that every school is a good school; that we deal with the tail of underachievement. We will learn from the South, and it can learn from us. We will also

learn from countries that have non-selective systems. There is tremendous work being done in Finland, which tops the OECD league. I hope that the Chairperson of the Committee for Education reads carefully the report of that important OECD conference. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Paul Butler.

Mr Butler: I do not have a question, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr K Robinson: It is interesting to note that the Sinn Féin representative is speechless this morning. Perhaps his notes have not arrived.

I note this morning's statement; however, I want reassurance that educational progress rather than political positioning is the driving force behind the Northern Ireland Minister's focus in that recent meeting in the South. I notice also that there is no mention of the pre-school sector in the statement. Since she has introduced the transfer procedure, I must point out to the Minister that children do not suddenly fail at the age of 11 — they are failing before they reach that age. Will she assure the House that at the next ministerial meeting she will raise the issue of pre-school and early-years education, so that if there are systems in the Republic of Ireland that work, we can learn from them?

I reiterate what my colleague Sammy Wilson said: we need to get to grips with literacy and numeracy. We cannot allow the Minister's fixation with the transfer procedure to cloud over the underachievement. That is there from the beginning.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. I agree that pre-school education is essential. In fact, every time I rise in the House I mention the importance of early intervention and pre-school education. It was not one of the areas discussed at the North/South Ministerial Council because there were agreed topics in place. I will certainly ask officials to explore how we might get that subject on the agenda of the next NSMC meeting in education sectoral format.

I assure the Member that work has begun in my Department on formulating a new early childhood education and care strategy, which includes the time from birth to the foundation years of primary education — the nought-to-six age group. In fact, when I brought forward my proposals on 4 December, I talked about the nought-to-six, six-14 and 14-19 age groups. Those are key educational periods in children's lives.

The nought-to-six strategy will bring Sure Start, pre-school and the home childcare agendas together in a cohesive way to support the integration of service delivery, taking into account all relevant factors and the effect that those changes will have on the lives of children and families. The aim of the strategy is to ensure that a solid framework is in place for early-

childhood care and education to enable children to enter school well prepared educationally.

Initial stakeholder consultations with the early-years sector emphasised the need to base the strategy on evidence-based research, and we will certainly learn from any good practice in the South of Ireland.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh céad maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire agus gabhaim buíochas léi ar a shon. Tá ceist agam di ar an chóras malartaithe maidir le scoileanna, daoine óga agus múinteoirí.

I want to ask the Minister — *[Interruption.]* I thank my colleague from Newry and Armagh for his vocal support. Obviously, his grandfather's influence is coming to play on him again today.

Mr Kennedy: Great-grandfather.

Mr D Bradley: Great-grandfather; I stand corrected.

What plans does the Minister have to address the reduction of funding for North/South teacher and youth exchanges in 2010? That is when the funding, which accounts for over 40% of the total, is to cease. Taking into account also the reduction of funding under Peace III — a further 40% — which is already having a devastating effect on projects and organisations that address cross-border co-operation in this area, what concrete plans has the Minister formulated to make up the shortfall? Will the Minister commit herself to giving this area of co-operation the same priority that it was given by the North/South Ministerial Council before suspension?

Chomh maith leis sin, a LeasCheann Comhairle, ba mhaith liom fiafraí den Aire an inseoidh sí dúinn ar phléigh sí lena comhghleacaithe i mBaile Átha Cliath pleananna le haghaidh oiliúint tosaigh agus oiliúint inseirbhíse do mhúinteoirí ó Thuaisceart Éireann do scrúdú cáilíochta na Gaeilge sna coláistí oiliúna anseo sa chaoi is go n-éascófar an bealach do mhúinteoirí ó Thuaisceart Éireann ar mian leo teagasc i bPoblacht na hÉireann.

Will the Minister tell us what discussions she has had with her counterpart in Dublin about plans for initial and in-service training of teachers for the Irish-language teaching qualification to be available in Northern Ireland colleges in order to facilitate North/South teacher mobility on the island? Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. While listening to the second question, I forgot what the first question was. Gabh mo leithscéal. Cad é do chéad cheist arís, a Dhomhnic? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order. Would you like to repeat the question?

Mr D Bradley: What plans does the Minister have to address the reduction of funding for North/South teacher and youth exchanges in 2010? That is when the IFI funding, which accounts for over 40% of the total, is to cease. Taking into account also the reduction of funding under Peace III — a further 40% — which is already having a devastating effect on projects and organisations that address cross-border co-operation in this area, what concrete plans has she formulated to make up the shortfall? Will the Minister commit herself to giving this area of co-operation the same priority that it was given by the North/South Ministerial Council before suspension?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask those who have their names down to ask questions to keep those questions as short as possible. They should not be the same length as the Minister's statement.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. First of all, I am very committed to North/South co-operation. As I have said before, we have a lot to learn from each other. I have met my counterpart in the South regularly, and we have done joint launches together on many different issues. The Member will know that both Departments are committed to making progress on North/South exchanges. We need to look at it in terms of the environment that we are now in. The Member is right to say that some funding is coming to an end. We are reviewing the North/South work that is being done. Obviously I cannot go into detail while the Budget is out for consultation, but we will be coming forward with plans.

I have not had discussions with my counterpart in the South on teacher training. We had a very full agenda; no doubt that subject will be on a future agenda.

Mr Lunn: I welcome the Minister's statement; it is good to see the level of co-operation between North and South on these matters. My question was to have been along the same lines as the one that Sammy Wilson asked, so I will not repeat it. I will ask, however, about the reading recovery programme. Does the South have a similar programme? Have there been cross-border discussions about the value of such programmes? There is a lot of concern up here about the future of it; maybe there is something to learn from the South in this area.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. The issue of literacy and numeracy is very important, and reading recovery is one of the many methods that are used to deal with underachievement and children who have special educational needs.

Special educational needs is one of the most prolific areas of North/South co-operation. The South also uses the reading recovery programme, and we are working together on best practice. CDs have been produced, which will be used in every school, North and South. Yesterday, we launched a toolkit for children with

additional language needs. The Department of Education is currently reviewing the entire area of special needs. A report will be published shortly on all the issues that the Member mentioned, including reading recovery.

Miss McIlveen: Can the Minister tell the House how much the Middletown centre of excellence for autism has cost the Department of Education to date, the estimated total cost and the annual operational cost? What input have the relevant stakeholders had in the development of this project, in particular, its location?

Ms Ruane: In May 2007, I visited the Middletown centre of excellence for autism with Martin McGuinness. At the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in Dublin, there was a report on the centre, which I am pleased to say is moving forward. The Department of Education, in partnership with the Department of Education and Science, is taking forward the arrangements needed to establish the Middletown centre of excellence for autism.

The chief executive, the senior management team and the board of directors are working on the provision and phasing in of services, beginning with the training, advisory and information research services. The educational assessment and learning support services will come on stream when the building works are completed, which is expected to be in 2008-09. The senior management team is currently meeting education providers North and South to ascertain needs. A number of training courses is taking place in newly refurbished accommodation on site, and the centre will soon undertake a consultation exercise with relevant stakeholders who are involved with children and young people with autism.

Funding for the purchase and running costs of the centre at Middletown has been provided on a 50:50 basis by the Department of Education and the Department of Education and Science. The Department of Education spent £1.5 million on purchasing the property. If any Members have seen the property, they will agree that it is value for money and a wonderful building.

The annual running costs of the centre are estimated at approximately £2.97 million per annum and will be shared equally between the two Departments. The refurbishment costs were estimated at £3.5 million over two years; they are to be split equally between the two Departments. In line with general increases in building costs, the estimates have risen, and officials are currently working through the detail.

The Department of Health and Children in the South is also funding half the therapy and care costs. The Member will be delighted to know that the programme includes a two- to three-day multidisciplinary educational assessment and a five-week residential multidisciplinary education and learning support programme.

This is a North/South project, so the location is perfect. Children will travel from all parts of Ireland — Cork, Kerry, Mayo, Galway, Coleraine and Antrim — to visit the centre. Members will be glad to know that children in the North will spend less time travelling to the centre than children in provinces such as Munster or Connacht. The centre is a very good project, and I am proud that our Department is associated with it.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend the Minister for this morning's comprehensive report. I thank her for her update on the Middletown centre of excellence for autism, about which I had intended to ask a question.

The Minister referred to children for whom English is an additional language. As the migrant worker population grows, right across the island, does the Minister agree that teachers could share good practice, perhaps by organising a conference? We must ensure that all children have equal access to education and equal outcomes.

Ms Ruane: I absolutely agree with the Member. It is difficult for people to leave their own country and arrive in a new one, so it is important to welcome newcomers into Ireland.

The Member will be glad to know that a conference has been held in Cavan that involved primary-school principals from across the island. Yesterday, primary-school principals and representatives from non-governmental organisations and education centres across the island came together to launch a toolkit.

As I have said, I shall ensure that the Committee for Education receives copies of that toolkit, which is the result of 10 years' work and best practice, North and South. The South has a greater number of newcomer children than we do.

11.00 am

I praise teachers and principals for the work that they have done, but the strong message that came out of last night's launch, and out of the conferences that were organised, is that education cannot do everything on its own. A joined-up approach that involves all sectors of society, including health, is needed. That said, some tremendous work is being done to integrate newcomer children and those who are learning English as a second language.

Mr Storey: At the risk of tiring the Minister, I wish to put some questions to her. Given the financial constraints in the current budgetary round, the funding pressures that have been brought to bear and the fact that she still has no financial structure for her blurred vision, which she announced in the House last Tuesday, can the Minister explain to the House how she has been able to commit funding to school-, youth- and

teacher-exchange programmes and to pensioner provision, and how she plans for those to be funded?

The Minister said in her statement that we can learn a great deal from the Republic of Ireland. On this occasion, I agree with her, having read a report that appeared in yesterday's 'Irish Independent'. I hope that the Minister has read the article, which stated that the Republic's Department of Education and Science's planning and building unit has proposed that no new second-level Irish-language schools be built. In the light of that proposal, how can she submit spending plans to the House and make more financial commitments when she has not even worked out the finance necessary for her blurred vision? Furthermore, what is she doing about transient children, especially those from families from the British Army community, and not those from families from any other army with which the Members opposite were associated?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. I do not accept that I have a blurred vision. I ask the Member to go out and about in his own community and talk to educationalists. He may learn something about education and about the tail of underachievement in certain areas. I visited areas that he represents, where I met with local educationalists. Your vision might be a bit less blurred were you to talk to people and listen to them.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Minister, when replying, please make your remarks through the Chair, not directly to the Member.

Ms Ruane: Gabh mo leithscéal. At present, the children of British Army personnel are at 1·2 units on the local management of schools (LMS) funding scale. I think that that is the answer to the Member's question.

Mrs M Bradley: I thank the Minister for her statement, but what actual progress has been made in dealing with underachievement that distinguishes the return of devolution from the previous period of care and maintenance?

Ms Ruane: I welcome the Member's question, which is a very important one. There is an enormous amount of North/South co-operation, and there was a sense of palpable excitement last night in Dundalk at the launch of the toolkit, a copy of which every school on the island of Ireland will receive.

Members will be glad to know that I am going to Scotland today to talk about how we can learn from what is happening there. It is important to ensure that we deal with underachievement in education and that we achieve academic excellence in the North. We can learn from the South and from England, Scotland and Wales.

I have been all over the island of Ireland. I have met with different Ministers to discuss the Irish language, education and ways in which to remove obstacles to

mobility, so it is good to see that progress is being made. A much more proactive approach is being adopted now than was the case when care and maintenance was in operation here, and we shall only be stepping up our efforts.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire ar an chruinniú de chuid na Comhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas i bhformáid earnála oideachais.

I welcome the statement and the report from the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in education sectoral format.

My question relates to the special needs sector, and to educational psychology services in particular. I am mindful of one pupil who lives in Lifford, County Donegal, and who attends school in Strabane, County Tyrone. The current rules mean that that pupil is not entitled to the full range of support from educational psychology services, and I would like to know how that matter is going to be remedied.

Ms Ruane: Since 1999, the number of educational psychologists in training at Queen's University has been increased from five to 12 each year through the provision of additional resources. That increase in trainees has been sustained following the move to a three-year doctorate course, which has replaced the one-year Masters course in 2006. The Department of Education supports 24 placements each year at Queen's University. The Department has also been working with the education and library boards and with Queen's University to consider future staffing requirements and help to ensure that future supply matches demand.

The Department has also provided additional funding in recent years to all education and library boards to enable them to recruit additional educational psychologists. In addition, the vacancy control measures that have been in place because of the review of public administration have been lifted in relation to the recruitment of permanent educational psychology staff due to the unique situation of the educational psychology service.

I was at a North/South institutional meeting in which we looked at obstacles to mobility: where those exist, we need to identify and deal with them.

Mr McCausland: I note that the Minister travelled to Dublin on 14 November and discussed a wide range of topics, such as youth exchanges. Will she explain how she found time to travel to Dublin to hold a cross-border meeting when she could not find time to meet the youth committee of the Belfast Education and Library Board? The chairman of that committee wrote to the Minister on 1 November, and received a reply dated 20 November stating that her diary was too full to meet them.

Is the Minister aware that that committee was appalled by her answer and her arrogance and that members of her own party made no attempt to defend her?

Finally, having found time to travel to Dublin, will the Minister find time, in her very busy diary, to meet with the Belfast Education and Library Board in the next month to discuss the very important issue of the funding of youth services in Belfast?

Ms Ruane: I am delighted that the Member is concerned about my time management skills. I welcome his question and I will be sending him a copy of all the meetings, and launches, I have attended in relation to youth services.

Mr Attwood: The Minister referred to removing obstacles to mobility on the island. Indeed, in her statement, the Minister referred to one of them: consideration of the transfer of pension rights on a cross-border basis. There is meant to be a report coming back to the NSMC in due course. We have been down this road before with respect to policing. Patten recommended that there should be lateral entry between the Garda Síochána and the PSNI, which has still not happened after eight years because of issues around the transfer of pension rights.

If the Minister is committed to mobility then she must be very vigilant and dedicated to making sure that this matter gets resolved quickly — otherwise, we could have the situation in the years to come in which the transfer of pension rights might not get adjusted and corrected by the Irish Government and the Government in the North in future. Will she also reassure the House that she will be dedicated to getting that issue across the line?

I would like to ask the Minister another question; and I would not normally raise this matter during a statement on a North/South meeting, but the Minister mentioned it on the Floor this morning. She said that there would be no transfer test after 2008. Will she explain to the House why Sinn Féin has tabled an amendment to Sammy Wilson's motion in this afternoon's debate?

The motion states that the deadline for the creation of an alternative transfer test is 31 January 2008. If that is the case, why does the Sinn Féin amendment follow the phrase "alternative transfer test" with the words "if needed"? Is the Minister in a state of confusion or contradiction, given that the commitment that she gave to the House last week that there would be no transfer test after 2008 has already been changed to include the words "if needed"? Can she explain to the House how she reconciles her statement last week with today's Sinn Féin amendment?

Ms Ruane: The North/South Ministerial Council met in institutional format in October. We agreed, on behalf of the Executive, to convene a working group of officials from relevant Departments, including finance

Departments, to consider the transfer of pension rights on a cross-border basis and report to a future Council meeting. I am glad to say that all four parties in the Executive, including the Member's party, will work to ensure that obstacles to mobility are removed so that all our people have equal access to different jobs on both sides of the border.

I will deal with the Member's second question in this afternoon's debate.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity to ask the Minister a question. She has waxed loudly again this morning about underachievement. However, if there is underachievement, it is ministerial underachievement, and there is concern about that in all sectors of education.

The Minister's statement reminded me a bit of our house: there was not much in it. It failed to include any reference to the Irish-language qualification required by the education authorities in the Republic, which specifically discriminates against Northern Ireland-trained teachers and prevents them from obtaining jobs in that jurisdiction. What discussion took place at the joint ministerial meeting on that subject, and can we expect any progress on that long-standing problem in education North and South?

Ms Ruane: The meeting identified the Irish-language requirement for recognition as a primary-school teacher as one of the obstacles to cross-border teacher mobility from North to South. Lack of proficiency in the Irish language represents a shortfall in the range of qualifications of primary-school teachers that must be made good. Significant changes have been made to the previous requirements for proficiency in the Irish language in respect of teaching posts, such as the limitation of the requirement to teachers in primary schools and second-level teachers in Gaeltacht schools who are required to teach in the medium of Irish, and the ending of previous differential rates of pay, pending the acquisition of a recognised qualification.

The Member will know that the Irish language is the national language of Ireland. It is taught in every primary school in the South of Ireland, and respect should be given to it. Significant obstacles to teacher mobility have been removed. I brought the Irish-medium education review team to the Gaeltacht area to see the Irish language in its natural environment. There were people there from many different communities; I met a young Hindu girl who was learning Hindi, Punjabi, Irish and English, and was nearly fluent in them all. I do not know why people here are so worried about learning different languages. Surely we need to learn different languages and respect different cultures, instead of always trying pathetically to put the Irish language down.

11.15 am

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Pensions Bill

Final Stage

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

That the Pensions Bill [NIA 7/07] do now pass.

The Pensions Bill represents a major step in legislating for long-term reform of our pensions system, and it is appropriate that I comment briefly on what has been achieved. As a champion for older and disadvantaged people, I am pleased to have had an opportunity to introduce measures that will provide real help, in particular to women and carers, but also to pensioners in general.

The Bill introduces a complementary package of reforms aimed at improving the coverage, generosity and sustainability of the state pension, simplifying private pensions and providing for the initial functions of the personal accounts delivery authority. The reforms flow largely from recommendations made by the Independent Pensions Commission and they respond to demographic and social trends that the commission identified as creating challenges for the future.

The state pension reforms recognise the different ways in which people contribute to society and they will particularly benefit sections of society such as women and carers. The effects of labour market differences between men and women and the impact of caring responsibilities will be addressed by reducing the number of qualifying years required for a full basic state pension to 30 for men and women and by introducing contribution credits for parents and carers.

These measures will provide significantly enhanced opportunities for accruing state pension entitlement. By the end of the next Parliament, at the latest, the basic state pension will be uprated in line with earnings rather than prices. That will ensure that the basic state pension keeps its value in relation to earnings and will provide a solid underpinning to retirement income.

The standard minimum guarantee element of pension credit, which provides a safety net for those who do not build up sufficient state and private pension entitlements, will continue to be uprated in line with earnings. Members will recall that during the second stage of the Bill I was much charged with the need to ensure that pensioners and the more elderly members of our population receive the benefit to which they are entitled,

hence my recognition of that and the fact that I introduced the benefit uptake campaign earlier in 2007.

The second state pension will be reformed and simplified, and entitlement to a category B pension, which is based on a spouse's national insurance record, will cease to be conditional on the spouse claiming their pension. Inevitably, given the cost implications, there are trade-offs. For example, in order to meet the demands of an ageing population, the state pension age will gradually increase from 65 to 68 by 2046. The abolition of adult dependency increases of category A and category-C retirement pensions will simplify state pension rules and remove an increasingly outdated concept of dependency.

A number of measures will help to simplify private pensions. Over time, layers of regulation have produced an extremely complicated system. The reforms will provide a degree of clarity that does not exist at present.

The Bill also 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.

The Bill aims to ensure that the state pension system remains affordable in the short and the long term and to remove existing inequalities in the system. The reforms form an integrated package and, as a whole, will provide the foundation for a new pension settlement for the twenty-first century — a settlement that will allow everyone to plan with confidence for retirement.

When I attended the Committee for Social Development, its members expressed reservations about the use of accelerated passage for the Pensions Bill. I spoke at length to the Committee about our need to maintain parity with Great Britain on social security and pension matters, and the advantages of our doing so. I addressed Committee members' concerns, and I will further discuss with them how I deal with social security legislation and the issue of parity.

If the Bill did not receive accelerated passage, there could be no guarantee that the Department would have the necessary power to uprate the pension credit standard minimum guarantee in Northern Ireland in line with earnings from April 2008, and that is an important aspect of the reform package.

There is a statutory requirement to seek to maintain a single social security and pensions system in Northern Ireland and Britain. That creates tensions between the Assembly's desire to scrutinise proposed legislation in depth and the need to ensure the parity of timing that is inherent in single systems. I recognise that tension, and I acknowledge the comments of the Chairperson and members of the Committee for Social Development. I have agreed to consider further with the Committee and its Chairperson how best to handle parity legislation for social security issues.

I thank the Chairman and members of the Committee for Social Development, and MLAs in general, for their positive approach and support in progressing this important Bill.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Campbell): As the Minister indicated, the issue has been the subject of some discussion in Committee, and I formally support the Bill being given its Final Stage.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Does the Minister wish to make any further comments?

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Chairperson, on behalf of his Committee, for his contribution and supportive comments.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pensions Bill [NIA 7/07] do now pass.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

FIFA Eligibility Proposal

Mr Deputy Speaker: I must report that a valid petition of concern on the motion was presented on Friday 7 December. Members who wish to inspect the petition may do so in the Business Office. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion has 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech, and all other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. The vote on the motion will be on a cross-community basis, whereas the vote on the amendment requires only a simple majority.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I draw to your attention a matter that arises from my having seen the petition of concern in the Business Office. One of the Sinn Féin names listed is that of Mr Gerry McHugh, who is an erstwhile member of the party. It appears that Mr McHugh signed the petition of concern, but his name has now been scored out. Did Mr McHugh score his name out or was that done by his former party colleagues, who feel that he is now unworthy of putting his name to the petition of concern? Will you rule on whether any such interference would invalidate Sinn Féin's contribution to the petition of concern?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The petition of concern only bites at the point of the vote; therefore we can continue with the debate. I will give a ruling on the matter when the vote is due to be taken.

Mr McNarry: I beg to move

That this Assembly opposes the recent eligibility proposal outlined by FIFA; believes it has the potential to cause serious harm to international soccer relations on the island of Ireland; and calls upon the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to assist the Irish Football Association in opposing the ratification of this unfair and unjust proposal.

It is regrettable that a sporting issue, particularly one that impacts on our country's only international competitive team, is to be blocked by a petition of concern that is deliberately being used to ensure that a cross-community vote will prevent us from supporting our national soccer team — Northern Ireland. It would have been far better had a cross-community vote been used to give the team a ringing endorsement and perpetuate its future. Instead, a pre-emptive sectarian strike has been launched against the team, using the petition of concern mechanism to divide the House,

with unionists and others going one way and nationalists and republicans going the other.

There seems to be an assumption that Catholic players from Northern Ireland will automatically opt to play for the Irish Republic. That assumption is not only ill-advised, but highly emotive. It is wrong to bring that issue into the debate, albeit that that is how things will probably end up if FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) proceeds with its proposal. For the sake of soccer, and the players and supporters of Northern Ireland, let the Assembly remove such a wicked assumption from the equation. If we do nothing else, let us make no contribution to Catholics only playing for the Irish Republic and to Protestants only playing for our country — Northern Ireland.

We are two separate countries: two separate individual competing soccer nations. Religion has nothing to do with the representative honour of playing for the country of your birth. This debate, which has been generated by FIFA, demands that we concentrate on the tampering of eligibility that is being forced on the Irish Football Association. How helpful it would have been had the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) stepped in with an unqualified rejection of this inflammatory FIFA proposal.

In our efforts to stabilise our country, we have stretched the art of compromise almost beyond belief in this place. We have even confused ourselves to the extent that we have almost outwitted each other in pursuit of some hybrid definition of an Irish person, which meets the deeply held convictions to be both Irish and British at the same time, or only Irish or only British.

As a unionist, I have no longing for Northern Ireland to manifest itself in a way in which an allegiance to the country of one's birth is diluted by creating an opt-out clause, or in the way in which someone is bound to playing for a country to which they have no allegiance. It is called "playing for the shirt" — a pride instilled when players put on their jerseys, go out on to the pitch to do their best, be part of a team and want to win, even against teams such as England, Germany and Brazil, or, in our case, the Irish Republic.

Regrettably, the FAI did not do the honourable thing and reject FIFA's proposal. On the contrary, it only proceeded to raise the bar and, lamentably, took the opportunity to stick the boot in. In a move more typical of a striking poacher, the FAI welcomed FIFA's proposal, because, in its selfish view, it would then have a larger pool for team selection. How sad that is. The FAI suggested there was a principle involved, in that players born in this country could choose to play for the Irish Republic if they so wished. Let us first establish that there is no such country as Ireland for any sportsman or sportswoman to represent in competitive or friendly international events.

This island is not divided without the consequences of that division impacting on sport. We are as we are, and we are likely to stay that way for a long time. We are also told that Northern Ireland is a country that is moving on from the horrors of its past. In the momentum of moving on, it is implicit that we leave some things as they are, without mischievous overtures from our neighbours and crass interference from our partners in Europe. Soccer in Northern Ireland fits into the category of "leave alone" — leave it as it is. If politicians cannot leave soccer alone, attempts in the Assembly to move on and build a new future together are put at risk.

11.30 am

I want to build the new Northern Ireland that all Members crave. However, if soccer representation is kicked out in a shoot-out over eligibility, the goodwill that Members work to produce, every day that the Assembly stays in business, will be undone. Let us not test soccer on the issue; let us not open a divisive loophole to be exploited as a contribution to a political agenda or added to an already embattled political arena; let us set examples, instead of tests, for soccer — let the First Minister and deputy First Minister set a good example and show joint support for the Northern Ireland soccer team.

It is understandable that a Northern Ireland-born player not deemed good enough to play for his country will look favourably at another country that is willing to play him in international competitions. However, that is a luxury that is seldom open to Northern Ireland. We need every player that we can get. We do not need — or want — the FAI to act as a surrogate organisation that dangles the attraction of a match like a magnet pulling a player away from putting on the Northern Ireland jersey, which is his as a right.

Neither can we allow FIFA to engage in a preposterous game of fantasy football by imagining that the Belfast Agreement mark I — superseded by mark II at St Andrews — through the consent principle, in some way enshrines consent to tear up the basis of an international footballer's birthplace.

I hope that FIFA is listening to the debate because it will hear, no doubt, those in favour of its proposal studiously, and defiantly, avoid calling Northern Ireland by that name. FIFA will hear its cheerleaders in the Assembly talk offensively about the North, the Six Counties and the Twenty-six Counties instead of Northern Ireland or the Irish Republic. That is because they do not use the term "Northern Ireland" in the House. Sadly, that will be the sum total of the contribution by republicans to the debate, as they strive to be divisive in applauding FIFA. I hope that FIFA sees through that and does not allow its foolishness to be exploited by so-called Irish republicans who are bringing their ideology into sport.

Fortunately, that is not how most unionists, nationalists or Alliance Party supporters behave. The issue is soccer, which is our national game. It is not about coercing a player, turning him inside out over his identity on the pitch or chasing him from the game that he loves and from which he earns his living. I urge Members to support the motion and not sit back and watch FIFA introduce something that they know that they will regret. I know the Minister's position on the issue, and I urge him not to hesitate in forcefully putting the Northern Ireland soccer team's case against this pernicious, malicious and incredibly foolish FIFA proposal.

I say to my colleague Pat Ramsey from the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure that the FIFA proposal is divisive and too hot to be given endorsement by the House.

On this issue, Pat Ramsey has talked of Ireland as a single country, when clearly, on a football and international basis it is not.

Mr P Ramsey: It is the case in rugby.

Mr McNarry: No it is not. I will not use the yarn, "Did you hear, Mr Blatter, about the Irish man born in Australia who could play for the Irish Republic but another fella from Londonderry who could not", as Pat Ramsey did. How good it will be for Northern Ireland football, not only when the FIFA proposal is thrown out, but when all teams with their home ground in Northern Ireland play their games in the Irish League — I will welcome that.

If the only message sent to FIFA from the Assembly is that of a House divided, so be it. The message of a divided House means that FIFA cannot rule: to do otherwise would be unsafe and totally unrepresentative.

Mr Campbell: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after 'by' and insert

'the FIFA legal committee; expresses concern at the undue political pressure exerted on FIFA by the Government of the Republic of Ireland; and offers its support for the Irish Football Association's campaign to ensure that a cross-community team continues to represent Northern Ireland.'

It is unfortunate that the circumstances have arrived that require the above motion to be brought before the House. One would think that everyone who has the best interests of sport and football in Northern Ireland at heart would not only want to see a good or better Northern Ireland team, but the best Northern Ireland team that can possibly be assembled for the future. One would also think that people in Northern Ireland would want to see footballers of the ability that we undoubtedly have — and we have seen them nurtured and brought on in recent years — continue to play for their own country.

It galls me that FIFA, and others, have attempted to propose a directive through the FIFA legal committee to the overall FIFA organisation — and thereby to

international associations — that would result in good-quality players feeling the need to play for a country that is not their own. Such a proposal would be more than disconcerting; it would be divisive, as the mover of the motion said. I thought that Members would be working to create the best team possible.

I was a lover of sport and football long before I became involved in politics. I support football, and I have followed Northern Ireland for many years, as many thousands of people continue so to do. They follow Northern Ireland irrespective of the community or religious background of any of the players. That must continue to be the case, but, unfortunately, it will not be so if the suggestion from the FIFA legal committee is enacted.

Some people will decide to play for their own country: Martin O'Neill, Pat Jennings and others, rightly, played for their own country and were applauded and lauded for doing so. Some of them are among the best footballers that Northern Ireland ever had. However, there will be others who will feel the political pressure not to play for their country — that is not just sad, it is appalling.

Some argue that we should be trying to get the best team assembled on the pitch, and they argue that we could get a better team from a population of almost six million from both countries — Northern Ireland and the Republic. The logic of that argument is that we could have a team of world-beaters if there was an United Kingdom team. Unfortunately, England has found out that it does not work like that. England might have a population of 50 million, but it did not qualify for the 2008 European Championships: it came as close to qualifying as did a small nation of 1.7 million people.

England has shown us that the argument that a bigger population leads to a better team, thereby qualifying for more tournaments, is not correct. I look forward, then, to hearing those who make that argument go on to say, "Let us have a UK team." However, I hear only silence; they do not advocate that. For some politically inspired reason, they want to have a larger population to draw upon, provided it is drawn in a particular way that suits their political agenda, and that is deeply unfortunate.

The other issue is the precedent that this would set, which Mr McNarry mentioned. With political boundaries being redrawn in the Near and Middle East, the same scenario might unfold there: people born in one jurisdiction or country might, because of an emerging political climate, choose to play for another as a result of this ruling. Those are the cans of worms that could be opened if FIFA proceeds down that route.

I am opposed to politicising sport — it should remain totally separate, so that all of us can support anyone who plays for Northern Ireland. I do not care whether they come from west Belfast or Crossmaglen;

if they score for Northern Ireland, we should cheer them. Before the result of the game against England was known, a political representative who now holds high office was asked whether he would be cheering for Northern Ireland or England. Despite the fact that that representative despises England with every ounce of hatred in him, he could not bring himself to say “my own country, Northern Ireland”, because he did not know which he hated most — England or Northern Ireland. I refer to the man who is now a junior Minister, Gerry Kelly of Old Bailey fame. Unfortunately he could not bring himself to make a decision on which team he preferred, or which hatred he held most dear in his heart.

Let us put all of that to one side, get behind our own country and team, and ensure that the best talent from anywhere in Northern Ireland, regardless of religion, politics, or background, plays for their country. That is what the FIFA ruling will prevent.

I thank Mr McNarry for supporting the amendment and hope that, even at this late stage, the House will unite behind the only sensible, pragmatic and positive step forward, which is to abandon this ludicrous proposal.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to be cautious in their remarks.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First of all, republicans do not have any hostility towards the Northern Ireland football team. I recently met Howard Wells and a number of officials from the IFA (Irish Football Association) to see whether Sinn Féin could help them, and obviously we discussed this issue. Today's motion is offensive to a lot of nationalists in the North, who see themselves as Irish citizens and regard the Republic of Ireland football team as their team. That is the reality.

This issue has arisen before in the case of Darron Gibson from Derry, who simply did not want to play for anyone other than the Republic of Ireland. Today's motion is divisive, and if FIFA officials heard the debate they would consider it as being all the more support for their compromise proposal, which is to allow people from the North of Ireland to play either for the Northern Ireland football team or the Republic of Ireland team. Likewise, people from the Republic can play for the Northern Ireland football team. That seems like the best message for this Assembly to send out.

No other sport on this island is subjected to this debate. I challenge anyone on the other side of the House to name one. Cricket, GAA, tennis, rugby, cycling; all those other sports are not subjected to this debate. Why are we causing division — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Ross: Does the Member admit that there is a Northern Ireland volleyball team? In the sports that he

refers to, such as rugby, cricket and hockey, the flag that is used is not a national one, because there is no national team. They play for the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU), and they use the IRFU flag; in hockey, they use the Irish Hockey Union flag; and in cricket, they use the Irish Cricket Union flag.

11.45 am

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for his intervention. However, since we are on the issue of flags, tell me this —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. When you are making remarks —

Mr Butler: Yes, Mr Deputy Speaker —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Please refer all your remarks through the Chair.

Mr A Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Does that ruling apply to all Members on all sides of the House?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I imagine that that is a rhetorical question. Yes, of course, Mr Maskey, it refers to all Members.

Mr Butler: On the issue of flags, will the Member tell me why the Northern Ireland football team is the only team that flies the Union Jack and plays the national anthem? Scotland plays its local anthem; Wales plays its local anthem; even England does not play ‘God Save the Queen’. Northern Ireland is the only country to play it. What does that tell us? Does that not send out a political message to nationalists in the North that they are unwelcome?

A lot of good work has been done by —

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mr Butler: No.

The IFA has done a lot of good work in trying to eradicate sectarianism in football here, and I welcome that. When we met Howard Wells recently, we praised him for that. The proposals from FIFA's legal committee are the only sensible way to deal with the issue. It is ridiculous for unionists to try to tell nationalists in the North that they must play for Northern Ireland and no other football team. It will not add up. That is why Sinn Féin has presented a petition of concern.

The Chamber must send out a message of compromise based on the Good Friday Agreement. The Good Friday Agreement enshrined people's identity here in the North so that they could be British or Irish. If people accept that — and everybody in the Chamber signed up to the Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement — they should accept what FIFA is saying. It is the only logical, imaginative and sensible way to deal with the proposal.

The unionists lobbying on this issue need to face the realities. Many nationalists do not accept Northern Ireland as their national team. At the same time, and whatever people's religious or political background, if footballers want to play for Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland, then they should be allowed to get on with that. Nobody should stand in their way or deter them.

Members should look at the example of Derry City Football Club. It plays in the Republic of Ireland's league, and its policy is that if people want to play for the Republic of Ireland then no one will stand in their way. Likewise, if any of the players want to play for the Northern Ireland football team they are given every opportunity to pursue that course, and that is the compromise that Members should send out. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr P Ramsey: At the outset, it is important to put on record that the SDLP understands why the Irish Football Association wants to oppose the FIFA proposals. The IFA is concerned that they will reduce the number of players that it has to choose from, and its opposition is understandable. However, the issue of playing for one's country, or one's international team, is complex. Unionists see Northern Ireland as a country — some even see it as a nation. Therefore, from their perspective, it makes sense to have a national team called Northern Ireland.

Irish nationalists, on the other hand, see the Six Counties of Northern Ireland as a state with complex relationships between Britain and Ireland, but which is geographically — and, for many of us, socially — part of the island of Ireland. Coming back to what Mr McNarry said, it would be a ridiculous situation if an Irish citizen, born to Irish parents in any country of the world, be it Boston, Bangkok or Australia, could play for the Republic of Ireland under the previous ruling, but someone born in Derry, Bangor or Belfast could not. That does not make sense.

People may shake their heads, but that was the ruling prior to FIFA's advice. Hopefully, that advice will be supported at the weekend.

I support Northern Ireland. When the team does well, the communities in Northern Ireland do well and there is a feel-good factor. Similarly, in nationalist communities, there is a feel-good factor when the Republic of Ireland does well. People must respect and honour that.

David McNarry said that we should leave it alone. Gregory Campbell said that sport should be separate from politics. The crux of the problem is that, if sport is separate from politics, why, two years ago when Darron Gibson and Mark McCrystal were asked to play for an under-21 select team, did the IFA insist that they carry British passports? Is that leaving sport alone?

Mr Campbell: Does the Member accept that that is not the case now?

Mr P Ramsey: Yes, I fully accept that. However, I say directly to Gregory Campbell that the problem is that that was an own goal by the IFA because it —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Nothing should be said directly to another Member — only through the Speaker.

Mr P Ramsey: Mr Deputy Speaker, it was an own goal by the IFA, which bombarded FIFA with communications about player eligibility. Over a period of two years, 10 years ago, 10 players from Derry City Football Club played for the Republic of Ireland. There was not a word then. This situation is a consequence of the mess due to the passport issue and the negativity of the IFA.

Although many nationalists enjoy watching Northern Ireland and hope that the team wins because the players are local, we do not consider it to be the national team. Given that the Irish Constitution has an inclusive approach to Irishness, covering people born in Ireland and those of Irish descent who were born abroad, nationalists do not consider the Republic of Ireland team to be representative of the Irish nation. The emphasis should be on Irish people rather than on the territory of the Republic of Ireland or the island of Ireland.

Ultimately, the SDLP wants politics to be removed from the debate and a single team to represent all the people on the island — as happens in other major sports. Such a team would have the potential for tremendous success on the field, and one could argue that such a team would be multinational because it would comprise British and Irish players. The same argument could be made for the Members of this House, because everyone who was born in Northern Ireland is a citizen of two nations.

Given the complexity of Northern Ireland, which is not the same as most other states or regions, the FIFA proposal offers a liberal approach that is sensible and wise. A player's allegiance would be left to the individual, and I fully support and defend an individual's right to choose.

For far too long in Northern Ireland, we have been telling one another what we are and we have been forcing one another to be something we are not. It is time that we allowed ourselves the freedom and space to be what we want to be — British, Irish, Northern Irish, or any combination of those. Frankly, it is none of the Assembly's business which team a player chooses to play for; and, given the complexity of the relationships on these islands, the Assembly should be protecting the freedom of individual players to choose for themselves.

Mr Lunn: The Alliance Party supports the motion and has no problem with the amendment. We regard

the debate as an opportunity, once and for all, to clarify the status of Northern Ireland sportspeople.

Members should note that the FIFA decision has been taken only at committee level, and that the IFA and the Minister have the opportunity to make a case against it — and I hope that they will.

There are several reasons why the proposal is slightly baffling. Although a person's eligibility to represent their country was based on birth, lineage or residence, FIFA's proposal would base eligibility on citizenship. Across Europe, that has the potential to open a can of worms that would have implications way beyond Northern Ireland. I do not know whether this debate will be broadcast in Bosnia. If it is, the Bosnian football association is sure to take notice because it is in danger of losing Bosnian-Serb players to Serbia. In the same way, Romanian-born, ethnic Hungarians might opt to play for Hungary — and so it would go on.

However, those are not the reasons why the Alliance Party supports the motion and the amendment. Based on what Members have said this morning, there is now a risk that the distinction between our international teams will become purely sectarian.

Northern Ireland will become a team for Ulster Protestants, and the Republic will become a team for Irish Catholics. The ongoing community work of the IFA will go to waste; the recent success of our religiously mixed Northern Ireland team could be endangered in the future, and we will have another source of division.

We have come a long way in taking sectarianism out of soccer, and I applaud the work of the IFA community-relations office and the amalgamation of supporters' clubs. However, we must recognise that there is still a delicate work in progress. The problems for young Catholic players have been evident for years, and they go way back. I am sure that Pat Ramsey remembers John Crossan and the abuse that he received at Windsor Park in the bad old days. In his case, the sectarian abuse was reasonably good humoured, and, as it happened, he took it in good spirit.

However, Neil Lennon was a vital part of the Northern Ireland team for some years. His acceptance on the team would have represented a major step forward. However, when he joined Glasgow Celtic, he became an outcast. All the old prejudices surfaced, and, as we all know, he was driven out of the Northern Ireland team by disgraceful sectarian abuse at Windsor Park. Although, that example is an exception, despite the excellent community-relations work done by the IFA and the supporters' clubs, we have not managed to eliminate sectarianism completely.

The authorities need all the help that they can get to continue that work. They do not need FIFA's interference, which has the potential to destabilise the situation. If we are to produce a Northern Ireland team that welcomes

players and support from all Northern Irish men and women, we will not be helped by having a decision foisted on us by FIFA, particularly a contrived decision that flies in the face of its normal approach, common sense and logic, and which has nothing constructive to offer, but which has the potential to produce two codes — one Roman Catholic and one Protestant.

The Alliance Party particularly respects the part of the motion that refers to the potential for relations between the FAI and the IFA to be harmed. It is a pity that the issue was raised in the first place, but we are where we are. We should recognise co-operation between the associations, not only at the obvious level of competitions, such as the Setanta Sports Cup, which is very successful, but at youth-development level and elsewhere. We should not support moves that could poison that work.

We accepted formally in 1998 that anyone born on the island of Ireland is entitled to Irish citizenship. However, eligibility for an international soccer team has not previously been determined in that way; it has been determined by birth, residence or lineage. We also accepted in 1998 that the Assembly is responsible for Northern Ireland, and that that responsibility extends to soccer. My party's vision is of a broadly supported, mixed-religion Northern Ireland team performing successfully at a new stadium — preferably at the Maze site — by 2011. Therefore, I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion and the amendment. I have been a supporter of the Northern Ireland football team for a very long time — since I was a wee boy, and that was not yesterday.

I remember going to matches as a teenager, when I dreamed of possessing the skills of those on the field, but, although I had dreams, I did not have the skill. As I grew older, I took the level of support higher. I followed my team to Spain in 1982 and to Mexico in 1986. I had passion for the game and a desire to see my country excel. The 1982 and 1986 teams represented the entire community, as does the team of 2007.

As I grew older and raised a family, I had the pleasure of seeing my boys going to watch the matches, and passionately cheering their team to victory.

I have seen the team go through bad times as well as good times. I have always been there; the role of true supporters is to support their team when it is not doing well.

12.00 noon

It is a pleasure to see how the philosophy of Football for All, which has been implemented by the IFA, has brought football back to being a family game. Grandfathers and grandmothers can now bring their grandchildren to matches with no fear of them learning

behaviours, and perhaps lyrics, that they would not like them to learn, and with no fear of violence.

Football in Northern Ireland has come a long way, not simply on the international stage, where Northern Ireland is now one of the best teams in the home countries and is no longer thought of as an easy three points, but on the home stage, where both sides of the community find themselves able and willing to support their home team — our home team. We can be proud of the progress that has been made in recent times.

Northern Ireland supporters — known as the green-and-white army — have been crowned European supporters of the year and received the Brussels International Supporters Award in 2006. Therefore, to come that far, and to bring so many along with us, to now having sectarianism brought into the game from the highest level cannot be tolerated.

If FIFA makes the ruling that has been suggested, it will mean that only Protestants will ever play for the Northern Ireland team, because any Catholic who wants to play, and has the ability to do so, will be pressured into playing for the Republic of Ireland — whether or not he wants to. Not so long ago, the Republic of Ireland team were known as the “England B team”. I am sure that that sent shock waves through the Republic of Ireland supporters and players.

To subject football to something that we have fought so hard to move away from is not the way forward. That is why it is the Assembly's duty to stamp out sectarianism, even though it comes from the highest realms of FIFA. It is absolutely ridiculous that people who have no idea of the problems that we have overcome in this sport are thoughtlessly trying to push through rulings that will only encourage division in communities once again. That is not the way it should be.

Recently, Northern Ireland's footballing hero David Healy — who comes from Killyleagh, incidentally — took part in a football skills day in Newtownards, which was attended by thousands. Kids came from all arts and parts of the community to take part in the event, which was hosted by the Ulster-Scots Agency. Kids from Portaferry played footy with kids from Portavogie, and there were no issues or problems.

The reason for that is that children are coming to the stage where the love of the game is overtaking all other factors, and it is that drive that we need to keep in motion so that our children can keep playing the game that they love with others — regardless of their background. We should try to encourage that as part of a shared future. We hear comments about a shared future over and over again. If Members believe in a shared future, they should prove it today in the Assembly for the future on the football field.

Surely it is the duty of all Members to support that ideal in its entirety, not just when it suits them to prove

a point. It is about skill, ability and passion, and it is about the country that people choose to play for and why. This is not a recipe for the shared future to which some Members have referred; it is a recipe for an old meal that has gone mouldy and bad. We do not need to serve that again.

As I have said previously, we are a small country with a big heart. However, our small numbers cannot be further stretched by lessening the choice of those who play. It is not simply that Catholic men will not want to play for their country and wear the Northern Ireland shirt but that they will be expected to play for the Republic; they will have no freedom of choice. That cannot be accepted.

In conclusion, the FIFA mission is to:

“Develop the game, touch the world, build a better future”.

That will certainly not be achieved in Northern Ireland as FIFA tries to drag us back to sectarianism and politics. We have left that behind — where it belongs. The DUP supports a shared future for all. I support the motion and the amendment, and I urge all Members to do likewise.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The motion has been tabled in an attempt to split the House in a controversial manner. That is why the joint petition of concern has been lodged.

On many occasions, I have heard it said that politics should not be brought into sport. However, Members of the Assembly have tabled the motion in order to do the exact opposite. The core of the argument goes against the Good Friday Agreement, the same agreement to which the Members who tabled the motion signed up. What is going on there?

The issue of what teams people play for is a matter of choice for the individual. Fair play to those individuals who are good enough to play for either team; they must be congratulated on their achievements. Instead of allowing people to choose which team to play for, Mr Kennedy and Mr McNarry are playing silly games with the motion and should be given the red card for their foul play.

I have heard MLAs suggest that, were more players from the North to choose to play for the Republic, sectarianism could creep back into the game in the North. What a load of nonsense; what drivel. What proof has any Member that that could happen?

I ask Members to recall Neil Lennon and Anton Rogan. Every time that they kicked the ball while playing for Northern Ireland, they were booed. They were jeered off the pitch, because they played for Glasgow Celtic. *[Interruption.]*

Some Members: It never happened.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr P Maskey: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. If some of the Members opposite were to watch archive footage of Northern Ireland matches in which those players participated, they would be proven wrong.

I am already on record as having commended the great work that Michael Boyd and others in his team have done to reduce sectarianism in soccer. Fair play to him and his team on that success. However, this debate should not be about sectarianism but about players' rights to play for the team of their choosing. How can an individual perform to the best of his or her ability if that individual does not want to play for a team?

Mr Dodds: Will the Member give way?

Mr P Maskey: I will not. Are we not in favour of improving our teams, of showing leadership and of giving our young players every opportunity to compete at the highest level? If the answer is yes, we should accept FIFA's recent draft proposal on eligibility.

Mr McElduff: Will the Member give way?

Mr P Maskey: Certainly. *[Interruption.]*

Mr McElduff: I have come on as a sub, go raibh maith agat.

I am curious about the repeated use in the debate of the word "country". The Six Counties is variously described as a "country" or a "nation". Sometimes it is called a "region", a "state" or a "province". Unionists cannot have it five ways. What is it? Does it constitute a nation, a country, a state or a region? In my eyes, it is two thirds of a province and about a quarter of a country.

I prefer to follow Gaelic games, but I must say that the only way in which our soccer players will be able to compete on the world stage, or even to have a competitive edge, is as part of an all-Ireland soccer team. Unionist members opposite are afraid to taste success with a truly national football team.

I want to draw attention to the Minister's comments

Mr Dodds: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am unsure as to whether Mr McElduff's contribution constitutes an intervention or a speech, but it seems to have gone on for an extremely long time. If it sets a precedent that a Member can stand up and speak for as long as he wishes during an intervention, there is little point in Members putting their names down on the list of Members who wish to speak.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Interventions are allowed at the discretion of the Member who has the Floor. In this case, the Member has allowed the intervention.

Mr McElduff: At the discretion of Mr Maskey, I continue.

Lord Morrow: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, will you explain to the House why, if

an intervention is allowed at the discretion of the Member who has the Floor, that Member is compensated for interventions with additional time?

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is convention that a Member is compensated with additional time only when a contribution is to last five minutes or less.

Mr McElduff: I refer Members to the statement that the Minister of Culture, Art and Leisure made to the House on the strategy for sport and physical recreation on 9 October. He said:

"it is important that people can fulfil their desires to participate for the team that they wish, whether that is the Great Britain team or the Ireland team." — *[Official Report, Vol 24, No 6, p263, col 2]*.

Mr P Maskey: I thank the Member for his points, and I hope that the Minister will deal with some of them.

I have posed two questions: do we accept the current draft FIFA proposal, and do we commend FIFA for it? The FAI has said that it is pleased that FIFA has once again upheld the principle that players who are born anywhere on the island should be free to choose whether they wish to play for the Republic of Ireland or for Northern Ireland. The FAI has shown leadership, for which it should be commended.

Howard Wells of the IFA has said that he was staggered by the FIFA decision. However, I urge him not to bring politics into sport. Unless he has read the Good Friday Agreement, he should be careful about commenting on the matter, because it is about people's rights as well as being a sporting issue.

Therefore, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I urge all Members to kick the motion into touch. Let us not score an own goal by supporting the motion or the amendment. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank Lord Morrow for reminding me about timing, but I was aware that the Member was allowed up to one minute extra for an intervention.

Mr Dodds: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The clock was stopped during the intervention. Is it to be the case during an intervention that the clock is stopped, a minute is added, and as much intervention time as desired is taken? That seems quite bizarre.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The clock was stopped during the point of order, and at no other time during the Member's speech.

Mr A Maskey: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. You said that you had been aware of the time, despite Lord Morrow's having reminded you of it. Can you advise the House why you did not remind him that he was interrupting a contribution by another Member?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is part of the cut and thrust of debate in the Chamber.

Lord Browne: I support the motion and the amendment.

I shall begin with a quotation:

“The world is a place rich in natural beauty and cultural diversity, but also one where many are still deprived of their rights. FIFA now has an even greater responsibility to reach out and touch the world, using football as a symbol of hope and integration.”

That is part of FIFA’s mission statement and promise. I strongly contend that the proposal to allow players the choice to play for Northern Ireland or for another foreign county is a contradiction of that mission statement and promise.

FIFA states that:

“the world is a place of natural beauty and cultural diversity”.

Northern Ireland is certainly a place of natural beauty and cultural diversity, but at a time when we endeavour to work together and respect each other’s cultural differences, FIFA is proposing to divide our community by allowing players to choose between our country and another.

Mr Dodds: Not only is that proposal wrong for Northern Ireland, but it is wrong in respect of FIFA’s rules, and dangerous for world football. If we follow the logic of the previous contributor to the debate, who said that footballers should play for whichever country they like, that would mean that Germans would be able to play for Italy, and Italians would be able to play for France. That is exactly the same principle as allowing people in Northern Ireland to play for the Irish Republic. That completely undermines everything that FIFA stands for, as well as world football in smaller developing countries. Who would think for one moment that Premier League footballers — such as Didier Drogba — whom certain African countries may call on, would not be more attracted to playing for the bigger teams? That is why the proposal is dangerous.

Lord Browne: I agree that the FIFA proposal could open a can of worms. There is political instability in many countries that have sizeable ethnic minorities; for example, there is a large Russian minority in Ukraine, and there are Algerian and African ethnic minorities in France. Where would this ridiculous proposal end? Should it become reality, it would not be difficult to predict which country one section of our community would choose, and which the other section would choose. That would have the effect of dividing our soccer players and our community into two separate camps that would support two separate national soccer teams.

Mr P Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Lord Browne: I have already given way. Some may argue that that already happens, which is probably true to some extent, but, recently, there has been a considerable increase in support for Northern Ireland’s soccer team from across our communities. In recent

years, the Northern Ireland soccer team has been a unifying symbol, but now the world governing body of soccer wants to create division.

FIFA’s mission statement states that it:

“now has an even greater responsibility to reach out and touch the world, using football as a symbol of hope and integration.”

The suggestion that players should be able to choose between two national sporting bodies without any criteria being applied will bring about the opposite of hope and integration.

12.15 pm

We need only look back to the recent European championships, when the Northern Ireland team, whose players hail from across the community, was able to compete for a place in the finals up until the last qualifying game, having beaten major soccer nations such as Spain, Sweden and Denmark along the way. The opportunity for the team to compete, and the hope that we have for football here, will be considerably reduced if the Irish Football Association has a smaller pool of players from which to select. There could be no better way to divide our community in sport than by FIFA’s suggestion, which completely contradicts the word “integration”, which is used in its own mission statement.

I agree with FIFA that soccer is a wonderful game. However, I urge it to steer clear of politics. I urge it to recognise the hurt and damage that its suggestion has already caused, and the potential for permanent damage that it would cause the community if it ever became a reality. I therefore call upon FIFA to adhere to its own mission statement and immediately withdraw its suggestion. I urge every Member in the House — and I mean every Member — to unite against FIFA’s divisive proposal and to support the motion and the amendment.

Mr K Robinson: I support the motion and the amendment. I believe that FIFA’s move on nationality rules for football in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is not only backward-looking but is also deeply offensive to the many fans who support the game from the terraces in all weathers. The health and future of football depends on those fans.

Since the defeat of England in 2005, there has been an increase in national pride in the Northern Ireland team, with the demand for replica kits and tickets outstripping supply, and with tongue-in-cheek songs, such as ‘We’re not Brazil; we’re Northern Ireland’, ringing around Windsor Park; followed, perhaps, by ‘It’s just like watching Brazil’, whether the team’s performing like Brazil or not.

In 2006, Northern Ireland supporters were awarded the Brussels International Supporters Award for their efforts to stamp out sectarianism, their charity work, their general good humour and their behaviour at home

and overseas. The IFA website, entitled 'Our Wee Country' says a great deal about the driving force behind the IFA. It also says a lot about the fans and their aspirations.

I have listened carefully to what has been said from the Benches opposite. I also note that the IFA has invested greatly in the development of young and promising players throughout the various echelons that lead ultimately to a place in the international squad. Will the IFA be denied the outcome of all the work that it has put in? FIFA would do well to take account of that if it is to live up to its primary objectives. In its mission statement, FIFA talks about how it aims to:

"Develop the game, touch the world, build a better future".

How can any step that has the potential fatally to undermine one of the constituent parts of FIFA, namely the IFA, adhere to that primary mission statement?

That scenario is exactly what will happen if FIFA's proposal to permit players who are born in Northern Ireland to choose to play for the Irish Republic goes ahead. This ill-considered move has the potential to fatally undermine the IFA, since the FAI will be at liberty to poach players who are from Northern Ireland, thus effectively disabling the Northern Ireland squad. That flies in the face of fair competition. It will also have the effect of undermining football in the Province, which has become a beacon of success for the community during many dark days of the past 30 years, and despite the relatively low population base.

My colleague Danny Kennedy will raise an important issue later in the debate. He will describe FIFA's move as being overtly political. The Assembly must consider the political context of the move. The blurring of the nationality rule flies in the face of all that the Assembly has done.

Mr McCartney: Will the Member give way?

Mr K Robinson: No. It is based on the outdated political thinking that lay behind the 1937 Irish Constitution. One article in that constitution that caused great offence to unionist-minded people in Northern Ireland was the claim to what was described as the "national territory" of Ireland, which, under the terms of that enactment, meant the whole island, including Northern Ireland. That claim stood in the way of political progress here for decades and introduced an element of irreconcilability into politics. It entrenched that negative spirit in the law.

The Belfast Agreement, and the Assembly that flowed from it, were partly based on the renunciation — by politicians and the ordinary voters in the Irish Republic, in a referendum — of that claim to the territory of Northern Ireland. Following that, a new principle of consent was introduced, whereby the

future of Northern Ireland would be decided by the voters in a border poll, thus reassuring unionist people that they could not and would not be coerced into a united Ireland.

Political progress here is based on the common shared Northern Ireland identity, which, for one side of our community, has a subset of nationalist aspirations, while the other side has unionist aspirations. That Northern Ireland identity is expressed in many ways: it is expressed in our shared Government in Northern Ireland; in our joint approach to economic and social problems; in the way we worked together in New York and Washington in the search for inward investment for Northern Ireland plc; in our working together in the Assembly; and in football, which is a major leisure activity and a major icon for identification right across our community.

People identify with our Northern Ireland football team. They identify with the shared fun and shared values of football. To unpick the Northern Ireland team, which will be the result of the FIFA proposal, is to undermine one of the ways in which we hold our communities together. That must be, at the very least, bad for our sense of community cohesion. It is bad for a confident Northern Ireland that is seeking its long-awaited place in the sun.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom a rá ag an tús go bhfuil mé in éadan an rúin agus in éadan an leasaithe chomh maith.

I am opposed to the motion and the amendment.

The Good Friday Agreement, in the section that deals with constitutional issues, recognises:

"the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose, and accordingly confirm that their right to hold both British and Irish citizenship is accepted by both Governments and would not be affected by any future change in the status of Northern Ireland."

Mr McCartney: I am mindful of what you said about the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, and I heard Lord Browne referring to FIFA's mission statement. Article 15 of FIFA's own rules states that:

"Any person holding the nationality of a country is eligible to play for the representative teams of the Association of that country."

When that is coupled with the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, the case is closed, lads.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention. The Good Friday Agreement clearly recognises the situation that exists in Northern Ireland whereby we have two communities with varying national and political aspirations, both of which are equally legitimate when pursued by wholly peaceful and democratic means. That principle is recognised by all sides of the House. The question of nationality in

general has been settled by the Good Friday Agreement. Individuals may choose which passport they hold.

We should all agree that no one should be forced, in any way, to accept a nationality to which they do not aspire and with which they feel uncomfortable. People in Northern Ireland have a choice. They can choose to describe themselves as Irish, British or both. That clearly reflects the political and cultural realities on the ground, and ensures that no one is bound by a designation that does not reflect their outlook.

The FIFA ruling reflects the realities of the Good Friday Agreement, which is, after all, an international agreement between two sovereign Governments, supported by the political parties. The FIFA ruling allows players, as individuals — subject to certain provisos — to choose the team for which they want to play, according to their own preference. That is how it should be. It is wrong to deny players that choice. That would be tantamount to denying them that which the Good Friday Agreement offers them — the choice of expressing their nationality, as they see it. The agreement is concerned with giving people that choice, and not denying it to them.

We should not pre-empt the choices that players may make. Players from every side of the community will make decisions for themselves, and they should be free to do so. Some players may make their choices on the basis of nationality, while others may choose the team that best suits their career prospects. We must remember that footballers are professionals; football is a career to them, and, ultimately, many of them may be more influenced by where their professional interests lie than by any other consideration.

Cibé bunús atá lena rogha, is é an rud is tábhachtaí ná gur leo féin an rogha agus go bhfuil said saor leis an rogha sin a dhéanamh gan cháineadh.

Whatever the basis of the choice, the important factor is that it is their choice to make, and they should be free to make it without any censure whatsoever. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): I welcome the opportunity to debate the recent FIFA eligibility proposal.

Members will be aware that, for several years, there has been considerable public concern about the state of football in Northern Ireland in general. In the past few years, my Department has striven to help football to address those issues through its soccer strategy initiative. As part of that initiative, DCAL (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure), in conjunction with Sport Northern Ireland and the IFA, has been working to bring about improvements in the game across a number of areas, including governance, administration, facilities, youth development and, importantly, community relations.

In recent times, we have witnessed signs of a revival in the state of our game, which has given all of us increasing grounds for optimism. The success of the Northern Ireland football team is perhaps the most obvious sign of that improvement. Good results, great performances, and the record-breaking feats of David Healy have resulted in a rise in the team's FIFA ranking, from a low of one-hundred-and-twenty-fourth in 2004, to our current position of thirty-second in the world. For a nation of its size, Northern Ireland is right at the top of its game.

That, in turn, has brought about a feel-good factor right across the community, which is best evidenced by a rise in attendance at international matches and a huge demand for tickets that far exceeds the capacity of current facilities. A great deal has been done to improve the image of the sport across all sections of the community. However, that is not the whole picture, and considerable changes lie ahead.

The recent consultants' report on the state of Windsor Park raises concerns about the staging of international football in Northern Ireland in the future. To help the IFA to address that concern, DCAL has developed proposals for a new state-of-the-art multi-sports stadium capable of meeting all the requisite standards for international football. Such a facility would position international football to make a further contribution to improving the image of football and of Northern Ireland, given that the stadium could be shared with other sports. Members will be aware that a decision will have to be made on that matter in the very near future.

Mr P Ramsey: Does the Minister accept that there is a unique situation in Northern Ireland, in that Derry City Football Club plays in the League of Ireland? Furthermore, if a young man from the Minister's own constituency played in the League of Ireland, was not called up for any of the Northern Ireland junior sides, but was eventually called up for the Republic of Ireland, would the Minister respect and acknowledge that young man's contribution and his right to choose what he wanted to do?

Mr Poots: I met Derry City Football Club last week, and, during our discussions, I encouraged the club to come back home to the league to which it belongs. That would be very good for football in Northern Ireland and in the city of Londonderry, because it would give the team a far greater opportunity to play games locally and the fans a greater opportunity to go to see matches. The Member has made a very good case for Derry City Football Club's returning to the Irish League.

12.30 pm

Considering the pressing issues that Northern Ireland football faces, and its hopes for the future, it is most unfortunate that FIFA's legal committee has unexpectedly

produced a proposal that seriously threatens the identity of our national team. I believe that that proposal has emerged on foot of undue political pressure that has been applied to FIFA. That is disappointing.

It is particularly disappointing that people who are involved in the Assembly on the basis of seeking to build a better Northern Ireland should undermine that aim in respect of football. Those people are undermining the good work that is being done by the Irish Football Association to develop a cross-community football team, and theirs is a path that would sectarianise the Northern Ireland football team. All of that serves to drive against the shared-future agenda. Those people were supposed to have signed up to that; however — clearly — they are not as committed to a shared future as they have said.

Mr McCartney: Has the Minister sought legal advice in respect of the Good Friday Agreement's bearing on the FIFA proposal?

Mr Poots: By making the proposal, FIFA are stirring up a hornets' nest. Members have mentioned other countries in Europe. A high number of Russians live in the Baltic states. Large numbers of Hungarians live outside the borders of their country, in south-east Europe. We must also consider the position of the ethnic Albanians, Croats and Serbs. FIFA is engaging in politics in a dangerous way if it goes down that route.

A person whose parents were born in Ireland and had moved to Australia can play for Ireland. That is a completely different situation from that of people who have been born and brought up in Northern Ireland, and whose parents have lived in Northern Ireland for generations. Northern Ireland is a legal entity, and it is part of the United Kingdom. Irrespective of whether people like it, Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom.

I am fully aware of the considerable debate among FIFA, the IFA and the FAI. Officials from my Department have been in regular contact with the IFA on this matter since it arose. As a result, I understand that the IFA had strongly advised FIFA to be cautious on this matter, and that FIFA representatives had, in response, as recently as October, assured the IFA that it intended to uphold the principle that players born in Northern Ireland should represent the Northern Ireland team. That was before undue, unwarranted and very wrong political pressure was applied on a sporting matter, when others decided to introduce politics into sport.

It was, therefore, disappointing to learn that the FIFA legal committee now proposes that players born in Northern Ireland and entitled to hold UK or Irish nationality should be eligible to play for either the IFA or the FAI.

Miss McIlveen: Does the Minister agree that Northern Ireland is in a unique position? Not only are we one of four football associations in one country, but a foreign country had a claim on our territory, and now willingly hands out its passports to our citizens to justify stealing our players.

Mr McCartney: Read the Good Friday Agreement.

Mr Poots: We are in a unique situation, and all four countries that make up the UK have independent football teams. That is partly due to the fact that the UK is the home of football, and we have been given some leeway in that matter over the years. I trust that that will continue. I am sure that Members opposite would not wish to move to a situation whereby everyone in Northern Ireland who reached a certain standard would have to play for a United Kingdom football team, and that that would be their only choice.

I firmly believe that the FIFA legal committee's recommendation, if accepted by FIFA's executive committee, would have serious implications for the future of international football in Northern Ireland. Perhaps that is the agenda that some people follow. That would undermine the credibility of our international team among its fans and supporters. That will also lead to confusion about eligibility and representation, and could well have other more significant repercussions for the wider structures of football in Northern Ireland.

Although I fully understand the desire of the Republic of Ireland to poach Northern Ireland players, given the current standing of both teams, it is still not right. If footballers are allowed to choose which country —

Mr McCartney: Read the Good Friday Agreement.

Mr Poots: I hear a Member who keeps getting agitated about a political agreement. We are talking about sport. We should be attempting to separate politics and sport, but some people keep trying to drag politics back into it.

If footballers were allowed to choose which country they represent, there would be a real danger of Northern Ireland losing some of its most promising talent. We have only to look back at the late 1960s and 1970s, when certain Members encouraged young people not to apply to join the RUC, but to apply to the gardaí. We do not want to go down that route when it comes to sport. We must keep politics out of sport, and allow Northern Ireland's sport, and sporting heroes — from whatever background — to develop.

The FIFA proposal could undo much of the good work of the IFA, as well as of the Amalgamation of Official Northern Ireland Supporters' Clubs in an effort to stamp out sectarianism at international football matches.

It is worth noting some of the achievements of those bodies. The IFA's Football for All project has worked to provide anti-sectarian and anti-racism training support for football clubs and community groups, using football

to celebrate diversity. With significant financial backing from UEFA (Union of European Football Associations), the Football for All campaign has been extended across our society to incorporate activities to tackle exclusion, and to ensure that football is welcoming, safe and inclusive — regardless of age, gender, ability, disability, ethnic background or religion.

In September 2006, delegates from UEFA and the EU awarded the Amalgamation of Official Northern Ireland Supporters' Clubs the Brussels International Supporters Award for its efforts to stamp out sectarianism. More recently, on 31 October 2007, the IFA and the amalgamation were runners-up in the volunteer category of the UK-wide International Sports Event Management and Security Awards, in recognition of their efforts to give sectarianism the boot at international matches.

It is sad that some people want to bring sectarianism back into football. I am amazed that Members should wish to create a single-identity football team. Moreover, I am concerned at the astonishing abuse of the petition of concern. That flies in the face of the principles of the shared future that was referred to earlier.

As the Minister with responsibility for sport, I have sought to reach out to bodies with which we may not, previously, have been involved — in particular, the GAA — which I commend for its good work. I encourage that body to be more cross-community driven, and to see how it can reach out to other sections of the community that may not have participated much in its sports. I find it sad that some politicians want to drive Northern Ireland football in the opposite direction, and remove its cross-community element. That is an absolute disgrace.

Once again, we can be truly proud of international football in Northern Ireland, on the pitches and the terraces. The recommendation that is under consideration by FIFA has the potential to undo or jeopardise much of the progress of recent years. I cannot foresee that that so-called freedom of choice will in any way benefit the development of international football in Northern Ireland — or Northern Ireland's sporting image in general — particularly when we are developing a biennial competition for the Celtic nations. Every other year, the Northern Ireland team will be in competition with teams from the Irish Republic, Scotland and Wales — yet there are people from Northern Ireland who want to undermine our team before the competition even begins.

Against that backdrop of concerns, and immediately after FIFA's announcement, I met Howard Wells, the chief executive of the IFA, and Raymond Kennedy, its president, to discuss the proposed recommendation of the FIFA legal committee.

Mr Wells believes that the recommendation flies in the face of FIFA's existing player-eligibility rules, as

set out in that organisation's circular 901. He advised me that the IFA will strongly oppose the legal committee's recommendation, and I fully endorse that position. Further, I offer the IFA whatever support it feels will be useful in having that recommendation rejected by the executive committee. I am conscious that this matter concerns a sporting organisation, and, given that I do not want to interfere inappropriately in the decisions of sporting bodies, I will take advice from the relevant sporting bodies on what I should do.

As the Minister for sport, I have written to the general secretary of FIFA asking him to review the recommendation of the legal committee as a matter of urgency and to stand by FIFA's long-standing principle that only players who are born within the territory of an association and who hold appropriate citizenship should be eligible to play for its international team.

In conclusion, I welcome the interest that the Assembly has shown in the matter through this debate. I confirm that I am totally opposed to FIFA's proposal, and I assure the House that I am doing all in my power to ensure that a satisfactory conclusion is reached as soon as possible. Further to that, I have asked Howard Wells to keep me informed of developments.

Mr Ross: Members' contributions have shown that this is a divisive issue. That should be a warning to FIFA that it should not proceed down this route.

When the suggestion was first mooted that players from Northern Ireland who have no family or blood ties to the Irish Republic should be allowed to, effectively, choose which international team to play for, I, like many others, felt that local football could be damaged. Such a decision could potentially create a dangerous precedent in international football. Many Members have mentioned that point this afternoon.

I have written to FIFA about the matter, and, through correspondence with the Minister, I know that he has done the same, as he has just confirmed. He has made representations to both FIFA and the IFA about the apparent inconsistency between this decision and FIFA's own rules and regulations. In his contribution to the debate, my colleague Lord Browne mentioned FIFA's mission statement.

I am aware that three Brazilian players wished to represent the state of Qatar, but were barred from doing so by FIFA. We are not Brazil; we are Northern Ireland, but the same rules should apply to each case. I am glad that nobody stole that gag before I was able to speak.

Mr S Wilson: Sing it.

Mr Ross: I am sure that the House would not wish to hear that.

Although many nationalists in Northern Ireland give their allegiance to a foreign football team, politics has no place in sport. It would be totally unacceptable for

foreign football associations to be allowed to effectively poach our best players. As the Minister said, Northern Ireland is now thirty-second in the FIFA world rankings, and striker David Healy has been breaking all sorts of goalscoring records for our national team, which is at an all-time high. Only a few years ago, it seemed impossible that our team could score anywhere near 13 goals in an entire championship, never mind a single player's doing so. The effect that David Healy has had on football in this country, and on its supporters, is phenomenal. The number of times that his name has appeared in Hansard in the past 48 hours alone will prove that.

In parallel with results on the pitch, we have also heard that Northern Ireland supporters have built up a reputation as being among the best in the world. They travel the globe loyally with their team. I was at Windsor Park on the night when we beat England, and that victory was one of a series of superb results in recent years. The atmosphere was electric, and it was an example of how great the fans are and of how far football in Northern Ireland has come.

In numerous debates since May, including today's, we have heard Members from both sides of the House talk about how sport can bring people together. Football, in particular, can bring the communities together and allow children to mix socially and grow together.

The IFA's efforts to stamp out sectarianism in local football must also be welcomed and, indeed, congratulated. However, FIFA's latest suggestion, which has been backed by nationalists in the House, would reintroduce sectarianism to local football. That is because Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland who come from the nationalist community may choose to represent the Irish Republic, shunning their own country to play for our geographical neighbours. The outplaying of that would be the creation of a Protestant team in Northern Ireland and a Roman Catholic team south of the border. Despite arguments to the contrary from Members across the House, we know that that would be the case. I do not wish to see people putting on a Northern Ireland shirt if they have no pride in the team or loyalty to the fans, but let us remember that many Roman Catholics have represented our wee country over the years. Many of those players faced pressure from their own community not to play, and they even faced abuse from a small minority of those attending matches.

Dominic Bradley said much about choice. I do not want to see circumstances in which Roman Catholics do not have the choice to play for Northern Ireland because they are pressured to represent the Irish Republic, rather than their own country. If FIFA goes down the route of allowing players from one country to play for another, where will it end?

12.45 pm

Miss McIlveen: If England had come along and tried to poach George Best or, more recently, David Healy, should we have just rolled over and allowed that to happen?

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for that contribution. She is absolutely right. That is what we are talking about: should someone from Scotland, Wales or England be able to play for Northern Ireland if we grab them first? In fact, it could be argued that that makes more sense because we are, at least, all part of the United Kingdom, which is one state.

The proposal to allow someone to choose which international team to play for will make a farce of international football. We all remember the era when Jack Charlton was the manager of the Republic of Ireland team, and it seemed that anyone who ever drank a pint of Guinness was eligible to play for that country. It was a joke at the time, and it is still a joke today. That is what will happen if FIFA goes down that road.

Mr P Ramsey: Does the Member not appreciate what happened in respect of the shared-future agenda when, just two years ago, the IFA insisted that two young players from Derry city must carry British passports? That situation arose from a FIFA ruling.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for that, but, as he knows, that matter has already been dealt with by my colleague from East Londonderry. That ruling no longer applies.

I want to see people from all sections of the community being able to represent Northern Ireland. If we go down the route suggested by FIFA, that will no longer be the case. That is not good for football or the community in Northern Ireland. Players should play for the country in which they were born. That is where Mr Lunn's contribution made a lot of sense, and I am glad that the Alliance Party is adopting a sensible approach to the debate.

In conclusion, I support the amendment in the name of my colleague Mr Gregory Campbell and I commend it to the House.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Members who have contributed to the debate, even those who opposed the original motion and the amendment. I am happy to indicate that we accept the amendment and will support it. I also welcome the attendance of the Minister for the entire debate.

The reason for our bringing the motion before the House is that we believe fundamentally that if the proposal in question is carried and recommended by the legal committee of the governing body, FIFA, and allowed to proceed, it will do irretrievable damage to Northern Ireland football and reintroduce the spectre of sectarianism into football. It will also significantly

undermine the principle of consent, on which this Assembly and the Belfast Agreement are based.

The issue goes beyond football, and represents a degree of political interference that is totally unacceptable. One of the most important aspects of the Belfast Agreement was the renunciation by the Irish Republic of its erstwhile claim to the territory of Northern Ireland under its 1937 constitution. That constitutional change was sanctioned by a referendum. That was one of the gains of the Belfast Agreement and was the cornerstone of the new relationship of mutual respect between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. It has since been reinforced by new nationality laws in the Republic.

The FIFA proposal flies in the face of that fundamental tenet of the Belfast Agreement and represents, therefore, not merely an ill-informed and ham-fisted, but a very old-fashioned attitude on the part of those who advocate it. The proposal also seriously interferes with and undermines international agreements among sovereign states, as well as the political process in Northern Ireland. The proposal is backward looking and reintroduces old arguments that belong to an Ireland of the past, and which should definitely not belong to an Ireland, North or South, of today.

FIFA's proposal is based on a concept of nationality that is out of step with the times and with political realities. In many ways, it opens up old wounds that have been healing since the enshrinement of the principle of consent in the Belfast Agreement and since the abandonment of the territorial claim in the associated referendum. It appears that some people are still living in 1937.

Soccer matters to a great many people. What happens in football will affect —

Mr McCartney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kennedy: I am sorry: I do not have time. What happens in football will have an impact that goes far beyond its role as a sport. What happens on football terraces has implications for public order. The removal of sectarianism from the terraces is an important part of the removal of sectarianism from society. What happens in football governance has implications for the well-being of the political process, especially if it breaches or flies in the face of the so-called founding principles of our political process or of the ground on which political progress has been made.

Northern Ireland can be proud of its football record. On 27 November 2007, Kate Hoey, a Labour MP who hails from Northern Ireland, was able to write in 'The Daily Telegraph' that:

"When a player dons a Northern Ireland or Scotland shirt he looks forward to the game; he wants to play for his country and he raises his game; he knows he has the backing of the supporters; he knows they know he cares. He is proud to play for his country".

Kate Hoey is entirely correct. The sense of identity and pride in Northern Ireland is a key component, not only in our football presence, but in our overall presence in the world. It does not deserve to be undermined by this crass move by FIFA, which is a blow to the new pride in and of Northern Ireland and to our shared identity, which has enabled us to present a new image to the world. In no way does that shared identity undermine either nationalist or unionist aspirations; rather, it enables us to live and work together. That has been the road of peace and reconciliation. The Northern Ireland football identity is an intrinsic part of that overall Northern Ireland identity.

It is under that banner that I had the privilege of accompanying the First Minister and deputy First Minister and others on a business-awareness trip to the United States last week. It is through that identity that we have made peace and are striving to build prosperity and a new future for our people. We are doing it together in the context of a new and mature relationship on this island and within these islands and that shared Northern Ireland identity. We do not need a blast from the past delivered by FIFA with the help of some in the background, including, it would appear, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Irish Republic, Dermot Ahern, who ought to be ashamed of himself. If that is the contribution that Fianna Fáil has promised to make to politics in Northern Ireland, we would be better without it.

FIFA's eligibility proposal has the potential to be deeply divisive and has the negative side effect of mixing sport and politics. Furthermore, it mixes sport with the politics of the past rather than with the politics of the present or the future. That is doubly negative. For many years, Northern Ireland players, from whatever political, denominational and aspirational background, have been able to turn out for Northern Ireland in international games. I suspect that the players would be horrified that the FIFA proposal has been presented in a political context with which none of them would be comfortable. The recipe from the world governing body —

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kennedy: I am sorry: I do not have time. The recipe from FIFA is a recipe for chaos and confusion. It raises the spectre of creating sectarianism in football and of pressuring players from a nationalist or Roman Catholic background into playing for the Irish Republic rather than for Northern Ireland.

That is not only a retrograde step but a step that will undo much of the good work that has been done in breaking down barriers over the past decade. In recent years, the Northern Ireland team and its supporters have had an impressive record; the awarding of the Brussels International Supporters Award in 2006

confirms the view that Northern Ireland supporters are the best in Europe, if not in the world.

This move is deeply contradictory to FIFA's self-consistency. In 1946, when the IFA rejoined FIFA, the FAI stopped selecting Northern Ireland players for its national team. In 1950, that was reciprocated by the IFA. After partition, the IFA had attracted many talented players to Northern Ireland, including the likes of the great Johnny Carey. The reciprocal arrangement worked well, North and South. The current FIFA guidelines allow, and make it possible for, players whose parents or grandparents are of Irish extraction to play for the Republic of Ireland. It is important to point out that that facility has been in place for some years.

Northern Ireland's international performance in football has far outweighed our population base of 1.7 million people. Northern Ireland, as a whole, is proud of the team and its achievements. Raking over issues of nationality is harmful to the process in which Members are engaged. Every Member ought to consider that before taking a position on the issue.

I support the motion and the amendment, and I am deeply disappointed at the cynical professional foul that is represented by the petition of concern. I ask Members to endorse the motion.

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During the Minister's speech, I asked him for an intervention, which he kindly afforded me. I asked him whether he had sought legal advice on this matter. Dominic Bradley read from the "Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity" section of the Good Friday Agreement. The contention from this side of the House is that the steps that FIFA is taking are totally within the terms of the Good Friday Agreement and the subsequent legislative framework.

Mr S Wilson: The steps are totally against it.

Mr McCartney: Absolutely not. In all today's contributions, not once was it said that FIFA's position is in line with the Good Friday Agreement.

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

Mr McCartney: It is a point of order.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Please take your seat.

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In relation to my colleague Mr Kennedy's point of order, I have an additional point of order necessitating your ruling on a petition-of-concern status against an amendment that becomes a substantive motion. Is a petition of concern invalid if the motion against which it was directed has substantially altered in the form of the amendment being accepted by the House?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The matter has been considered by the Speaker, and he is satisfied that the

petition of concern will apply to the motion, whether or not it is amended.

Mr P Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During the debate, the Minister was asked whether he had sought legal advice. He did not answer that question, and I want to find out whether he sought legal advice regarding the Good Friday Agreement.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Again, that is not a point of order. I return to Mr Kennedy's point of order at the beginning of the debate, when Mr Kennedy asked whether Mr McHugh's withdrawal from the petition of concern invalidated the petition. Given that there are considerably more than 30 names on the petition, it is not invalidated. In fact, there are 36 names on the petition, not counting Mr McHugh's name.

1.00 pm

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In raising an earlier point of order, I drew attention to the fact that Mr McHugh's name had been deleted from the original petition of concern. Someone has taken the liberty of writing over his name. Was that done with Mr McHugh's permission, did Mr McHugh scribble out his own name, or was it done by others acting independently of Mr McHugh? I ask the Speaker's Office to investigate that matter and report accordingly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Kennedy, that matter has been investigated. The deletion of the name does not affect the validity of the document. In fact, the name was deleted before the document was presented as a petition of concern.

Mr Kennedy: Is it known who deleted the name?

Mr O'Dowd: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, have we reached the stage at which a Member is now questioning the ruling of the Speaker? Is that appropriate?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question on the amendment, I remind Members that the vote requires a simple majority.

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

Main Question, as amended, put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 52; Noes 40.

AYES

UNIONIST:

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea,

Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Ms Purvis, 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.

OTHER:

Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Lunn, Mr Neeson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Elliott and Mr Hilditch.

NOES

NATIONALIST:

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, 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 Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr P Maskey and Mr O'Loan.

<i>Total votes</i>	<i>92</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>52</i>	<i>[56.5%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>[0.0%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>

Main Question, as amended, accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).

Transfer Procedure

Mr Deputy 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 to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Four amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech.

1.15 pm

Mr S Wilson: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment has indicated that 31 January 2008 is the deadline for the creation of an alternative transfer test, which can be based on the revised curriculum; and, given the short timescale and the uncertainty which the indecision about the transfer procedure is causing, calls on the Minister of Education to present her proposals for the transfer of pupils from primary to secondary school immediately.

Some Members — including the Minister of Education, during her speech later — might argue that the motion is unnecessary because, last week, after months of silence on this issue, the Minister spoke. She told the House that she was outlining a clear vision for the future and was showing the way forward, and that now was the time to start building. A vision must have an objective, and the person with the objective should have a clear idea of how to achieve it, and how to bring people along. It is clear from last week's events, and from what has happened and been said subsequently, that the Minister achieved none of those things. She did not have a vision; she did not even have a vague dream. She has left people in Northern Ireland with the same old nightmare of confusion and mess — to use her words — and a lack of clarity, as the newspapers said.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

If the Minister had offered a clear vision last week, I would have withdrawn the motion. The Minister and some of her acolytes are paranoid that Members on this side of the House want to conduct a witch-hunt against her because of her background, but let me be clear: I do not wish to make this issue a political football. I met the Minister before she made her statement in the House last week, and we made it clear that doors should not be closed. I do not expect her to bring forward my ideas for education, but I do expect that she, as a Minister in an Executive — in which she knows there must be some sharing of views, and some consensus — would at least have brought something forward on which there could have been discussion. However, she failed to do that.

That is not only my view; the media, last week, had a similar reaction. On 5 December 2007, the 'News Letter' described the Minister's announcement as a:

"Package that will create school chaos".

On 5 December 2007, the 'Belfast Telegraph' printed a report card for Ms C Ruane in which it awarded her a grade D for clarity; grade C for practicality; grade B for long-term vision; grade C minus for adaptability; grade C for choice; grade D for equality; and grade D for fairness. The comment at the bottom of the report card was, "must do better".

Mr F McCann: The Member is being selective in the articles from which he is reading. The newspapers from which he quoted also printed articles in support of the Minister's announcement. Does the Member agree that the DUP is completely out of touch with opinion in the wider education sector and among the public, where the Minister's announcement is fully supported?

Mr S Wilson: I have not finished yet; I have only read a couple of quotations. On 5 December 2007, the editorial of the 'Belfast Telegraph' stated that the announcement left parents, pupils and schools "in limbo". The leader of the SDLP, Mark Durkan, said that the announcement was:

"short on detail and short of financial certainty."

The Minister herself was confronted by journalists in what was called a "heated exchange", but she could say only:

"Let's take this one step at a time."

She could not outline where she was going, or how she was going to get there.

For a Minister, whose vision is so unclear; who is so lost in her path and so dictated to by her own ideology that she would walk over a cliff before changing it, to ask anyone to follow her one step at a time — she has no chance.

One has only to look at the Hansard report of last week's sitting, in which the Minister was asked no fewer than 23 questions, some of which were asked three times, to see that she did not answer any of them. Indeed, the motion and the amendments are from different parties; therefore, in answer to the Member from west Belfast, it is not just the DUP and public representatives from the unionist side of the House who are confused about what the Minister intends for the future; it is all public representatives in the Assembly, including those in her own party. The motion is as relevant today as when it was tabled, before the Minister made her statement last week.

What is the source of the confusion, and what issues need to be addressed? First, the Minister told us — and although it was not her announcement, she claimed that it was — that she has said that the 11-plus will finish.

It was direct rule Ministers who made that decision, actually.

By 2011 we will have a system of 11-14 schools, 11-18 schools, or 7-14 schools — we do not know what the age limits in the schools will be, and they may be different in different places. We also do not know what will happen between 2008 and 2011. All that the Minister could say on that matter was that we should teach to the revised curriculum, as if that were sufficient guidance for teachers and parents.

What will the admissions criteria be for oversubscribed schools after 2011? A little hypocrisy creeps in here, because, according to the Minister, at that stage, admission will be based on community, geography and family — exactly the criteria that she would not apply to her own family. The Minister refused to send her daughter to a local school, choosing instead a grammar school — an elitist and divisive institution. Those are the same words that she used in her statement last week. The Minister chose to send her daughter to an oversubscribed grammar school in another country: so much for adhering to geographical criteria. Yet she has told parents in Northern Ireland that that is what she has in place for them at the end of academic selection.

Of course, the Minister is not alone in that hypocrisy: New Labour Ministers in England do exactly the same. They want to abolish grammar schools because they say that they are elitist, but those same Ministers make sure that they use their positions to get their youngsters into those schools. The Minister cannot divorce her choices from the restricted choices that she is giving to the parents of Northern Ireland.

The Minister claims that this is not an attack on grammar schools, and they will be allowed to continue. How will children be selected for those schools when their main thrust is teaching pupils with high academic ability?

Parents are confused about the future of the schools themselves. Which schools will become 7-14 schools, 11-14 schools and 11-18 schools, and how will that work across Northern Ireland? What might work in Craigavon, which the Minister has held up as an example, and where at least 30% of parents support such a proposal, but have the option of going to another system, will not work equally across Northern Ireland.

A viable school for 11- to 14-year-olds could not be implemented in rural parts of Northern Ireland without reducing the number of schools to about one in a 30- or 40-mile radius. Is that what the Minister is now saying? Is she going to introduce a system that will demolish half of the schools estate in rural parts of Northern Ireland and have youngsters travelling over half of the country?

The Minister has not given us any answers; instead she has said that we will have a discussion. This was meant to be the vision, the way forward, the plan. I am

not surprised at the reaction of the newspapers and the Assembly.

Finally, the Minister has no vision as to how she will deliver an alternative to the transfer test because she has ignored the political reality, and that is also causing confusion. How can she deliver on something that she has not got the ability to do? That is not an example of a Minister who knows her way. In the past, I have accused the Minister of being Nero —

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

Mr S Wilson: I will finish now. In the past, I have accused the Minister of being Nero; I probably did a disservice to Nero. He knew that the city was burning, and fiddled. She does not know that the city is burning, and is continuing to fiddle.

Mr Speaker: I wish to alert the House to the fact that the Minister of the Environment intends to make a statement this afternoon. The statement will be made immediately before the Adjournment debate. Copies of the Minister's statement will be made available to Members and, as far as possible, the Whips of all the parties will be alerted to the statement.

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"calls on the Minister of Education to present the details of her proposals for the transfer of pupils from primary to secondary schools immediately; and to outline these in terms of Area Plans, based on sustainable schools policy, within the context of the draft Budget and draft Investment Strategy."

Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I suppose that after last Tuesday's statement, which tried to cut this motion off at the pass, it was inevitable that today's debate was going to centre around the Minister's new visionary proposals — that is, if they are her own, if they are visionary and if they are new.

For the most part, those ideas have been around in educational circles in different forms for some time, and it does not take a forensic scientist to see whose fingerprints are all over them — certainly not the Minister's. No, Mr Speaker, she is only the ventriloquist's dummy: the words are those of others. Visionary, blue-sky thinking? I do not think so. If the Minister is telling us that this is her vision, I think that she has been daydreaming during class, and I only hope that her daydream does not turn into a nightmare for parents, pupils and teachers.

Many people have welcomed the ending of selection, including the SDLP. However, the Minister has been very coy about coming out and saying that academic selection has gone, full stop. Indeed, her colleague Mr Butler was at pains to underline to the Committee for Education that, during her briefing of the Committee, the Minister did not say that academic selection had ended. During interviews on television the Minister would not say that academic selection had ended: she

said only that she was not in favour of academic selection, not that it had ended. Perhaps she will clarify that point today and tell the House whether it has gone — and is gone for good.

Mr Butler's amendment suggests that Sinn Féin sees selection as continuing. Martin McGuinness made an announcement; this Minister has made a statement. When will we see action? The Minister has told us that there will be no 11-plus after 2008, and no one disagrees with that — not even the UUP or the DUP — but she has not spelt out how pupils will transfer from primary to post-primary schools. The Minister has simply said that pupils will go to their nearest local post-primary school based on family, geographical and community criteria. What will that mean in a city such as Newry, which has seven post-primary schools serving a city and a large rural hinterland far beyond the local area? Without agreed area planning in place, no one knows what will happen in Newry.

The Minister's indecision has heaped uncertainty upon uncertainty.

1.30 pm

The Minister tells Members not to get hung up about our constituencies. However, our constituents are asking how her proposals will be rolled out in local areas. Parents are asking which schools their children will be going to; school governors are asking how their schools will fit into the great scheme of things; secondary- and grammar-school teachers are asking how their expertise — built up over years — will be utilised under the Minister's proposals; and pupils are asking whether they will get to their chosen school.

If we look outside our constituencies, the answers are no clearer. There can be no reorganisation without area planning, and there can be no area planning without a sustainable schools policy. As we speak, neither of those steps is in place. That work should have been done by now.

Why has the Minister not acted or made up her mind on these issues? She has shied away from decision-making because she is out of her depth. On only two occasions did she show any sign of movement and, on both occasions, she was forced to do so by motions tabled in this House. She has been reactive rather than proactive.

It is not as simple as saying that children will go to their nearest local school. A system cannot be built on such vague and ill-thought-out theories. There can be no worthwhile practice without sound planning. The Minister has not done that planning, which is why she cannot describe the practical outworkings of the new system — she does not yet know what they will be.

The Minister has not consulted widely or built a consensus. She has simply flown a kite in an attempted pre-emptive strike against today's debate, and that has

blown back in her face. She has had more than enough time to consult and build a consensus. No wonder parents are asking what the Minister has been doing since last May. She has told Members that she would not be rushed, and she certainly cannot be accused of that. Not, at least, until last Tuesday, when, as soon as a critical motion appeared on the Order Paper, she rushed to the Assembly Floor to dole out reheated slices of half-baked ideas.

Regrettably, by the time she gets her consultation process under way and finished, she will have wasted almost a full year. She has earned the title of “Minister for Inaction”. The sustainable schools consultation process finished last Easter, yet no policy has been published. No one was asking the Minister to rush things; however, there is a happy medium between rushing and foot-dragging, and that happy medium is called action.

The Minister has accused other parties of stepping in and out of the Executive. What did she do? She did not even bother to take her proposals to the Executive. Rather, she wrote to her Executive colleagues half an hour before reading her statement, and then did a solo run up the wing, refused to pass the ball to anyone else, and shot wide of the mark. Undoubtedly, she is not a team player — perhaps she would be better off on the subs’ bench.

The questions still remain for parents. In 2009, to which post-primary schools will their children transfer? What infrastructure will be in place to facilitate choice at age 14? Those are serious and legitimate questions, and parents have the right to answers. Has the Minister decided? No. She says that she will consult. However, without a sustainable schools policy and area planning, on what will there be to consult? Consultation requires a framework, and, as yet, there is no framework.

The DUP has admonished other parties in this House, telling us that we are part of a four-party mandatory coalition. The bursar, Mr Robinson, came to class to tell us all to be good boys and girls. Yet, what have we witnessed today? The two main parties in the coalition are at loggerheads. The rowdy pupils of the DUP have reverted to form — they are in the orchard cherry-picking the St Andrews Agreement, and they will be chucking the stones across the room at schoolmarm Ruane.

The headmaster and his deputy do not know what has been going on while they have been away on their field trip. It is time for this rowdy class to be called to order and for it to begin to show some discipline.

The Minister must act. There is work to be done and a course to be finished. The coursework is still only at first-draft stage, and the main assessment objectives and criteria have not been properly addressed. One wonders whether the Minister is in the right stream. At present, she is heading for a fail grade. There are many corrections to be made before a redraft can even be contemplated. A report on the Minister’s progress would read: “Caitriona seems to be out of her depth. She must be more decisive

and put in the necessary hard work before there is even a chance of her sitting the exam.” Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr B McCrea: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after “Assembly” and insert

“calls on the Minister of Education to present the details of her proposed process of formal structured election, including the process by which schools will be selected; to indicate what support will be offered to schools in relation to the proposals; to outline the policy for selection and allocation of teaching staff; and to further outline her proposals to avoid selection by postcode.”

As other Members have mentioned, there is a lack of clarity and detail in the Minister’s proposals, and that is why we tabled an amendment in rather explicit terms. I want the Minister to explain, if I can catch her attention for a moment, what she meant last Tuesday when she said:

“a process of formal, structured election”. — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 26, p9, col 2*].

That phrase seems to consist of words plucked from a dictionary and joined together — it does not mean anything. It would be helpful if the Minister would explain what it means.

It would also be helpful if we were to know by what process schools will be identified as serving 11-year-olds to 14-year-olds, 11-year-olds to 19-year-olds and 14-year-olds to 19-year-olds. Why was the age range of five years of age to 14 years of age not considered? Some people consider that to be a viable option.

In her statement last week, the Minister promised that she would support grammar schools, and other schools, that are not yet ready for the change. Will she outline what she means by “support”? Will that support be financial or will it involve human resources? Can she provide the House with some details?

Can the Minister give the House some detail on the policy that she plans to use for selecting the teachers who will have to move schools when new ones are built, or when existing ones change to cater for a different age range of pupils? Have the unions been consulted on that matter, and what do the teachers feel about it? How will headmasters or headmistresses be selected?

Finally, everyone agrees that selection by postcode is not acceptable — it is the worst of all possible worlds. Therefore, how will the Minister ensure that that does not happen?

Mr S Wilson: The only person to whom I have spoken who praised the Minister is a builder in the Member’s constituency. He is building houses in the catchment area of a very popular school. Last week, he had 16 enquiries from people who already wish to purchase houses in that catchment area.

Mr B McCrea: The Member has raised a valid point that raises another question. Does one have to live in the house, or does one simply have to own it?

One could buy a house and rent it out, as many people do already. Those are the sorts of details that we want to understand. We are asking the Minister whether there is any flesh on the bones of the policy. Is there any substance behind her vision?

The Minister mentioned whether transfer should occur at the age of 11 or at the age of 14. I read her statement very carefully in Hansard, and what struck me, and which Dominic Bradley also mentioned, was that she was careful about what she did not say. She was careful to say that she was not talking about a one-size-fits-all system. She did not rule out academic selection but simply said that she was not in favour of it. There are many points on which we are not clear.

For example, on the question of age, she said that all people agreed that 14 years of age was an important age. It is an important age, but it is not necessarily the age at which academic selection should occur. The Minister is twisting words a little.

Why is there a problem about selection at 11 years of age or at 14 years of age? Research shows that boys aged 14 are further behind in their development than some girls aged 11. Therefore, age is a different issue.

There is also neurological development to be considered. There are bursts of activity in the brain at three different times — in the womb; prior to the age of four, and around the age of 10. The brain starts to develop different types of organisational skills during each of those times. Therefore, it could be argued on a neurological basis that those are the times when people should be changing schools.

You have made the argument that people are more mature and can make decisions about their future at the age of 14. I am probably not a good example, but at the age of 14, Minister, I had no notion that I would be addressing you in the Assembly today. That thought did not feature; I thought that I was going to be an astronaut, a fireman or have some such exciting vocation —

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the Member to address the Minister by her full name or by the term “Minister”.

Mr B McCrea: I stand corrected, Mr Speaker. It was an error.

The evidence does not support the notion that 14 is the age at which people should be making decisions about their future. When it comes to whether we need academic selection, again, the Minister is ambivalent and unclear. She comes up with the notion of matching children to suitable provision. How do you match children to suitable provision without some form of selection?

The fundamental issue is that parents will not send their children to schools that are failing, and you cannot force them to do that. They would rather leave the country than do that. Until all of our schools operate at a level

that is acceptable to parents, they will not send their children to them. The Minister knows that.

The Minister has said that there will not be a lottery of chance that is based on two one-hour exams. Selection and educational attainment are not based on two one-hour exams. By the age of four, children can be two years behind in their educational development. Even at that stage, pre-school teachers can pick out those children who are going to have problems. In pre-school, one child in three is at risk of having learning difficulties: when they leave pre-school, one in five is at risk. Therefore, the damage is done before children reach the age of five.

Has the Minister considered the problems facing children who are born during the summer; for example, in August as opposed to September or October? All the tests show that they always do worse because they are one year behind.

There are other issues. Parental involvement has a significant impact on cognitive ability and on literacy and numeracy. For children aged 16 and 17, parental authority is more powerful than family background, family size or the level of parental education. Those are the real issues, Minister, that are affecting the educational attainment of our children.

You say that you cannot ignore the fact that every year 4,000 children leave school after 12 years of compulsory education without adequate levels of literacy and numeracy. The real issue is that they should not be leaving primary school without reaching the appropriate targets. They should not even be getting beyond Key Stage 1 if they have not reached their targets. Resources should be put into those areas.

I feel strongly that academic selection is a red herring. The real issue should be about tackling cycles of social deprivation. Research on the factor that decides what school people will attend or what type of job they will get is clear — it is parental involvement, and they are the resources that Members can support.

Home environment, Minister, is more important than disadvantage during any years of a child's life. Child poverty is what really makes a big difference and determines whether children succeed in educational attainment. Twenty-two per cent of our children live in poverty. They do not have the necessary social infrastructure, parental infrastructure, facilities, aspirations or support. Those are the areas, Minister, that have to be dealt with. It is not about the 11-plus, it is not about academic selection; it is about giving people a good start in life. You have taken the entire debate in the wrong direction.

Minister, I do not understand why you have chosen to do what you have done in the manner in which you have done it. Why did you not bring this issue to the Committee for Education? Why did you write to the

Committee not two weeks before your statement and say that this was too important a decision to be rushed, and that you would inform us about it some time in the future?

Then she rushes out a ministerial statement —

1.45 pm

Mr Durkan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am not usually precious about these things, but earlier today a Member was reminded that he should speak through the Chair, rather than address another Member directly, just as Mr McCrea addresses the Minister now.

Mr Speaker: I agree with the Member's point of order. It is important that all sides of the House address all remarks through the Chair.

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful for the advice all round, and will attempt to follow it.

Questions remain about the process by which we try to build consensus. I cannot understand how measures can be approved by the Executive or the Assembly without sharing information.

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

Mr B McCrea: I would like more detail on the proposals so that the process can be advanced.

Miss McIlveen: I beg to move amendment No. 3: Leave out all after "test" and insert

"; further notes the statement by the Minister of Education on 4 December; believes that pupils should transfer to schools that best suit their needs and permit them to develop to their full potential; recognises that experience from elsewhere indicates that the practice of parents intentionally purchasing homes in the catchment areas of popular schools has contributed to reduced social mobility in these communities; and affirms that any new transfer procedure produced by the Executive must not permit children from disadvantaged backgrounds to be denied access to popular schools on account of their parents' financial or social circumstances."

Let me make it clear, so that no one is in any doubt, that the Minister's proposals, as outlined in her announcement of 4 December, will not receive the backing of unionist members of the Executive, unionist members of the Education Committee or unionist Members of the House. I hope that the Minister received that message, loud and clear, from the exchanges following her announcement last week. It seems evident that, in their present form and given the lack of detail, her proposals would not receive the backing of the Alliance Party or the SDLP. Those points are quite clear from the sheer number of amendments tabled on the motion, and the clamour for more information.

One thing is certain: it is essential that the Minister deal with the concerns of the unionist majority. She must achieve cross-community support. She has singularly failed even to attempt to address those concerns: so much for her party's outreach to unionism. If she does not address them, she will not achieve anything.

I refer the Minister to the explanatory notes to the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006. Paragraph 20 may help the Minister appreciate the situation. It states:

"In the event of the restoration of the devolved institutions on this date, the commencement of the provision abolishing academic selection would be subject to an affirmative resolution of the Assembly."

I hope that that makes things clearer for the Minister.

The Minister must recognise that all children are not the same. Children have different abilities, and they develop academically at different times. Some will never be academically gifted but are skilled in other ways. The Minister has not told us how she will address that. She has told us nothing, other than that she wants to unilaterally scrap academic selection — which Members know she cannot do — and offer what she calls "choice at 14".

The Minister has not told us how she proposes to deliver that choice, other than to say that it would be offered in accordance with area-based planning. She provided no costings for the delivery mechanisms of that choice, and I am quite satisfied that she did not discuss that with the Minister of Finance and Personnel, despite the fact that she is talking about radical reform of the school estate, with the potential to open new junior high schools. Just how does she propose to fund her vision, given the current budgetary constraints?

In her statement, the Minister acknowledged that:

"the capacity of our education system to deliver high-quality academic excellence is widely — and correctly — celebrated." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 26, p9, col 1].

She then went on to say:

"the system still fails a high proportion of our young people." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 26, p9, col 1].

Incredibly, instead of focusing on those aspects of the system that are failing and presenting proposals to enhance and improve education at secondary level, she shows her desire to dismantle that part of the system that is working.

She stated that there is a need to reform a system that was constructed more than 60 years ago; and I acknowledge that there is a need to reform the current selection procedure. The Minister's vision, however, has caused greater confusion and prompted more questions than answers. Her vision seems to be to dismantle the system and to rely on the principle that "nature abhors a vacuum". That is no way to run a Department. We are constantly told that those who do not pass the 11-plus perceive themselves as failures, that they carry that burden throughout their lives and that that requires the system to be changed and academic selection scrapped.

I have heard those words from the Minister, but she did not go through our education system, so I will not take any lectures from her on that matter.

As someone who failed the 11-plus, I stand before the House with an honours degree, a masters degree and with the necessary qualifications to teach at secondary level. I advise the Minister that I have never felt a failure, and I hope that the Minister would not brand me as one as part of her sweeping generalisations.

It is those who claim that not being selected makes people feel like failures who label people as such. To paraphrase Joseph Goebbels, if one says something often enough, people will eventually come to believe it.

The Minister told us that her proposals are ambitious, but we do not know what they are. We are told that she has reflected long and hard for the past six months. That statement gives us an insight into her ability to do her job: to have reflected for so long and to have come up with so little is a sad indictment. She has created more uncertainty through her statements, and that shows a distinct lack of leadership.

Understandably, the people of Northern Ireland look to their Minister of Education for guidance when it comes to such matters. When the Minister says that she will make an announcement to outline her vision for our education system, it is natural that people should expect a well-thought-out plan of action, with precise reasoning that they can digest and comment on. Instead, we have been left with vagueness and aspiration. That is simply not good enough.

The Minister tells us that her proposals require further work at a detailed level. That begs the question: why did she make the statement before that was done? Surely, she should have waited until she had proposals to make.

Sinn Féin's amendment:

"calls for a positive response to her consultation exercise in relation to future transfer arrangements."

That means that there is to be a consultation period. Has the Minister not put the cart before the horse? Surely an announcement should not have been expected until after consultation.

In her statement, the Minister made much of the needs of all children to be equal and have equal access. That sentiment sounds noble but, in the attempt to outline her proposals, the Minister appears intent that our children should achieve the lowest common denominator, rather than have their ability encouraged. That will not create a world-class education system; it will create drones, instead of encouraging excellence and improving standards where improvement is required. The Minister commented that she:

"cannot — and will not — ignore the fact that every year 4,000 young people leave school after 12 years of compulsory education without the appropriate basic literacy and numeracy skills." —

[*Official Report, Bound Volume 26, p9, col 1*].

I am glad to hear that because the DUP has been demanding that the Minister tackle that issue from the

moment that she took up her post. However, the Minister's proposals do not tackle that issue because those skills must be developed before secondary level.

We are told that her vision is based on election rather than selection, a natural effect of which will be the movement of parents to be near the best-performing schools. Those areas will become the most desirable, and, as a direct result, house prices around those schools will rise astronomically. Where does that leave children who come from less advantaged backgrounds, whose families cannot afford to live near those schools? With academic selection, children from less-advantaged backgrounds who are academically gifted may access the best-performing schools that will nurture their development. Ironically, the Minister wants to limit choice. Will her proposals limit the choice of those parents in the Irish Republic who, like the Minister, choose to send their children to our schools, which she believes fail our children?

The Minister says that equality is her watchword. Does that mean that there is no place for merit?

Despite what the Minister has said, academic selection is not dead. Rumors of its demise have been greatly exaggerated. I hope — but unfortunately I do not expect — that the Minister will reconsider her position, focus her vision, present proposals for the future of our education system, and bring forward reforms that are acceptable to all sides for discussion, so that we may develop an education structure that will be envied more than it already is. If the Minister does that, she may find that the parties on these Benches will be much more accommodating.

In her statement, the Minister said that there is too much focus on academic selection. However, that was all that she focused on. The system must be examined as a whole. The removal of academic selection is not the magic bullet that will cure all ills. Indeed, if it were removed, more ill may be caused. For those reasons, I ask the House to support the DUP amendment.

Mr Butler: I beg to move amendment No 4: Leave out all after "test" and insert

" , if needed, and welcomes the statement by the Minister of Education on the 4 December 2007 that there will be no more transfer tests from primary to post primary schools, from 2010 onwards; and calls for a positive response to her consultation exercise in relation to future transfer arrangements."

I welcome the fact that so many amendments to the original motion have been tabled. It is somewhat surprising — although it perhaps does not surprise me — that Sammy Wilson did not withdraw the motion. He did not even speak on the subject of the motion — the transfer test and the revised curriculum — hence, he looks rather foolish. He talks about the Minister's not having a vision, yet, as usual, he appears to have come to the Chamber with tunnel vision. Yesterday, he

was jumping up and down and was described as a "jack-in-the-box". Today, he is more of a court jester, having brought a bit of light relief to the debate.

I welcome the fact that none of the amendments, nor even the original motion, mentions the phrase "academic selection". Therefore, I believe that the debate has shifted towards what Caitríona Ruane, the Minister of Education, has asked Members to do, which is to consider her visionary statement of 4 December 2007 on future transfer arrangements from primary to post-primary education.

In many ways, people out there, especially those in the education sector, are ahead — of the unionists, in particular — on that issue. Members can examine newspaper cuttings; for example, in the 'Belfast Telegraph', the principal of Millburn Primary School in Coleraine writes that he finds:

"Education Minister Caitríona Ruane's vision for the province's education system extremely refreshing."

He goes on to say that:

"We are failing those children with the greatest need."

Given that not a single change has been put in place to alter that system, he is, therefore:

"delighted to support the changes advocated by the Minister."

Despite certain Members trying to tell the House that, somehow, Caitríona Ruane's announcement has been dismissed totally out of hand, many people in the education system have accepted the need for change. The Minister has outlined her vision for that change. I hope that the Assembly has moved to a position where real debate can take place on the issue.

Sinn Féin's amendment calls for a positive response to Caitríona Ruane's consultation process. The motion mentions the CCEA's indication that the deadline for the creation of a new test is 31 January 2007. I must clarify that the CCEA has never said that that must be the deadline: that emerged from a question that was asked of the Minister, and Sammy Wilson has now put it into a motion. The revised curriculum does not sit with any new academic selection test. It is about broadening the curriculum and giving teachers much greater flexibility to tailor their teaching to children's needs.

Basil McCrea's amendment calls on the Minister to give details of certain matters. Indeed, I agree that the Minister should provide details and clarification of those matters for the House and for the public. Sinn Féin supports Mr McCrea's amendment. Therefore, I beg leave to withdraw amendment No 4.

With regard to a postcode lottery, to which Mr McCrea's amendment refers, the Minister has outlined some proposals that Sinn Féin considers valuable, such as the introduction of family criteria, which would include circumstances when a child's siblings already attend the school and when a child is an only child or

the eldest child in a family. Children who attend a feeder primary school would be considered under the geographical criteria, as, too, would children who reside in a named parish or catchment area and children for whom the school is the nearest suitable school in a particular sector.

There must be debate, and it should start in the House today.

2.00 pm

Mr S Wilson: The Member has outlined four criteria, which he has used to justify why the proposals do not amount to selection by postcode lottery. The catchment area of a school or a parish, and other criteria that he mentioned, will indicate the postcode area in which a child resides. Therefore, how can the Member say that that is not a postcode lottery?

Mr Butler: Sinn Féin is saying that it wants a real debate about that issue. Currently, we have a system in which popular schools must set some criteria as a means of choosing the pupils who will attend them. We must open up a debate about the issue. That is what Caitríona has asked us to do rather than indulging in rhetoric or engaging in a campaign of constant attacks on her. Caitríona was asked to bring proposals to the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: Order, order. I remind the Member not to use Members' Christian names.

Mr Butler: Yes. The Minister was asked to bring proposals to the Assembly, and she has done so. We are conducting part of that debate in the Chamber today. Many of the proposals that have been outlined by the Minister of Education are already happening. Most of our post-primary schools use a non-selective system. Many grammar schools have an intake of pupils with mixed abilities. Approximately nine of our 69 grammar schools accept pupils only with grade A passes. The remainder of those grammar schools take pupils with grades B, C or, in some cases, D passes. Therefore, demographics are undermining the concept of academic selection.

We should go down the road of matching children's needs to suitable provision. The Republic of Ireland's non-selective education system ranks sixth in the world for the attainment of the highest levels of literacy and numeracy. There is no talk in the Republic of Ireland of putting children through an academic selection test.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Member accept that there is a significant private-education sector in the Republic of Ireland to which parents with money can send their children? Is the Member advocating the same type of solution for Northern Ireland?

Mr Butler: I am not advocating that system. I am saying that a non-selective system operates in the vast majority of schools in the Republic of Ireland, which has

one of the best economies and best education systems in the world. Those are the facts of the matter. There is consensus in the education sector that 14 years of age is a better age at which to make choices about schools and educational pathways. At that age, pupils will have gained three or four years' post-primary education, and with that — I hope — better literacy, numeracy and ICT skills. Fourteen years of age will become the key decision time in a pupil's life: the future is 14.

Our 69 grammar schools educate approximately 42% of our pupils. That figure will rise to 45% by 2013-14. Therefore, it is in the interests of grammar schools to become involved in the consultation process. I know that the Minister will encourage them to do that and will tap into the ways in which schools attain academic excellence. It does not mean the end of academic subjects; it means that children can also take different pathways, whether professional or technical.

I wish to withdraw Sinn Féin's amendment to the motion. Our party could support the Ulster Unionist Party's amendment. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Lunn: I am not sure whether the Minister's statement was prompted by the proposing of the motion, or whether that was just a happy coincidence. Nonetheless, this debate is necessary in light of that statement, which raised as many questions as it answered. The statement at least confirmed the end of the 11-plus and academic selection, and placed an emphasis on pupils making choices at the age of 14, which is very much in line with Alliance Party policy.

With or without the Minister's statement, the traditional structure of post-primary education is undergoing radical change. That is a matter of simple demographics. Our birth rate is falling rapidly — the 2001 census recorded more than 13,000 14-year-olds, but fewer than 11,000 one-year-olds. That trend of a declining birth rate has continued since then, and has resulted in empty desks in secondary schools, and grammar schools having an increasingly comprehensive intake.

Mr Butler has already mentioned that, this year, just 11 grammar schools in Northern Ireland took in only those with grade A at 11-plus. Like it or not, little by little, and year by year, the inexorable force of demographic change is turning grammar schools into comprehensive schools. Moreover, the rapid expansion of third-level education means that more pupils from secondary schools are attending university. The 11-plus system, which selects less by ability than by social class, is increasingly looking like a throwback to the 1940s, and we should be happy to see the back of it.

Many parts of Northern Ireland have either a delayed-selection model or schools that are comprehensive in practice. Much has been said about the Dickson plan, which operates in Craigavon. I see no evidence that children in that area are any less well educated than

children in the rest of Northern Ireland. It is always dangerous to single out schools, but I am sure that we can all think of non-selective schools that deliver a high-quality education to pupils of all abilities — Fivemiletown High School, St Catherine's College in Armagh, and Cross and Passion College in Ballycastle spring to mind. There are plenty more such schools across the Province.

As a member of the Alliance Party, it would be remiss of me not to mention the excellent work of the integrated sector in educating children of all abilities, religions and cultures to the highest standards. The Irish-medium sector also sees no need to select by academic ability.

With so many excellent non-selective schools successfully educating pupils of all abilities, including the most academically gifted, I honestly do not understand the argument that an end to the 11-plus will lead to declining standards or reduced social mobility. The evidence to the contrary in schools across the Province stares us all in the face. Therefore, the Minister's statement provides the right vision. I was particularly pleased to note the importance that she attached to area-based planning, which is the only way in which we can deal with a declining school population in a fiscally responsible way.

However, I must agree with other Members that the Minister's proposals are still dangerously sketchy. What will happen on 1 September 2009, when the first post-selection cohort arrives in secondary schools? To date, the Minister has simply not told us her views on that matter. A worthy vision is no compensation for the uncertainty that children, parents and teachers are all suffering at present. Many people fear that there will be chaos, and the Minister has given them no grounds for confidence.

Of the four amendments that were tabled, only three remain. It is lucky that the Alliance Party did not table an amendment — there would have been five. The SDLP amendment most closely reflects the Alliance Party's thinking on this matter, and my party is happy to support it. My party could also quite easily support the Ulster Unionist Party amendment, which is a more realistic statement of principles, rather than a last-ditch defence of selection.

The original motion, the SDLP's amendment and the Ulster Unionist Party amendment, which in itself is at least slightly refreshing, all ask the same question of the Minister and encourage her to introduce quickly detailed proposals to remove the confusion that affects all schoolchildren, particularly those who are due to arrive at secondary level in September 2009.

Without the benefit of its own amendment, the Alliance Party makes the same plea to the Minister: get on with it. She has endorsed Alliance Party policy thus far, and we look forward to further meat being put on the bones as quickly as possible.

Mr Weir: Members will not be surprised to hear that the message from these Benches will not be that the Minister should get on with her plans.

As someone who has pressed the Minister about a number of schools in my constituency without much of a clear response, I should at least be grateful that she has outlined something. However, my level of gratitude stops there.

It is rare in the history of the Assembly that an announcement has been so eagerly anticipated. It has been trailed for several months, yet has produced so little. To paraphrase the Roman poet Horace, the mountains will labour and the mouse shall be born. Instead of a great lion roaring forward to set boldly out a vision for the future of education in Northern Ireland, we have had a mouse of a statement. Its effect makes it a mouse. As has been pointed out, the Minister did not deign to bring her proposals to the Executive, because she would not have received the required level of support.

It is clear that the Minister's vision — if that does not attach too much weight to the word "vision" — will not obtain the support of the House. The unionist Benches will not support an attempt to remove academic selection. The effect of her proposals has been to encourage the grammar schools to carry on. Academic selection is enshrined in law. The Minister can huff and puff as much as she wants, but she will not blow academic selection away. In her statement, she tried to bully the grammar schools by implying that money would be withdrawn from them. When questioned three times, she refused to clarify what she meant by that. She then said that any entry test used by the grammar schools would not be funded. Academic selection is here to stay: the Minister's statement was a mouse.

The Minister's statement was also ineffective with regard to its content. Where do we stand on a vision for post-primary education? Will children have to stay on at primary school beyond the age of 11? Will we have a system for 11- to 14-year olds, or 11- to 18-year olds? The result will be that a host of junior high schools will spring up across the country and there will be more diversity in the schools estate at a time when, as we are constantly reminded, school rolls are falling. Less efficient use of resources will not benefit pupils or the education system in this country.

The Minister's statement is ineffective in its result. Although there might have been room for improvement in selection by merit, it will be replaced with selection by money. The principal driver, as has been mentioned, will be postcodes. Those parents who can afford the big houses beside the good schools will simply take that option. Whatever its flaws, the current system not only produces the best in academic excellence but greater social mobility compared with anywhere else in the UK. Our universities have a much higher percentage of

pupils from socially deprived backgrounds than anywhere else in the UK.

As an alternative to the postcode lottery, the Minister seems to have introduced a "spermcode" lottery. Families with children already attending certain schools will have an advantage. I attended an all-boys grammar school, but I do not have an older brother. Why should a child in primary 7 who has an older brother in second-level education automatically have an advantage when applying for a place in his brother's school? That is complete nonsense.

Mrs Long: Does the Member not accept that most schools, including most of the grammar schools, currently apply that factor as a tiebreak criterion out of practical concern for the parents?

Mr Weir: Most schools apply the advantage that I described on the basis that academic selection is the key driver. That principle is enshrined. The Minister wants to make that advantage the key criterion. She has derided the Education (Northern Ireland) Act 1947, but people of my parents' and grandparents' generations did not have the opportunities afforded by that Act.

They were deprived because they came from a background in which money could buy places. The Minister chastises us —

2.15 pm

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

Mr Weir: The Minister chastises us and tells us that we are not living in the twenty-first century, but the Minister is trying to drag education back into a nineteenth-century type of selection. That is why these proposals are dead in the water.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the debate. The tone of the debate has changed since the Minister's statement on 4 December, when some parties rejected her proposals before they had heard them. They even objected to the fact that the Minister was making proposals to the House, despite the fact that they had been lambasting her for the previous six months for not making any proposals. In fact, she had been going out and speaking to the people who matter in this debate: the education sector, parents, communities and everyone who is affected by education. She spoke to industry representatives, who require freshly educated recruits for new workforces.

When the Minister stepped forward to table her proposals, there was rejection. However, today's debate has shone a new light on that. The amendments that have been tabled by various parties also shine a new light on how the debate has moved. I suspect that political unionism has picked up on the fact that the views of many people in grass-roots unionism are not as dogmatic as those that were expressed in speeches in

the Chamber just over a week ago. That is an interesting element of how the debate has moved on.

Academic selection has failed. It has failed individuals, and it has failed the population generally. There is a new alternative for the way forward. The Minister has outlined her plans, which I endorse. She has correctly said how those plans will be fully implemented. The full detail of the plans will be laid out following discussions with the various sectors, including politicians. We should not condemn a Minister for that. It is important to speak to the various sectors again on how the programme will be rolled out. Despite the best attempts of sections of the media to state that confusion abounds and that the education sector has rejected the Minister's plans, when one reads the contributions of that sector in detail, one realises that that is certainly not the case.

Miss McIlveen told the House that the Alliance Party and the SDLP had flatly rejected the Minister's proposals. However, the contributions from those parties this afternoon did not flatly reject the proposals. The Alliance Party and the SDLP may have areas of concern to raise, and they may wish to have more detail. Some of that is about party politics and political debate, which is fair enough. However, it cannot be said that the majority of parties in the Chamber have flatly rejected the Minister's proposals.

A sensible debate on the required changes in education must continue. As my colleague Paul Butler said, many grammar schools now accept pupils with a grade D in their 11-plus. A school in my constituency of Upper Bann is in danger of closing because a neighbouring city takes more and more pupils into its grammar schools with grades C and D. My constituency might lose an education facility that is vital to the cohesiveness of a part of the community. That is not good for education or for the future cohesiveness and morale of that community. If local area plans can be set out around education, there will be an ability to build a role for the school in the example that I gave from my constituency.

There have also been questions over how the Minister intends to implement the proposals within her budget. In the House last week, the Minister stated that she intends to do that. I expected applause from the DUP for that. Miss McIlveen has set herself up as a spokesperson for the entire Executive in stating that the Executive will reject the proposals. I also note that she said on behalf of the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he had not been consulted. The Minister of Education has said that she intends to implement the plans within her existing budget.

Mr Storey: I sometimes wonder how Sinn Féin Members can come to the House and make such generalisations. The Member made a generalisation about what happens in the unionist community. We, on this side of the House, who represent that community,

are better placed to comment on it. However, I want to ask him —

Mr O'Dowd: I have the Floor. I accept where the Member is coming from, and I do not wish to be so arrogant as to speak on behalf of the unionist community. However, my point is that we must listen closely to what people are saying, because broad headlines will not work. People are demanding change, and the Minister's proposals can be broadly accepted by everyone.

Mrs M Bradley: During previous debates in the House on teachers' jobs and other educational matters, the Minister criticised Members for making unrealistic demands on the education budget. Given that the Minister's plans to restructure post-primary education were not provided for in either the draft Programme for Government or the draft Budget, it is she who is making unrealistic demands. The SDLP welcomes the Minister's belated confirmation that the 11-plus will end in 2008, but it would be good to hear why she has not been quite so forthcoming about the end of academic selection. Has she left room to make a late deal with the DUP?

For many years, the SDLP has called for selection at age 14. Unfortunately, despite having waited so long for it, the Minister's statement is short on detail and financial certainty. The Minister seems somewhat complacent about the numbers of children who will be able to attend their first-choice schools and believes that pupils will simply move to the nearest post-primary school.

The Minister may be naive enough to believe that it is as simple as that. However, those of us who have been familiar with the education system for longer than the Minister know differently. The potential implications have already been flagged up in the north-west, where the demand for schools outstrips the supply. The proposed criteria of community and geographical area, and what they will mean in practice, must be carefully scrutinised. The SDLP is particularly concerned about the possibility of disadvantage being reinforced by a postcode lottery. Most astonishingly, that important issue is neither addressed nor provided for in either the draft Programme for Government or the draft Budget. All the proposed changes and transitions will cost money, yet there is not one line in the draft Budget about that.

The huge implications for the future of the schools estate have not yet been reflected in the draft investment strategy. Given that that is the single biggest public-service issue, such an omission is astounding. It raises questions about the commitment of the entire Executive to delivering changes without creating adverse implications for other parts of the education budget.

The Minister must ensure that the "flexibility and agility" that she intends to introduce are not shorthand for unequal standards and inconsistent funding. There

must be clarity on how change on the ground will be delivered and when there will be plans to allow proper public scrutiny, rather than mere spin, on the subject. There are simply too many unanswered questions hanging in the air.

How much has been invested in post-primary education to offset the educational disadvantage that is caused by social deprivation? How will the Minister avoid a postcode lottery and the creation of housing hotspots around oversubscribed schools? The SDLP does not want a life lottery to be replaced by a postcode lottery. What steps will the Minister take to ensure equality of opportunity between rural and urban pupils? When will the sustainable-schools policy and the area plans be published, given that they are so necessary for the future?

Teachers and governors want to know what will be the intended role and make-up of the local groups that the Minister said can agree different arrangements in different areas. Will those groups allow individual schools to make their own arrangements and, perhaps, set their own tests? Or will the groups be convened to discuss only transfer and admission policies?

Will the groups have a role in planning the restructuring and possible relocation of schools to facilitate the new model? If not, how can they decide on or deliver anything? If so, what are the implications for the review of public administration if such mini-boards are established?

Mr O'Loan: As I remarked on 4 December, I was a mathematics teacher for more than 30 years. I taught mostly in Northern Ireland grammar schools, but I also taught in an English comprehensive school. I have seen my five children through the education system here, so I bring some personal experience to this debate. There are few policy issues that are more important.

There are many Members who come from humble backgrounds; therefore, we know the importance of education in climbing the ladder, and we know what our schools did for us. If we go back some years to a time when life was a lot simpler, the local school was a very important place in our community. Nowadays, education is absolutely central to providing the knowledge and skills base for our economy. We do not want to reduce education to its role in providing for the economic system: it is a richer and more varied thing.

I was fortunate to have listened to a programme on Radio Ulster last evening about Seamus Heaney and his visit to Anahorish Primary School last Friday. He talked about what his school days meant to him and about the rich reservoir that they provided for his later poetry. He recalled his early school days as the start of a fairytale, and he talked of his time at Anahorish as a dream life, on which he drew later.

Another writer, DH Lawrence, described the space between pupil and teacher as "holy ground". Therefore, our debate about the education system should be lofty in character, because we are dealing with human beings in all their richness and complexity. We explore that complexity at school among pupils and teachers.

For the most part, the debate about the future of schools has not been very lofty in character — it has been divisive. Very often, people do not listen to one another; they take sides and think that they are completely right. So far, the debate has not done justice to the issue. We need to quieten down and listen.

Like others, I am heartened by the change in the tone of today's debate, particularly characterised by the Ulster Unionist amendment. I hope that they will have the courage of their convictions and stick to that changed ground.

It is remarkable that such a large group of people believe that there is no need for change. I did not agree with the Minister when she said that we need to change the system, simply because it is 60 years old. If it were still a good system, we should stick with it. However, we need to change it because it is not working well enough. It is doing damage, as well as good.

I wonder whether people believe that a conspiracy lay behind the conclusions of at least two major reports — the Burns Report and the Costello Report — that change is required. The people who delivered those reports were not inexperienced or stupid. Perhaps they were brainwashed, or was it simply the case that the problem was examined and it became obvious that something had to change?

We live in a different world. The idea that there are two broad types of people — the academic and the vocational — is absurd. We need a system that provides for individual needs and potential, and, very often, the current system does not do that. The grammar school part of our system is not perfect either, but it is often treated in such a way. Of course, it produces great results — how could it not from such a pressure cooker? Underneath the surface, it is far from perfect, and there is a great deal of dysfunction.

We have made great progress on the curriculum. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment has made great strides, and I compliment it on that. The revised curriculum and the entitlement framework provide a structure whereby every child can achieve his or her potential. It no longer makes sense to maintain a crude sheep-and-goat system.

The Minister needs to be mindful of the fact that she constantly mentions equality. It seems to be a Sinn Féin trait that if its Members say the word "equality" often enough, they will create a policy on any issue. All children are different, so they will not be served well by equal treatment. An emphasis on equality, used in that

sense, can suggest a reduction to the lowest common denominator. I understand why people react against that, because such language is not necessary. We are talking about the most appropriate provision for every child.

I agree with the Minister that the direction of travel is the right one. It is true that she is far from defining a new system. She concedes that point when she talks about further work "at a detailed level". I place some fault with her for not making more progress, but she is not the only one to blame.

There are many people and groups that are resistant to change, and they do our children no service. The grammar-school lobby is very powerful and has argued its case strongly. However, it has not made any contribution to the debate on ensuring a better system for everyone. I ask all Members to work together on the issue — all our children deserve that.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Kennedy: While I was in Washington last week on Assembly business, I read the Minister of Education's statement with some interest, and not a little alarm. That statement was damaging to the image of the Executive and the Assembly. The public have witnessed confusion and mess, and there is understandably heightened concern among parents, teachers and principals throughout Northern Ireland. Consequently, I am grateful for the opportunity to support the amendment tabled by Basil McCrea.

In light of the rapidly approaching CCEA deadline, what does the Minister plan to do next? What assurances can she offer the parents, teachers and principals of Northern Ireland that our transfer procedure will not descend into a shambles next year?

I am still a little unsure about why the Minister made her statement in the manner that she did. Does she believe that the future of our education system should be changed and pushed around by maverick actions on a solo run? Considering that the statement came from a Minister in what has been termed a four-party coalition Government, the people of Northern Ireland deserve more, expect more and should be given more.

Will the Minister outline what a process of "structured election" is? Will she admit that, without further detail, schools in Northern Ireland cannot make plans for the future provision of education? Will she indicate the processes by which schools will be selected for transformation into either a school for children of 11-19 years, 14-19 years or 11-14 years? If she is able to provide that detail, what support will be offered to such schools to make the required changes?

Selection by postcode has caused grave concern to Members on all sides of the House. The Minister claims that her vision will create equality for all. Although

there are problems with the 11-plus system, it could never be accused of discriminating directly against families because of their financial status. If the Minister's vision becomes reality, that is what will happen — parents who can afford to buy homes close to their favoured schools will be able to give their children the best education at the expense of those who are less well off. What strategies does the Minister have to prevent that form of postcode discrimination from becoming a reality? It is of paramount importance that those questions are answered quickly and effectively.

The current uncertainty is causing great stress to parents and teachers alike — and not least to children. The ramifications of this meandering may be even more serious because, as we are becoming more aware, for the Northern Ireland economy to flourish, a competitive education system is required. The message that is being sent out to potential investors is uncertain and ambiguous. The current circumstances are regrettable. For those reasons, I support the motion as amended by the amendment tabled in the name of Basil McCrea.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate, which follows my statement to the Assembly on 4 December on my route map for education. I welcome the tone of the debate. It is important that the discourse continue because there is a tremendous debate about education in our communities. I have been part of that debate, even since my statement on 4 December.

There is a simple truth at the heart of my proposals. If we do not change our education system, we will continue to fail the majority of our children. I am Minister of Education for all the children, not only a few. We need change, imagination and vision to deliver for all our children. What will happen if we do nothing? In 2006, more than 1,110 children in the North left school without a single GCSE or equivalent qualification; almost 4,000 left with fewer than four GCSEs at grade A to G; and almost 12,000 — nearly half — left school without English and maths at GCSE grade A to C.

Members should note that the 2006 Audit Office report on literacy and numeracy showed that half of the 14-year-old boys in secondary schools across the North had not achieved the expected standard in literacy or numeracy, and only 60% of 14-year-old girls in secondary schools achieved the expected standard of numeracy. It is impossible for any Minister charged with the education of children to ignore those facts. The undoubted success of many children at the top end of the academic scale cannot be allowed to mask the many failures and deficiencies in the system. We have evidence of a system that is failing children, particularly those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

Some 27% of children in the post-primary sector qualify for free school meals. In grammar schools, it is only 6%. Those who argue that grammar schools offer a route out of disadvantage cannot explain that.

Cruthaíonn ár gcóras seo: tá 27% de pháistí sa Tuaisceart i dteideal béilte scoile saor in aisce. I gcóras cothrom ionadaíoch bheadh beagnach áit amháin i gach cúig áit glactha ag páiste atá i dteideal béilte scoile saor in aisce.

Those who seek to defend the current system argue that merit should be the principle on which educational opportunities are decided. That argument ignores the reality that money — not merit — influences educational opportunities. The figures that I have quoted bear that out.

I ask Members to consider what a grammar school is. The effect of falling pupil numbers is changing our system, whether we like it or not. In 2006, almost one quarter of grammar-school places were awarded to applicants who received a grade B2, C or D in the transfer test. Only seven out of 69 grammar schools exclusively admitted children with grades A and B1. Meanwhile, the non-grammar schools suffer. Some 144 non-grammar schools out of 159 were undersubscribed in 2006. In 59 non-grammar schools — a quarter of all post-primary schools — the extent of that under-subscription meant that one in four places was empty.

George Bain reported that the schools estate has 53,000 surplus places, and that number is expected to rise to more than 80,000 — more than a quarter of the current school population — over the next 10 years unless we act. Consider what that means for so many of the 144 undersubscribed schools. It means reduced funding, teacher redundancies and shrinking opportunities for children in a school that is struggling to survive. The terrible tragedy is that that reduced education experience costs more.

None of the 36 post-primary schools in the North that have fewer than 300 children is a grammar school. The cost of educating one child for one year in those schools is, on average, almost 20% more than in the 41 schools that have 1,000 or more children — 26 of which are grammar schools. That is a greater cost for a narrow and shrinking education experience, and it is one of the costs of academic selection. To do nothing — which some Members advocate — is the easy option, but it is not an option for me.

Change is already happening, and I am seeking to manage the process of change and use the opportunities it presents to tackle the inequalities that blight the current system.

In recent days there has been much discussion about the cost of my proposals. Let me be very clear that whatever cost the changes will have, it will be less than the cost of doing nothing. There is so much to galvanise

in our system, and that can be achieved if we remove the blinkers and see beyond our current divisive structure.

The Executive have set a priority for building a vibrant economy in the years ahead, and the First and deputy First Ministers have just returned from an economic mission in North America. We must create an education system that is suited to the twenty-first century and its need for a range of skills and talents. We will do that by retaining and improving what is best in the system, and by developing new pathways that are suited to the talents, abilities and aspirations of all our children.

We must develop a joined-up system that encompasses the very best in pre-school, primary, post primary, FE colleges and universities if we are to be ready to meet the economic challenges that lie ahead. My proposals will not be driven by ideological dogma but by a desire to create a world-class education system for all children with equality for all at its core.

Look at the schools that are bucking the trend — those non-selective schools that are delivering high-quality education to all children against all odds. I am thinking of schools such as St Mark's High School, Warrenpoint; St Paul's High School, Bessbrook; Ashfield Girls High School; St Mary's College in Derry; and New-Bridge Integrated College. Those schools achieve excellent results, offer a great range of opportunities, and going by applications, are more popular than many grammar schools. They do all that without rejecting the ability of any child. I state that academic selection is unnecessary, and these schools prove it.

The facts speak for themselves. The case for change is irrefutable, and it is an opportunity to restore equality to our system, address sustainability and raise standards for all. I make no apology for using the word equality — equality for everyone. This is the opportunity to organise access to suitable provision for all young people in a manner that is in keeping with a modern-school system that supports a modern economy.

I appreciate that concerns have been raised by parents and school teachers on how and when post-11 and post-14 transition criteria will be applied. I wish to reassure them today that my proposals are clear. The last transfer test will be held in November 2008, and the last children to sit the transfer test will be those starting post-primary school in September 2009.

The transfer of children who will be starting post-primary school in September 2010 will operate under new arrangements that will be based largely on family, community and geographical criteria, as they do now for pre-school and primary school, and indeed, the majority of post-primary schools.

The new arrangements will extend to grammar-school admission processes, and I will discuss their nature with the grammar schools. Some grammar

schools may require time to adjust to the new vision, and I am ready and willing to work with them on that.

However, let me be clear: this will be a well-managed and well-planned transition. There will be no postcode lottery, as some have said. Sound bites may be good for chasing headlines, but they contribute little to the debate on the future of our children's education. I have no doubt that in September 2009 we will successfully match children to the correct post-primary places. We will do so by managing the current spare capacity in the system and by working with post-primary schools in all sectors to ensure that that happens. The educational professionals who deliver for our children on a daily basis are confident that it will happen, just as it currently does at primary-school level. Unlike some here today, who predict and hope for failure, I share the educational professionals' optimism for the future of our system and our children.

I thank Trevor Lunn and Declan O'Loan for their thoughtful comments, and I would like to reassure them that this is not a one-size-fits-all system.

I agree with Declan O'Loan that education should not simply be about the economy. Last week, I sat in the staffroom in Anahorish Primary School, just before Seamus Heaney was due to attend an auction there. As I sat there, I thought of the education that was provided to people such as Seamus Heaney. No one would argue that he did not receive a broad-ranging education. I did not hear the programme on Radio Ulster, although I would have liked to.

2.45 pm

Some people may think that I am choosing headlines selectively. I ask Sammy Wilson to look not just at the headlines that suit his ideology. A headline in yesterday's 'News Letter' reads: "Changes to Education System are Refreshing". That is a quote from the principal of Millburn Primary School, a controlled school that I have visited. That principal cares about every child, and in a letter to the editor of the newspaper, he states:

"Change is invariably stressful and normally those who least understand the issues and for whom change will therefore be greatest, shout the loudest to try and prevent it occurring and maintain the status quo. Perhaps if we stopped for a moment and considered the 55 per cent of our children that this present education system fails on a yearly basis, then change might be more readily accepted. I find it disturbing that once again Northern Ireland occupies the bottom of the UK ladder in performance. I accept that on a year-to-year basis we normally produce the top four to six per cent ... we also produce the bottom 23 to 27 per cent ... We are failing children with the greatest need and we haven't put a single change in place to alter this system ... I am extremely disappointed with the negativity of your headline on Wednesday December 5 as I can absolutely assure you there was no fury in Millburn at the scrapping of this antiquated system of selection."

I do not want to turn the education issue into a political football. I ask Members to listen to educationalists in all communities.

I was asked earlier about trade unions. I met the trade unions last week, and they all welcome my proposals.

In 2013, the key education decision for a young person will be taken at 14 years of age, and it will be reached through a formal and structured process of informed selection, drawing on three years of post-primary schooling and the advice of parents, school-teachers and careers professionals. The provision for post-14 education will be accessed either by transition within the same, or collaborating, institutions or by transfer to other institutions. Area-based planning will design an area's provision to ensure that it has the capacity to match young people to suitable provision post-14 years of age, potentially with models catering for 11-14 year-olds, 14-19 year-olds and 11-19 year-olds.

The area-based planning criteria will be decided through a short consultation process, which has already begun. The choices available to young people at 14 years of age will be expanded by the entitlement framework, providing new opportunities for access to academic, professional and technical courses.

Beidh níos mó roghanna ann do dhaoine óga in aois a 14 faoin chreatlach teidil; cuirfidh sé ar a gcumas cúrsaí acadúla, gairmiúla agus teicniúla a rochtain.

Academic excellence will be at the heart of the new system. We have some world-class schools, and we will continue to have them. We will continue to match academic young people to academic provision. The only change will be that we no longer have some world-class schools at the expense of an underclass of schools. We will not have a two-tiered system, no child will fail at the age of 10, and we will not have a population that is afraid of change.

I shall, as promised on 4 December, make a statement in the new year on how that work is progressing, including, as previously stated, an update on the development of area-based planning. In January 2008, I shall also publish my strategy for school improvement — 'Every School a Good School' — which will underpin the pursuit of high standards for every child in every school.

I will bring proposals for the future of post-primary transfer to the Education Committee and the Executive Committee, and my draft admissions criteria regulations for transfer in 2010 and beyond will, of course, be subject to statutory consultation.

Cuirfidh mé moltaí ar thodhchaí an aistrithe iarbhunscoile ar bráid an Choiste Oideachais agus an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin. Nuair a bheas rialacháin dréachta agam do chritéir iontrála do Aistriú 2010, cuirfear iad faoi chomhairliúcháin reachtach. Is mian liom comhaontú a chothú.

Some people are intent on pointing out the various constitutional stages that are required before any significant policy changes can take place. Let me say

this: I want a legislative basis for my proposals. As I said last week, I will bring forward draft regulations. The point is that I want Assembly and Executive approval — I want consensus. Far from flouting consultation requirements, my 4 December statement served as an early briefing on the sorts of proposals that I intend to bring to my colleagues in the Executive, the Assembly and the Education Committee. That statement also prompted a long-overdue debate, and I urge my Assembly colleagues to listen to that debate, to the vast majority of educationalists who welcome my proposals and to their communities — and all communities.

There is excitement about the future of education. There is excitement and imagination about what is possible if the system's potential, which has been restrained for too long by our selective tradition, is released. My proposals will harness that energy and allow for different solutions in different areas and for debate. As I said, it is not a one-size-fits-all approach. The educational interests in each area will be responsible for developing the provision that best meets the needs of local children.

I will finish by setting out the work that I will be doing in the immediate future in order to develop my plans. Since my 4 December statement, I have already met a range of stakeholders: school trustees; the Governing Bodies Association; trade unions; the Equality Commission; the Human Rights Commission; and the Children's Commissioner. Before Christmas, I will meet all those involved in planning an orderly admissions process for grammar-school applicants due to transfer in 2010. On either side of Christmas, I will explore with them transfer arrangements that will enable them to move significantly towards a successful future, and which will help schools to manage the transition quickly and effectively.

I want to build a consensus, and I urge fellow Members to realise that they have a responsibility to approach this issue constructively. My responsibility is to be a Minister for all children. Work with me. The Minister, the Executive and the Assembly cannot stand by and allow the failure, drift and decay in our system to grow. We cannot abandon our children any longer. They are our collective children — our future. For their sake, we must reform our outdated and antiquated education system, and that reform must be delivered now.

Mr Butler: A Cheann Comhairle, I beg to ask leave to withdraw amendment No 4.

Amendment No 4, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr Ross: I listened to what the Minister said. She made it obvious that she is listening to this, that and the other but she has not been listening to the people of Northern Ireland or looking at the surveys and polls that have been carried out on what those people want for their education system. She has also not been listening to this side of the House. If she had, she would not

have come up with these proposals. She came up with these proposals last Tuesday, and that is why a raft of amendments were tabled, although I note that her party colleague Mr Butler has withdrawn his.

The DUP amendment clearly sets out — and such clarity has been missing from the Education Minister's statements — the necessity for the transfer mechanism to match individual children with schools that best suit their needs, rather than creating a one-size-fits-all system that will fail everyone. Amendment No 3 recognises that some children require additional help and that others who are academically gifted need to be academically stretched.

Having said that, I listened to the Members who spoke on the other amendments, and there is some merit in those. I will return to them later.

We also recognise the potential for what Mr Butler described as a "postcode lottery". I disagree with that phraseology, because, by definition, a lottery suggests that everyone has an equal chance. What will happen is that families who can afford to do so will buy houses in the catchment areas of the best schools.

Mrs Long: Does the Member accept that that already happens to some degree? Parents choose to buy houses near prestigious primary schools so that their children will have a better opportunity of passing the transfer exam. That is not a new situation; it has been going on for years. Those who have money and influence will do better out of almost any system.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for her intervention. I am not sure whether she is trying to justify that by saying that the inequality already exists, so it might as well happen in the post-primary sector.

We have seen evidence of it happening in England; we have read reports from the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, and 'The Scotsman' has reported that parents in Scotland are driving up property prices near good schools.

Mary Bradley talked about the equality of opportunity. Access to grammar schools should be based on merit — that is the fairest criterion. It would be a backward step to introduce measures that would automatically mean that children from lower-income families on both sides of the community are denied access to the most popular schools because they do not have as much money as middle-class families. Yet, we hear so-called socialists in the House proclaiming that doing away with selection is great.

Last Tuesday, the Minister of Education was referred to as the "Minister of confusion and mess". That mess and confusion exists as much today as it did before last week's announcement. She talked about her vision and her dream, and Mr Dominic Bradley said that he hoped

that it would not turn into a nightmare. We can all agree that it is time for her to wake up and face reality.

Two specific issues must be addressed — academic selection and whether pupils should transfer at age 11 or 14. Members have touched on both issues throughout the debate. No one has argued that the 11-plus exam should remain. That is not, nor has it been, my party's position. We recognise that it is not the best means of selection. However, academic selection must be part of any transfer proposals.

The Minister still has not grasped one simple reality. Academic selection is safeguarded in legislation, and, in order to do away with it, the Minister must introduce new legislation in the House and gain cross-community support for it. My colleague Michelle McIlveen quoted from the existing legislation. The Minister knows that her proposals will not receive the required cross-community support.

Since the Minister made her statement last week, I have listened to people discussing the subject in canteens, shops and in party meetings, which shows that the issue is important to everyone, not only to politicians. Nobody is a failure at the age of 11, but we must recognise that some children are more academically gifted than others, and that all children deserve —

Mr Weir: The Members opposite, and particularly the Minister, are keen to lecture us on the supposed mood of the unionist community on the issue. However, last year, several of us on North Down Borough Council launched a local petition, which, in a few weeks, received 13,000 signatures, with very few refusals. It showed clearly what the mood was. Does that petition not outweigh the one letter received from a primary-school headmaster?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute, because he has allowed two interventions.

Mr Ross: I agree with Mr Weir. That anecdotal evidence backs up various polls and surveys that have been conducted by newspapers and television programmes.

Academic selection allows children from all classes to go to grammar schools on the basis of aptitude and ability. That is fair. It also means that those children who struggle academically can go to schools that will be better suited to their needs. Mixed-ability classes in schools cannot deliver for children who need extra attention or for those who need to be stretched academically.

Members will have heard stories of very bright children who failed the 11-plus but went on to achieve academic success. That proves that a secondary-school education that is tailored to the individual needs of the pupils actually works. The House heard my colleague from Strangford Miss McIlveen describe how she failed the

11-plus. She has gone on to become a very successful young lady.

The second issue is whether transfer should occur at age 11 or 14. That is a separate issue from that of academic selection. Perhaps, the two issues have been merged in some of the debates.

There are merits in transferring at age 14. Those who live in the Dickson plan area talk about how great that plan is. However, that is another issue.

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

Mr Ross: In conclusion, the DUP is happy to support Mr Basil McCrea's amendment, as it includes proposals to avoid selection by postcode. To the DUP, that means that academic selection —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Ross: It is interesting that Paul Butler has withdrawn his amendment, which welcomed the statement —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to take his seat.

Mr Ross: He has changed his position —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to take his seat.

3.00 pm

Mr K Robinson: I am glad that the mood in the House has changed. The debate started off in a sombre and argumentative mood. However, Members are now beginning to move to a more cohesive stance.

The Minister lectured Members about working with her and listening to her. Well Minister, had you come to us, we would have listened. We would have wanted to work with you, but the method by which you chose to bring your statement to the House on 4 December made a difficult task even more difficult — if not impossible.

Therefore, before I begin my winding-up speech, I want to ask you one or two questions, and I will give you time to ponder those and perhaps this time we will get an answer. Did you discuss your statement with any of your Sinn Féin colleagues?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should address his remarks through the Chair.

Mr K Robinson: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Did the Minister discuss her statement with any of her Sinn Féin ministerial colleagues prior to making the statement to the House? Did they make her aware of the ministerial code to which she must adhere? Did she discuss the matter with any other Ministers prior to making the statement to the House? Did she discuss the matter with the Chairperson of the Committee for Education prior to meeting that Committee? The changes to the education system that the Minister has proposed are massive. Is she able to implement those changes within the timescale available to her?

Some Members who have contributed to this debate have taken a predictable approach regarding the transfer procedure. They have emphasised the word “failure”. I hate that word; I do not use that word, and I hate to hear other people using that word. As Mr Ross and others have pointed out, children do not suddenly fail at the age of 11. Many are failing before they enter our schools, and for a variety of reasons. If the Minister addressed that issue, perhaps there would be total agreement in the House. Resources are required for children before they go to school.

I find it distasteful when politicians behave in a doctrinaire manner, yet are indecisive having let the hare loose. On this particular subject, the undue delay on a matter of such gravity and significance for families across Northern Ireland is totally unacceptable. The political correctness exhibited by the Minister and her preference for what she calls “election over selection” is typical of the type of woolly thinking that has pervaded — perhaps up to now, maybe she has seen the light today, and maybe the vision has come home — her approach to handling this process.

Running an education service is about making real choices that dramatically affect real people. This is not about playing with words, and the Minister’s clichés and platitudes are no substitute for the lack of real investment in adequate staffing and resources in all our schools. Unless that issue is addressed urgently, I can imagine the Minister and her colleagues clocking up air miles as they travel backwards and forwards to attend Westminster Committees regarding underachievement in our system.

Selection is a perfectly valid process, as are the setting and streaming processes. The problem with selection is not the process itself; it is the perception by some people that it involves passing or failing a particular test. Selection is not about passing or failing; it is about seeking to place pupils in the educational situation that is most appropriate to their aptitudes.

One of the problems lies with the obsession that people in our society have regarding success and failure, and the suggestion that the academic route is the only route to success — it is not. However, the other routes require proper funding.

I thank the SDLP and the DUP for their movement towards the UUP’s view on this matter. I was particularly taken by the way that Dominic Bradley analysed the situation. He talked about a forensic examination and how that showed certain sets of fingerprints. I hope that those fingerprints can now be withdrawn and that all Members can settle down and address the real issues. That is what is required to enable all our children to succeed before they transfer, regardless of whether they transfer at age 11 or 14, and regardless of

what system is in place to enable them to transfer to their receiving school.

The proposals lack detail, as Basil McCrea said. There is no use in trying to introduce a system unless it is properly resourced. It is absolutely obvious to every Member that there are not currently enough resources to go around all the Departments. How on earth will the Minister proceed along the route that she has chosen? That path will end in total confusion.

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

Mr K Robinson: The Minister will not be able to deliver. The staff are not trained, the processes are not in place, and sufficient resources — buildings and personnel — do not exist.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm achoimre a dhéanamh ar leasú uimhir 1.

I am pleased to sum up on amendment No 1. It is clear from the debate that there is widespread dissatisfaction with the Minister’s plans. Members agree that not enough thought has been given to those plans and that there is not enough detail to make them credible. Much more work remains to be done before the Minister’s hazy vision becomes clear. Having listened to the various contributions, the Minister will now be aware of that.

The Minister must publish the sustainable-schools policy and her scheme for area planning — both are essential to provide the framework within which consultation will be based. That point has been already made by some of the major partners in education, including CCMS, the teachers’ unions and the Transferors’ Representative Council. The framework for consultation must have enough detail to enable teachers and parents to see clearly what the Minister’s plans will mean on the ground in local areas. Without more detail, parents will continue to be uncertain and confused about what the future holds for the education of their children.

There is also confusion about the future of academic selection. The SDLP has been opposed to academic selection since its formation. The Minister has been unclear on that issue. She has said that she is not in favour of academic selection, and Mr Butler was at pains to remind us that the Minister has not said that there will be no academic selection. What exactly is the situation? Has academic selection gone for good, or will it still remain in some form or other?

The SDLP — along with others — has pointed out the need for the schools estate and infrastructure to be ready to facilitate choice at age 14. There will be a huge need for restructuring, and we are not convinced that the Minister has been allocated sufficient resources in the draft Budget to deliver that. There is no indication that those major changes have been included in the

draft investment strategy. We must also be sure that the new system will be invested in to an extent that will ensure that educational disadvantage resulting from social deprivation will be dealt with early in the school lives of pupils, and before they enter post-primary education.

Many Members underlined the need to avoid a postcode lottery, with housing hot spots developing around oversubscribed schools. As my colleague Mary Bradley said, we do not want to substitute a postcode lottery for a life lottery. Many questions remain about rural communities and the need to ensure that pupils from rural backgrounds are not disadvantaged by the forthcoming changes.

Overall, we must move forward constructively, and I am glad that the Minister seems to have got her skates on and is thinking of making progress.

In the context of the debate, I am minded to withdraw my amendment. The Assembly must present a clear message to the general public, and I thank the Alliance Party for its support for our views. I am minded to withdraw my amendment in favour of the UUP amendment, but I will continue to warn the Minister that she must have the resources to effect change. I wonder whether she has raised the matter with the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Together with my colleagues on the Committee for Education, I will raise that question with the Minister and her officials. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member clarify whether he wishes to withdraw his amendment?

Mr D Bradley: A Cheann Comhairle, beidh mé iontach soiléir faoi — agus bhí mé iontach soiléir faoi — ach le tú a shásamh, déarfaidh mé é, “Beidh mé ag tarraingt an leasaithe siar.”

Yes, Mr Speaker. [*Laughter.*] I beg to ask leave to withdraw amendment No 1.

Amendment No 1, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr Speaker: Amendment No 1 has been withdrawn, and I am hearing no objections.

Mr Storey: At the outset of the debate I thought that there would not be any Christmas cheer, given the position that we are in. However, it appears that there may be some light at the end of the tunnel, albeit on the basis that what was certain last week is now uncertain. Sinn Féin has withdrawn and is in the process of retreating — all the answers have become questions. We know the reason for that: the Minister has realised that she has no chance of getting her proposals through the legislative framework that was negotiated by the DUP, limited and lacking in detail though those proposals were. Whether her retreat is dignified, discredited or disorderly, I assure the Minister that we will continue to pursue her on the issues.

Today, the Minister informed the House about what she has done since she made her statement on 4 December 2007 — she has been having talks about talks. We have had those in the past, and we have seen how little value they have brought to the process.

In this Chamber last week, the Minister outlined what she called her vision for the education system in Northern Ireland. Some of us might suggest that the Minister had been eating too much cheese — Irish cheese, no doubt — before she retreated for the night. Therefore, instead of a vision, she came up with what my colleague Dominic Bradley referred to as a nightmare. It is clear to even the most naïve Members that the Minister's commitment is not to strengthen or improve the education system, and that her lack of competence to do a job that is far too big for her will be harmful to our education system and, in turn, harmful to our children. No doubt there remain some on the Sinn Féin Benches, including the Minister's defender Paul Butler, who would say that she is doing a good job no matter how many gaffs she makes, or how many times she makes a complete hames of her job.

Mr Shannon: Does the Member agree that Northern Ireland students outscore their peers in England, Scotland and Wales, and that lower-income families also outscore their peers across the water? Does the Member also agree that it appears ludicrous to change the system to something that will fail?

Mr Storey: We must ensure that rather than bringing the system down, which is what the Minister's proposals advocate, we must bring the entire system up so that everyone has equality, if that is what is at the centre of the Minister's aims.

Even on the Minister's Benches, there must be some Members who are questioning why Gerry Adams decided to promote someone who is so obviously out of her depth and who cannot deal with the situation that confronts us.

Undoubtedly, it is time for Gerry Adams to say to the Minister that it is time to go, you know. That is the message that must come from the Chamber. The DUP's motion and amendment call on the Minister to do what she ought to have done last week: do the work that she is paid to do; and put in place a process that will deliver an education system that is fit for purpose in Northern Ireland. The DUP is happy to support Basil McCrea's amendment, which calls on Caitríona Ruane to provide a coherent strategy for the implementation of her proposals for alternative arrangements to the existing transfer system, which will end in just over a month's time.

3.15 pm

Several Members quoted from various newspapers. I want to quote from a recent edition of 'The Irish News'. A certain individual made the following comment:

"One area of Sinn Féin politics that is less welcoming is their fundamentally flawed approach to our education system."

Obviously, people who read that publication are not convinced that the Minister of Education has got it right.

This is a golden opportunity for the Minister to put some flesh on the bones and to give the House a clear outline of the fruit of all the work that she has supposedly done since taking office. Now is not the time for one of her lectures about equality, which, of course, Members are always being given. Listening to the word "equality" on the Minister's lips is a bit like listening to the words "till death do us part" on Elizabeth Taylor's lips. I have no doubt that that is not a matter on which she has been overproductive and over-profitable during the past few years.

What does the Minister actually propose to do? She must tell the House what her intentions are for children from 1 February 2008 onwards. If she cannot do that, she has failed not only the House but the children and parents who are waiting to hear from her. There is concern about the way in which she intends to go about that. Will there be a 12-week consultation on the Minister's proposals, or, with her constant references to regulations, will her proposals be introduced by sleight of hand and through the back door? Let me tell the Minister that she will not succeed in bringing anything in through the front door, the back door or any other door, without the say of the Executive and the Assembly: there will be no sleight of hand on this issue. If the Minister cannot do that, she becomes the Minister of failure — the Minister who, as I have said previously, has failed the children of Northern Ireland.

Does the Assembly really believe that the mess that Members have been debating has all been created by one individual? I would suggest that it is not simply the fault of the Minister; it is, of course, a result of Sinn Féin policy. Sinn Féin continues to promote that policy and to trade in destruction and division. It has not moved away from its old tactics. Therefore, Sinn Féin has put the Minister in a position where she must carry out its diktats. Last week, the Minister missed a major opportunity to back up the party's rhetoric. Today, she has failed again to do exactly that, because she is ill prepared to have tangible and meaningful proposals in place by the end of January 2008.

In conclusion, I have some suggestions for the Minister. It is a bit like the "toolkit" to which she referred earlier, when she told the House about the merits of the toolkits for diversity in primary schools that she discovered in the Irish Republic. Today, she will receive a toolkit that is stamped with the words "made in Northern Ireland", because that is where the best products are made.

The Minister must reflect on why so many children fail to achieve the literacy and numeracy skills that

they are expected to develop through the primary-school system. That is where much inequality begins. She would do well to tackle that, if she could see beyond her political ideology and social engineering. She must carefully examine those targets and then hang her head in shame.

Observers are now asking whether the Minister has deliberately turned a blind eye to the potential for "grannyng" because of her apparent contempt for the existing pupil allocation system.

The existing pupil allocation system prevented abuse by all but the dishonest. Informed as she is about the ruling on pupils from across the border attending our post-primary schools, does Minister Ruane propose to open the floodgates deliberately to all kinds of underhand practices, such as "grannyng" and the postcode lottery, by decommissioning the existing system? Were she to do so, that would create the type of anarchy of choice that the Minister seems to desire.

Grammar schools have made it clear that they will retain the right to put in place their own transfer procedures, which will include an element of academic selection. There is absolutely nothing that the Minister can do about that, so what is her proposed response? She has threatened not to fund those schools but has failed to say whether she is referring —

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: No. She has threatened not to fund those schools but has failed to say whether she is referring to the funding of pupils — capital or administration — or simply the funding of any test that those schools may introduce. Again, she has failed to give us any clear indication on that matter.

What will the Minister do? Will she strangle the very part of the education system that is acknowledged as providing excellence in education? Is that her vision for the future education system in Northern Ireland? Is she so ideologically crippled, and so eaten up with hatred, that that is her intention? I leave the House to decide whether that is the case.

However, that may not be the case. Perhaps she simply does not want an obligation to fund any independent transfer process. What would that result in? If that were to happen, the selection process would have to be paid for by someone. The schools would set charges that would have to be borne by parents. Instead of our having an education system that is at the centre of equality, we will have further inequality.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Storey: I suggest that the Minister, in her current proposals, is a Minister of apartheid in education rather than of equality.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Order. I remind Members that amendment No 1 and amendment No 4 have been withdrawn, by leave of the House. I remind Members that if amendment No 2 is made, amendment No 3 will fall.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to present the details of her proposed process of formal structured election, including the process by which schools will be selected; to indicate what support will be offered to schools in relation to the proposals; to outline the policy for selection and allocation of teaching staff; and to further outline her proposals to avoid selection by postcode.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Missing Disks

Mr Speaker: As I indicated to the House earlier, I have received notice from the Minister of the Environment that she wishes to make a statement about two disks that have gone missing in transit between the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) in Coleraine and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) in Swansea.

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I thank you, Mr Speaker, for the speedy way in which you dealt with my request to make this statement. I apologise to Members, but a copy of my statement should, by now, be in their pigeonholes. The statement was produced quickly, and I hope that Members appreciate that fact.

Two computer disks, which contain the names and addresses of 7,685 vehicle keepers and details of their vehicles, are missing in transit between DVA in Coleraine and DVLA in Swansea. The information on the disks for each of the 7,685 vehicles consists of the keeper's name and address, and the vehicle details, which include registration mark, chassis number and the make, model and colour of the vehicle. The data on the disks were being sent to DVLA in response to requests from vehicle manufacturers who need to contact drivers about faults, or potential faults, that have been discovered in certain vehicle models.

The two agencies routinely deal with such safety-recall requests, and the release of data to manufacturers for that purpose is both lawful and in the interests of the drivers concerned. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Would whoever owns the mobile phone that is ringing, please switch it off? I ask all Members to ensure that their mobile phones are switched off.

Minister, I apologise for the interruption.

Mrs Foster: I would be very happy if that was Parcellforce on the phone. *[Laughter.]*

The disks were sent using a special courier service that is operated by Parcellforce Worldwide, which is part of the Royal Mail group. The packages were collected by prearrangement by Parcellforce Worldwide and were tracked at every stage of handling until they reached the company's central hub in Coventry. There is no record of the packages leaving the depot in Coventry, although Parcellforce Worldwide believes that they were despatched to its Swansea depot but did not arrive there. Despite extensive searches at the depot, they have not been found.

That method of sending such data has been used without incident for many years. Due to the nature of the data on the disks, encryption was not used. It is ironic that an internal review — which was initiated by

the Department after the child benefit disks were lost in Great Britain — identified that method of sending disks as a systematic weakness — a week after the disks had been sent.

DVA has written to every vehicle keeper involved. In view of the limited nature of the data on the disks, it is not likely that keepers will need to take any action. However, a special helpline has been set up that customers can call if they have any concerns. Every vehicle record has been flagged to alert staff in the unlikely event of any attempt being made to misuse the data. The information needed by the manufacturers has already been re-sent to DVLA by a different method, and drivers can expect to get the safety information that they require shortly.

I sincerely regret that this error has occurred, and I regret any inconvenience or concern that has been caused to the keepers of the vehicles involved. As well as the internal review that was carried out by the Driver and Vehicle Agency, all issues regarding the handling and transmission of data are being examined urgently as part as a review of the security of personal data across all Departments, which was initiated by Minister Robinson.

I will ensure that all the recommendations that emerge from those reviews are implemented fully and speedily. In addition, the Information Commissioner has been informed and has agreed to carry out an audit of data security in the Driver and Vehicle Agency.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her prompt statement.

Many people will view this latest revelation of yet more losses of computer disks containing people's details with dismay, anger and, in some quarters, fear. When such details are lost, people are fearful that they could fall into criminal hands.

Can the Minister clarify when the disks were sent and when it was first discovered that the data had been lost? Since that discovery, what has been done in conjunction with the police, Parcelforce Worldwide and any other relevant authorities to retrieve the data or at least to establish what went wrong? I believe that tracking measures were supposed to be in place.

Finally, what measures will be put in place at the Department of the Environment to ensure that such an incident does not occur again? Although the Minister cannot answer for other Departments, I hope that there will be compliance with, and standardisation of, measures across all Departments and all statutory agencies within their remit so that our citizens' personal data can be protected in the interests of personal privacy and, more important, personal security. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Chairman for his concerns. The Driver and Vehicle Agency very much regrets this incident, and its chief executive made that very clear in his comments today on this problem.

The disks were sent on 20 and 21 November, and although both disks were received at Parcelforce Worldwide's national hub in Coventry — and were tracked to that destination — DVLA notified DVA on 5 December that the disks had not been received in Swansea. Since then, Parcelforce Worldwide has carried out extensive searches to locate the disks. We are not optimistic that the disks will be found, and there is no point in saying otherwise.

In order to rectify the situation, DVA has written to every vehicle keeper involved. In view of the limited nature of the data on the disks, it is not likely that keepers will have to take any action.

3.30 pm

Customers may have concerns as a result of the recent losses of computer disks containing financial details. We have, therefore, set up a helpline that will, hopefully, give people the answers that they need. Furthermore, every vehicle detailed on the missing disks has been flagged in order to alert staff in the unlikely event of an attempt to misuse that data. As I have already said, the reason for sending the material to Swansea was a safety recall by manufacturers. That information has been sent by a different method, and drivers can shortly expect to obtain the safety information that they require.

The Information Commissioner's Office has been informed of the incident and has agreed to carry out an audit. The Member will know that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has instigated an audit of all practices across Departments, and we are working with him. This latest incident was, as I said in my statement, detected by an internal audit in the Department after the child benefit disks were lost in GB. It is unfortunate that the incident happened only a week after the revelations about the child benefit disks. There is nothing that I can do about that. All I can do is work with the people who have concerns and look to the future so that this will not happen again.

Mr S Wilson: I thank the Minister of the Environment — or “Arlene Darling”, as she is likely to become known after this incident — for her statement.

The big concern is that this information could be used by criminal gangs that are involved in the theft and resale of cars or the recycling of cars that have been written off by insurance companies. Has the Minister consulted the police and car manufacturers to establish the possibility of such a misuse of data, and how that might be avoided?

Mrs Foster: The loss has been reported to the police in Northern Ireland and in GB, where it occurred. I note the Member's comments about the potential misuse of the data by criminal gangs. We are confident that that will not happen. As I have already said, the records have now been flagged so that staff will be alerted to any misuse and can take appropriate action.

I have been asked whether the missing data could be used fraudulently to insure a vehicle. The insurance database would show that the vehicle was already insured, which would raise suspicion of fraud in the insurance industry, and alert it to that. I am confident that criminals will not be able to use the material. However, if Members or their constituents have concerns, I urge them to call the helpline.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I note the exceptional affection with which the Minister's party colleague addressed her. I also thank her for her statement.

Many people's concerns will be heightened by the emerging evidence that there are significant holes in the system. My Committee has heard evidence that highly secure intranet facilities are available to the Government that would obviate the need for any kind of physical transfer. That, it seems, would provide some answers to concerns about the security of highly sensitive data. Would the Minister agree that that is an option that we should urgently consider?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his comments. There is no doubt that that issue required examination. The current method of sending disks to Swansea has been used for some considerable time, and was in need of review. Unfortunately, as I said, we looked at the matter a week too late.

On this occasion, we re-sent the information to Swansea, using the sort of method that the Member has talked about. I have no doubt that that will be the way that information will be sent in the future. It is unfortunate that this has happened at this time.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Minister for her statement and for the detail that she provided. I ask that every effort be made to keep Members informed into the new year as to how the practical problems are outworking from this unfortunate episode.

It is important that encryption should be used in the handling of data of that nature. Can the Minister tell the House whether there are any plans to insist on encrypting data in future, irrespective of the review that the Minister and the Department of Finance and Personnel are carrying out? I also welcome the Minister's assurances that no insurance implications will result from the incident. The incident is somewhat unfortunate, and it highlights a degree of incompetence, particularly in other parts of the United Kingdom, that we do not wish to become widespread in Northern Ireland.

Mrs Foster: This is a systemic issue, and the DVA in Northern Ireland has met it head on. The DVA has made itself available and given the fullest amount of detail that it can. Therefore, I felt that it was important to come to the House today, before it rose for the Christmas recess, to give Members their place and to make them aware of where we are on the issue.

In the past, it was felt that the sort of data that was being sent on the disks was of such a nature that it did not need encrypting. However, when the data is sent by the new methods to which I referred in my previous answer, it will be encrypted.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for her statement. The issue of data minimisation is often raised in situations such as this. I am aware that extracting pieces of data to be sent can be a costly process, but in some cases, it can help to increase security. Therefore, can the Minister tell the House whether only information that was essential to the manufacturers for recall was forwarded, or whether complete records were forwarded to the DVLA?

Mrs Foster: The information that was sent to the DVLA was: the keeper's name; the keeper's address; the chassis number; the registration; and the make, colour and type of car.

Some Members: The model of the car.

Mrs Foster: Yes, the model of the car was sent to DVLA — I could not think of the correct word. I understand that that was the information that was requested in order to effect the security recall. All those issues will be considered in the audit that is being carried out by the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

I omitted to tell Mr Kennedy that I am more than happy to keep the House informed about how the matter is progressing.

Mr Weir: I join other Members in thanking the Minister for bringing the issue so swiftly to the Assembly. Along with the Chairman of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I look forward to the Executive's review on data, which will be brought before the House and which will allow us to consider how issues such as this are handled systemically. I note that, on this occasion, it is clear that the mistake was made in England. However, we must ensure that we are not complacent on such issues because peace of mind is crucial to people. The Minister said that the information related to around 7,500 vehicles, which, I presume, are all Northern Ireland-based.

In her statement, the Minister said that the owners of the vehicles had all been written to. Can she tell the House when they were written to? Depending on her answer, can she give an assurance that everyone who has been affected has either already received a letter, or should receive one in the next couple of days, so

that people who do not receive such a letter can be fairly certain that their vehicle has not been affected?

Mrs Foster: There were 7,685 vehicles involved, and letters have been written to all 6,000 individuals concerned. Some have received those letters today, and, presumably, others may not receive theirs until tomorrow. People who have not received correspondence by the end of the week, to take account of the Christmas post, can assume that they are not affected.

Mr I McCrea: I also thank the Minister for coming to the House so swiftly to keep Members informed of matters that affect some of our constituents. Other Members have asked some of the questions that I had in mind, but the loss of any personal information, including the data that the Minister mentioned, is concerning. Will the Minister confirm that no financial information was included on the disks? She detailed the information that was sent, but, for the sake of people who hear about the situation, it is important to clarify that there was no financial data.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for that important question. It is vital to reiterate that the data included no details whatsoever of bank accounts, or any other financial information. Given the context in which we are discussing what has happened, I recognise the concern in the community. I reiterate that no financial details were on the disks, as the letters that have been sent to the people involved confirm.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her statement. However, her news is quite alarming, and the questions that have been put to her thus far reflect Members' concerns. I presume that police are investigating the theft of the disks. If so, have they, at this early stage, been able to indicate whether the disks are in the hands of criminals, and, if that is the case, what steps are being taken to address the situation?

The Minister mentioned an alternative method of relaying information. I want to ensure that that will replace the current method, which is clearly suspect, and that any future method will be more secure.

Mrs Foster: There is an ongoing police investigation in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Given that I was alerted to the situation only towards the end of last week, that investigation is at an early stage. Parcelforce is continuing its search for the disks, but I am not particularly optimistic that it will find them. I understand why the Member said that this is an "alarming" matter. However, the mislaid data includes no financial information. I urge anyone who is concerned about the issues that I raised in my statement to contact the helpline for guidance.

I severely doubt that the Department will use the same system again. We will use the intranet system that has been mentioned and other secure methods of transmitting data.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Speaker:*]

ADJOURNMENT

The Route of the NIE North/South Interconnector through the Constituency of Newry and Armagh

Mr Speaker: I remind the House that the Member who tabled the Adjournment topic will have 10 minutes to speak, and all others will have approximately seven minutes.

Mr D Bradley: I welcome the opportunity to address the House today on the emotive issue of the proposed North/South interconnector between Tyrone and Cavan. At the outset, I wish to make it clear that I, and those I represent, are not opposed to North/South interconnection, and we welcome the steps that have been taken to make the all-island electricity market a reality.

However, when embarking on large-scale infrastructure projects such as this, elected representatives must ensure that the concerns and fears of constituents are adequately addressed.

I am concerned about the proposal to create a 400-kilovolt interconnector running 80 kilometres between Tyrone and Cavan as part of a joint project by NIE (Northern Ireland Electricity) in the North and EirGrid plc in the South.

The proposal as it stands has created genuine fear and anxiety the length and breadth of this island. For many different reasons, communities have deep-rooted concerns about the health and environmental implications of overhead power lines and about their visual impact on some of the most beautiful parts of this land.

3.45 pm

Homeowners and farming families are concerned about their lands, and about the fact that power lines may depreciate them. For many years, scientific experts across the globe failed to agree a collective response to the issue of overhead power lines. However, in August 2007, after lengthy collaboration among many international scientists, a report titled 'A Rationale for a Biologically-based Public Exposure Standard for Electromagnetic Fields (ELF and RF)' was produced by the BioInitiative working group. That report shows that there are sound reasons for questioning the use of overhead high-voltage power lines, and it strongly argues in favour of using underground power lines instead.

The report, which was published on 31 August 2007 by 14 of the world's leading experts in the physical,

biological and engineering sciences and in public health and public policy, rejects outright current industry guidelines and calls for a drastic reduction in permitted limits of electromagnetic field exposure. The report states:

“You cannot see it, taste it or smell it, but it is one of the most pervasive environmental exposures in industrialized countries today. Electromagnetic radiation (EMR) or electromagnetic fields (EMFs) are the terms that broadly describe exposures created by the vast array of wired and wireless technologies that have altered the landscape of our lives in countless beneficial ways. However, these technologies were designed to maximize energy efficiency and convenience; not with biological effects on people in mind. Based on new studies, there is growing evidence among scientists and the public about possible health risks associated with these technologies.”

The report makes it abundantly clear that not everything is yet known about the subject. However, it states that existing public-safety standards are not enough.

People are extremely concerned about their health and safety because of EMFs (Electromagnetic Field) and their links to cancers, particularly to leukaemia in children. There are clearly demonstrated potential health risks, especially to young children, with so many schools and houses in the proposed route corridors. In the stretch from Moy in County Tyrone — in my colleague Mr Gallagher’s and the Minister’s constituency — to the border with County Monaghan, there are four primary schools in close proximity to the proposed overhead cables. They are Our Lady’s Primary School in Tullysaran, Drumsallen Primary School, St Joseph’s Primary School in Madden, and Our Lady’s and St Mochua’s in Derrynoose. That is totally unacceptable.

In June 2007, the Draper Report was published. It was a UK Government-funded study that the University of Oxford childhood cancer research group conducted. It studied 29,000 children with cancer over 33 years and investigated whether proximity of home address at birth to the nearest high-voltage power line was associated with an increased risk of childhood cancer.

The results showed that children who lived within 200 m of high-voltage power lines were almost twice as likely to have childhood leukaemia as those who lived more than 600 m from the power lines. A slightly increased risk of leukaemia was observed for those children who lived between 200 m and 600 m from the power lines.

The BioInitiative report concludes that the business-as-usual attitude cannot continue. It is time that planning for new power lines, and the homes, schools and other habitable spaces that are close to them, is done with routine provision for low-ELF (Extremely Low Frequency) environments. The lives of our children are too precious to play such dangerous games with.

However, the exposure from high-voltage power lines and high-level ELF does not just affect children. Indeed, the BioInitiative working group’s report also

highlights a strong link between EMF exposure and adult leukaemia, suggesting that childhood exposure increases the risk of adult leukaemia. The report also points to connections between EMF exposure and breast cancer, Parkinson’s disease and other cancers and neurodegenerative diseases.

Although I do not want to use scare tactics, the BioInitiative report is correct to state that it is no longer acceptable to build power lines and electrical facilities that place people in ELF environments that have been deemed risky. One is not at risk of picking up any of the diseases by simply walking close to power lines. However, continued and sustained exposure to high-level ELF considerably increases the risk of the aforementioned diseases.

Putting power lines underground is one way to simultaneously reduce their health implications, protect the environment, reduce the visual impact, and allay public concerns. It will also ensure that the North/South interconnection goes ahead. Communities demand that power lines are built underground, and I support them in that. Indeed, I welcome representatives of communities from Armagh, Monaghan, Cavan and Meath to the Public Gallery. Evidence shows that putting power lines underground can be done without major disruption to land or roads. There will be no visual impact or noise pollution. Such construction will use less agricultural land, and it will lower power losses. Ultimately, putting power lines underground will mean that there will be no electrical fields and that there will be low magnetic fields.

When pressed on underground construction, Northern Ireland Electricity and EirGrid suggested that it could cost up to 10 times the capital outlay. However, given that NIE has just commissioned a report into the cost of such work, how can it make those claims?

Constructing power lines underground is an option that is used elsewhere in the world. For example, building a 400kV line stretching 200 km from Beaulieu to Denny is being considered in Scotland. That may be because, in a letter to the Scottish Parliament’s Public Petitions Committee, Professor Henshaw, who is a member of the Stakeholder Advisory Group on EMFs (SAGE), wrote:

“I urge the Scottish Parliament to consider immediate strict precaution against the siting of power lines near houses”.

There is much concern in our communities about those power lines. I understand that insurance companies, such as FBD in the Republic and Norwich Union in the UK, now regard living close to high-voltage power lines as a future risk for their industry. For example, FBD has EMF exclusion clauses on its insurance policies.

I have held meetings with Northern Ireland Electricity, made representations to TDs from my neighbouring constituency of Cavan-Monaghan, and I have hosted

meetings between NIE and concerned local residents. I am not convinced that Northern Ireland Electricity or EirGrid have properly — or meaningfully — engaged with the local communities or tried to allay their fears.

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

Mr D Bradley: To conclude, what I have said highlights the health risks of the issue. I welcome the Minister of the Environment, and I urge her to consider making the construction of underground power lines a factor in planning approval.

Mr Irwin: Since it was announced, NIE's proposal for a North/South interconnector, which will create a high-voltage overhead-cable network that carries the highest voltage ever used in Northern Ireland, has generated a high level of public interest.

Public meetings have been convened, and large numbers of people have attended to spell out their dissatisfaction with the proposals. The level of interest remains high, and one can see that from the large number of residents from the area who are in the Building.

Northern Ireland Electricity has undertaken consultation with residents along the proposed route and met landowners. However, despite NIE's attempts to sell the idea, local people have rejected the proposal outright. The message from the residents is clear: they do not want high-voltage overhead power lines and steel structures blotting their landscape. The landowners along the preferred route have been contacted by NIE, and many have made clear their objections to any idea of large pylons blighting their picturesque countryside — regardless of any financial incentives.

Northern Ireland Electricity faces a huge difficulty, as its proposal for overhead cabling is the least favoured option among residents and landowners. As well as being a MLA, I am a member of Armagh City and District Council, and in that capacity I have met NIE officials on a number of occasions and placed on record the council's strong objections to above-ground cabling and the impact that it would have on the environment. The council has also raised serious concerns about the well-documented health fears relating to electromagnetic fields.

Although there is a strong consensus against overhead cabling, the council recognises the principle of the interconnector in securing the electricity supply and reducing operating costs. The council, therefore, has pursued the idea of placing the cables underground, thus doing away with the need for unsightly pylons and reducing greatly the health concerns. From the outset, NIE has labelled that alternative as hugely expensive compared to overhead cabling. However, NIE has yet to provide exact details on the difference in cost between the methods. I urge NIE to provide those costings to council representatives as soon as possible.

There is no doubt that everyone wants cheaper electricity, and there will be no debate when it comes to the idea of paying less. However, the methods being suggested to bring about a situation in which the consumer will receive cheaper electricity via the North/South interconnector are a long way from what the people want. NIE has made it clear that, whether above or below ground, the cost will be fed through to the consumer. I ask NIE to provide detailed costings on the inevitable increase in electricity prices that will arise from the cost of construction. I would also like to see long-term projections with regard to NIE's promise of reducing operating costs, and details of what that will mean for consumers' future bills.

NIE faces a massive uphill struggle in its task to create the interconnector with the use of pylons and overhead cabling. In the current circumstances, with people in the area rejecting the method proposed for the interconnector, I urge NIE to reconsider its proposals and seriously consider putting the cables underground. I also call on the Minister of the Environment to exercise care when considering any planning proposals for the interconnector, and I urge her to take note of the local residents represented here today, who strongly object to overhead high-voltage lines.

I have asked NIE whether land vesting might be pursued as a final method of providing overhead cabling. I urge NIE not to go down that route; it would be unfair to farmers. That would be a highly controversial and unfair way of pursuing this.

Residents unanimously reject the current NIE proposal, and their views must be taken on board by NIE and by the Departments that will deliberate on any interconnector plan. The residents' valid and passionate views on the safety issues surrounding high-voltage overhead cables cannot be ignored, and I call on NIE to engage more fully with public representatives and residents to ensure that any final proposal has the necessary support.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate, and I thank Dominic Bradley for bringing the matter to the Chamber.

4.00 pm

I also thank him for clarifying his party's stance on the issue, as it seems to have changed from the initial feelings of his colleagues in Armagh City and District Council.

Mr D Bradley: It has not changed.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Brady: The Member should read the minutes.

The interconnector will allow an all-island electricity market to work efficiently and will benefit the consumer

in both price and dependability. We recognise and welcome that, and indeed, Sinn Féin will support any project that benefits the community.

Major health concerns have been raised North and South of the border. Sinn Féin asked NIE to extend the corridor of consultation up to a kilometre, which it did, and that is welcome. NIE also held a consultation clinic in Armagh City; unfortunately, it has not convinced the public that their health concerns are unwarranted or so minimal that they do not warrant concern.

NIE should not be allowed to steamroll its way through communities North and South of the border, but should take their concerns on board. In the absence of clear and unequivocal evidence that overhead power lines will not pose a medical risk to those living in the vicinity of the pylons, it should be incumbent on the powers that be, namely the Minister of the Environment, to ensure that the interconnector is placed underground. The main obstacle is cost.

NIE will make profits from the interconnector for many years, and it could absorb any additional costs of placing the interconnector underground over many years. People are prepared to pay a few pounds extra a year on their bills if it means less risk to their children. Weight must be given to people's concerns at the planning stage, and the interconnector should be placed underground. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: I thank Mr Dominic Bradley for bringing this important debate to the Assembly, and I thank the Minister for her attendance.

People are chiefly concerned about the effect that the interconnector could have on landowners and rural dwellers who live on the proposed route corridor; however, there are also concerns about the economic, welfare, health and environmental risks that could occur as a result of the proposal being developed in its current form. Other public representatives and I were at a very well-attended meeting in Armagh City Hotel, where approximately 600 people highlighted their concerns.

The initialisation of pylons along the proposed route could prevent many farmers from utilising large tracks of their land, which could have an adverse economic effect on their livelihoods in an increasingly difficult economic climate. Although NIE said that landowners will be entitled to, and will receive, compensation, it will be dictated in many cases by NIE and will reflect NIE values rather than those of landowners. Consequently, people have serious reservations that NIE's compensation would recompense farmers for any financial losses suffered as a result of being unable to utilise sections of their land.

Pylons will be placed extremely close to properties along the proposed routes, and numerous householders have, understandably, raised concerns about the visual impact and the potential health and safety risks.

Although NIE has stated that there are no risks associated with the interconnector, that has failed to reassure local residents and landowners who live along the potential route. They have acted responsibly and sensibly and have engaged the services of well-qualified experts.

One such expert, Mr Roger Coghill, has countered NIE's claim by stating that much evidence points to the adverse health effects of living near electric fields. He said that the belief that there was no health risk from living near such fields had been dispelled decades ago. He maintains that there is substantial evidence in every part of science to show that there are adverse health affects from possible exposure, which flies in the face of the material produced by NIE.

Local constituents believe that the environmental and potential health risks associated with such a major overhead power line cannot be justified by NIE. They believe that a high-voltage overhead power line, with pylons of over 100 ft, would significantly destroy areas of beautiful, natural landscape in that part of Northern Ireland.

I support the calls of Assembly colleagues that NIE should listen to public representatives and residents in the area and insist that if a cable is absolutely necessary, it should be buried underground. I hope that the Minister will feel sufficiently minded to insert an approval clause making that a requirement in any determination of a planning application.

NIE has much work to do, and it will have a considerable battle as it seeks to convince local representatives and householders that its plans are in their best interests. No one doubts that a project of this nature and magnitude will not be abandoned easily. Nonetheless, it has deep-seated opposition, and NIE, the Department and public representatives must be aware of that and must reflect on it. I hope that the various groups concerned will listen and pay attention to the views of those who want to site the cables underground.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom cúpla rud a rá sa díospóireacht seo.

I declare an interest as a member of Armagh City and District Council, which is one of the councils that requested NIE to consider the cost of laying the cables underground. I appeal for no division on the matter. I am glad that my fellow Member for Newry and Armagh Mickey Brady sought clarification from parties about their positions on the matter, and I thank him for bringing the subject to the Chamber.

The Cavan to Tyrone electricity interconnector has been a worrying and emotive subject for the public who live along the proposed route, which includes five counties: Armagh, Tyrone, Meath, Cavan and Monaghan, and public meetings have been held in most of those areas to highlight concerns.

The reason for that concern is the fear of health risks connected to overhead power lines that carry up to 400 kV. In Ireland, no such voltage has been carried by overhead power lines before, and there is no conclusive proof for, or against, the health concerns. The public have a right to demand safety, rather than leaving judgements about the matter to future generations, when it may be too late. However, for every scientist who says that there are health issues, there is another who says that there are none. That should not be left to chance, and there is evidence to suggest that incidences of cancer and leukaemia are linked to such power lines.

One aspect of the health concerns that must be examined more closely is the production of corona ions. When high voltages are present in electrical systems, it is possible that strong electric fields close to conductors may cause the electrical breakdown of surrounding air — an effect known as “corona discharge”. A consequence of corona discharge from high-voltage power lines is the production of clouds of ions that are readily blown downwind. An increase of charge density downwind of power lines is well established and can be measured at distances of several kilometres. People may be exposed to such highly charged polluted particles, and the effects that electrostatic charges have on increased instances of respiratory problems have been recognised for some time.

4.15 pm

In plain English, ions cause the damage. Air pollutants and particles cling to ions, and there is evidence to suggest that that causes serious problems for people’s lungs. I ask Members and the Minister — and I welcome her presence at the debate — whether we are prepared to gamble with subjecting the public to the potential health risks that might be posed by corona ions? In all conscience, I do not believe that we should.

I call on the regulators, North and South, the Minister of the Environment and her counterpart in Dublin to take the handcuffs off NIE and Eirgrid and allow them to put the interconnector underground. Doing so will not only reassure the public on health issues, but will cancel out the detrimental environmental impact of 40 km of pylons — irrespective of their size — in the North and 40 km in the South, which will cut across the drumlins of Armagh and the other counties that I mentioned.

Any planning applications must take into account that those pylons will be visibly intrusive and impact adversely not only on the environment but on property and land prices in the affected areas.

The concerns are not about cost. They are about the health of future generations who will live near the interconnector. Although we do not have a crystal ball, we know that future generations will judge us on the decisions that we make in the coming months.

Sinn Féin supports the proposal for an all-Ireland energy system that will benefit the consumer. That can best be met by putting any proposed interconnector underground, and Sinn Féin supports the public in its call for that.

I remind the Minister that a motion on the Climate Change Bill [HL] was passed yesterday, and, if we are serious about tackling climate change, we must consider renewable and other forms of energy production.

I ask the Minister to consider not only whether planning applications meet current criteria, but to take account of the serious concerns about the possible health implications for future generations. The conditions of any planning application assessment should stipulate that power lines be put underground. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Gallagher: I support my colleague Dominic Bradley in raising this matter in the House. Like some others here, I have been a Member since 1998, and, given that this is an Adjournment debate, this is the first occasion on which I have seen such a high level of public interest, which is reflected by the attendance in the Public Gallery.

We must bear in mind that those visitors are not from greater Belfast. I understand that they have travelled considerable distances to attend the debate.

I welcome this opportunity to reflect the views, concerns and annoyance of many of the people in the Moy and Benburb areas of south Tyrone, which are on the planned route of the North/South interconnector. I have been to see those areas for myself, and I have spoken to people who live in close proximity to the route. Their views are, clearly and simply, that they want the proposal stopped.

Their anger is justified. No electricity line in Northern Ireland compares to the scale of that which is planned. The line will carry 400,000 volts through twelve cables, which will be strung from pylons 49 m high. Most Members will have been to the top of Parliament Buildings, but even that is not 49 m above the ground. That is what faces the communities in Cavan, Armagh and the part of south Tyrone to which I referred.

The annoyance of people in south Tyrone has been increased by visits from NIE officials. On one occasion, they were told that the line would be very difficult for NIE to construct in that part of the country, because it could not pass over poultry sheds. The pylons, however, could be located within 50 m of people’s homes.

The residents’ strong opposition can be summed up by three areas of concern: the visual impact; the health risks, which have been referred to in some detail; and the impact on property values. We can all understand those concerns. One property, just outside Moy and close to the proposed route, was on the market for a

considerable time. It could not be sold, because it had dropped so much in value. It is easy to translate that scenario to a person's home, which might end up with a pylon outside its front window.

As for the visual impact, those of us who have had the privilege of visiting that part of south Tyrone, particularly in the summer, know about its natural beauty. The beauty and tranquillity of the countryside has been a tremendous asset to the people for generations, and they have a valid concern that the erection of pylons will damage the visual environment.

The concerns about the risks to health have been outlined. There are many reports about the dangers of electromagnetic fields and the risks that they pose to health. Cancer and childhood leukaemia have been identified as risks, especially for people who live within 600 m of overhead lines. NIE's plan does not take account of that 600 m zone.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that NIE has not been open and transparent in its handling of the issue so far?

Mr Gallagher: NIE did not put all the information in the public domain at the beginning. An individual — a resident — who asked for an environmental impact assessment to be carried out was told by NIE that that could not be done.

My colleague Dominic Bradley mentioned the latest report, dated 31 August 2007, which again warns of the likelihood that a project such as the one under debate will carry health risks. It also warns that, heretofore, the Government have not exercised sufficient caution on the development of a project of that type. To the best of my knowledge, there is no scientific report that will state baldly that there is no health risk associated with the development of such a project.

As I have said, the proposal places a duty on both NIE and the Planning Service to heed the relevant research. NIE must go back and factor all that information into its plans for the interconnector. As Cathal Boylan pointed out, NIE was not exactly forthcoming with information, particularly on the environmental impact assessment.

NIE must provide all the information, and, specifically, it should produce the costings for both the overhead and underground options. Simply proceeding with the cheapest option is not a proper basis for the project. Health risks and the infringement of the rights of residents should be properly considered.

I welcome the presence of the Minister, who, like others, is listening carefully to the debate.

The Planning Service also has a responsibility that goes beyond the rules and regulations of planning policy statements. It must ensure that a safe environment for

all is its top priority. The project must not pose a threat to the health of residents, particularly young children.

The present proposal is unacceptable. The best option may be to route the interconnector underground, which may also be the best way to develop the all-Ireland market for electricity. There must be a cautionary approach on the part of both NIE and the Planning Service. To date, we have not seen that from NIE.

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I join Members in thanking Dominic Bradley for bringing this matter before the House. I recognise the widespread interest and concern that exists in the community that he represents, and, indeed, as has been mentioned by Mr Gallagher, in the community that he and I represent in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. I note the comments and concerns that have been expressed in respect of the proposed North/South electricity interconnector. I welcome the opportunity to clarify the position of the Department of the Environment on this matter.

This issue has already been the subject of debate and scrutiny. Members of the Committee for the Environment will know that that Committee has questioned Planning Service officials about the forthcoming planning application. I have also responded to several questions that have been tabled in the Assembly.

The proposal to build a second North/South electricity interconnector represents a major infrastructural project, and its promoters have indicated that it would more than double the current trading capacity of the existing line. They consider the new line a key component in promoting greater competition in the new single energy market for wholesale electricity trading, as well as enhancing security of supply, network stability and supporting the future growth of renewable energy generation.

I hope that Members will realise that this is not simply a matter for my Department, but for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). As well the consideration of a planning application, I understand from DETI that it will have to grant consent under article 40 of The Electricity (Northern Ireland) Order 1992 to proceed with such an interconnector. Therefore, this is a cross-cutting matter, and, as such, will come before the Executive for a decision at some point. In other words, I have drawn the short straw and have to appear before the Assembly today.

My officials have had preliminary discussions with NIE in relation to the submission of a planning application and the content of an environmental statement. I noted Mr Gallagher's comment that when someone asked NIE about an environmental impact assessment, NIE was unable to provide it. I assure the Member that an environmental impact assessment is an integral part of the planning application. There will have to be an environmental statement attached to the planning application.

Members have all expressed concern about potential health risks associated with the interconnector. I fully understand those concerns. As Members have said, it is always difficult to assess the gravity of such health risks and to rule them out entirely. The risks in this case will come from the electromagnetic fields generated by electricity lines. I assure the House that NIE will be required to include a full section on EMFs in the environmental impact assessment that will accompany any planning application. That will, therefore, be addressed when the application is made.

NIE has continued to update Planning Service officials on its progress in preparing a planning submission. During the most recent contacts, my officials were apprised of the preferred route of the power line. It was indicated that the planning application was likely to be submitted in February or March of next year. As I have indicated, an article 40 application will also have to be made to DETI. I understand that, at present, no such application is awaiting consent.

The planning application for the interconnector is likely to be dealt with under the procedures for handling major applications as laid down in article 31 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991. As I have indicated, the matter will come before the Executive and, as it will be an article 31 application, it will also come to the Floor of this House when a decision is made in respect of it.

Under the article 31 provisions, the final decision —

Mr Boylan: I have asked another Minister about the costing of the project. Can that be held until the actual application is made, or can that information be made known before the application? I have asked for a costing for underground cabling. The response that I got — obviously not from Mrs Foster, who may or may not be able to answer — is that the costing will be submitted along with the planning application. I would like to know whether those figures can be made available to councillors or to the Assembly prior to the submission of the planning application.

Mrs Foster: I understand that figures on the feasibility of underground cabling are supposed to be available in mid-December. I cannot force NIE to share those, but it will be in NIE's best interests to share them with elected representatives and with those concerned. I assume that the reason why NIE has not yet proceeded with the planning application or the environmental impact assessment is that it wants to consider putting the cables underground as part of that. That is why an application has not yet been made.

Under article 31 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, the final decision on any such application will rest with me as Minister of the Environment. Members will appreciate that it would be inappropriate for me to express any view that might suggest that I

had already adopted a position on any application prior to its being given full consideration thorough the formal planning process. When the application is made, I will consider it. Let me reiterate that part of the planning process is an environmental impact assessment, which will address all the issues that I have mentioned heretofore.

Mr Boylan mentioned the need to consider renewables in relation to climate change — I entirely agree. Planning Service recently brought out PPS 18 to encourage people to use renewable energy and to consider future security of supply in that context

Potential health risks associated with the interconnector proposal have been brought to my attention by Members. Those will be taken into account.

4.30 pm

Environmental impacts, particularly the visual impact on the landscape, as referred to by Mr Gallagher, will also be taken into account — as will the matter of whether the proposed cabling should be placed underground, and the choice for the preferred route. All those matters will be addressed as part of the consideration of the planning application.

I understand why Members may wish to debate those issues, but I cannot not be drawn into those matters for reasons that I have already set out. Moreover, when dealing with the substantial amount of correspondence that has already been generated by the proposal, my officials are unable to respond in a constructive manner due to the absence of the planning application and the environmental statement. Indeed, when that planning application is submitted, it will provide a much-needed focus for the debate and a degree of certainty on the issues that have been discussed. We look forward to that.

I am aware that NIE is engaged in a public-consultation process, and that some Members have expressed disappointment about the manner in which that has been conducted. That is a matter for NIE. In defining its preferred route, NIE has sought to maintain a distance of 60 m from residential properties, although some people have cited a distance of 50 m. NIE is conducting a feasibility study on the underground routing of the cable along part of the proposed route. That work will shape the final content of the planning application, and, indeed, the environmental statement.

I assure the House that the application will be publicised in the normal way, and, considering the interest of elected representatives, I have no doubt that they will alert the wider public about that. All interested parties will have an opportunity to make representations in respect of the article 31 procedure to which I referred earlier, which will also allow me — should I consider it necessary — to ask the Planning Appeals Commission to hold a public local inquiry to consider the matter

and to help the Department to reach a decision on what will be a major application.

Mr D Bradley: To what extent are the project's possible effects on health a material consideration in the planning process?

Mrs Foster: That will form part of the environmental impact assessment, and will be taken into account to a great degree. I expect that residents and Members will raise that matter with me again when the planning application is received and we have that much-needed focus for debate.

I hope that what I have had to say has been helpful, and has provided some clarity on a matter to which we will probably return in the new year, when the planning application is received.

Finally, Mr Speaker, as the last woman standing in the Assembly — just as I was before the summer recess — I wish you and your staff a very happy Christmas.

Adjourned 4.33 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 14 January 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill

Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform Members that the Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill has received Royal Assent. The Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Act Northern Ireland 2007 became law on 14 December 2007.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

December Fisheries Council Meeting

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that she wishes to make a statement regarding the outcome of the December Fisheries Council meeting.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement about the outcome of the Fisheries Council meeting that was held in Brussels on 18 and 19 December to determine the fishing opportunities for our local fleet for 2008.

Members will be aware that the Fisheries Council meets each December to reach agreement on the fishing opportunities for the following year. The outcome of that meeting is a detailed regulation that sets the total allowable catches (TACs), representing the maximum quantities of fish that can be caught from specific stocks in different sea areas in accordance with the management objectives.

As well as TACs and quotas, the regulation details the number of days that vessels may spend at sea. The overarching concern is to ensure that a system of fisheries management is in place to ensure that there are sufficient stocks from which everyone can fish in the years to come.

The December council meeting represents the end of a long process involving engagement between the European Commission and member states at official and ministerial level. The process begins with the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), which compiles scientific evidence on the state of fish stocks from many different sources. Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) scientists contribute to that body of knowledge from the research on the Irish Sea that is carried out annually.

ICES makes recommendations to the European Commission on the TACs for more than 100 stocks, which are then considered by the Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF). STECF comprises national experts, representatives from the fishing industry and other stakeholders.

Key negotiations also take place with non-EU countries, such as Norway, that have an interest in the same fishing grounds or stocks. Throughout the process, member states make representations to the Commission and submit technical papers to support the case that they are making on behalf of their fishing industries.

In the lead-up to the December council meeting, Fisheries Ministers Jonathan Shaw, Richard Lochhead and I attended two meetings with Commissioner Borg to

brief him on the key issues that are facing our fishermen and our priorities for the December council meeting. During those meetings, I was able to press the case for an increase in the Irish Sea haddock quota and for maintaining TAC levels on other stocks that are important to our fishermen. The delegation also presented strong arguments against draconian cuts in the days that may be fished and presented alternative proposals that it considered would better meet fisheries management objectives without the adverse impacts that blunt across-the-board cuts would bring on the industry.

I believe that those meetings played an important part in shaping the Commission's final proposals, which were further refined through negotiation at the Council of Ministers. In the four months leading up to the December council meeting, my officials worked closely with their counterparts to assemble evidence, to agree priorities and the approach to the negotiations. I also met my fellow Fisheries Ministers on a number of occasions to confirm our negotiating priorities in the light of emerging information that ensured that the issues facing our fishing industry were heard and understood. During that time, there was a series of meetings with fishing industry representatives in order to take their views and to explain our approach. The priority areas identified for the local industry were agreed with them, and I had several helpful discussions with the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development in the lead-up to the council meeting. The Committee also met Commissioner Borg in order to support the case that I was proposing. Committee members heard from the Commissioner at first hand his determination to restrict fishing effort on vulnerable cod stocks.

I was particularly delighted that we were able to meet my fellow Fisheries Minister, Mary Coughlan TD, in the run-up to the December negotiations, when we were able to discuss areas of common interest.

The shopping list assembled by Jonathan Shaw, Richard Lochhead and I was formidable, and it was more extensive than those from other member states. The key issue for us was to resist the blunt cuts that had been proposed by the Commission on the number of days that can be fished by vessels in areas affected by the Commission's cod-recovery zone. As I mentioned earlier, we wanted the Commission to adopt a different, more focused approach that would better protect vulnerable stocks and provide incentives for the industry to engage in responsible fishing practices. That was a tough battle, and the Commission was determined to reduce the effort on cod to help to rebuild stocks. However, the Commission was convinced by our arguments that its proposed 25% cuts in days at sea for white-fish and prawn vessels operating in the Irish Sea were unjustified, and it has finally proposed cuts of 18% for white-fish vessels and 10% for prawn

vessels. That was accepted as part of the wider package of fishing opportunities.

It is important that Members understand that our fleet will not necessarily be restricted by the 10% and 18% cuts, which would result in the prawn fleet having 184 days at sea and the white-fish vessels having either 146 days or 174 days at sea, depending on the fishing gear deployed. Over 95% of our fleet targets prawns, fishing mainly in the Irish Sea, and they catch other species as a by-catch. However, at individual vessel level, their impact on cod stock is minimal.

Under the rules contained in the 2008 TAC and Quotas Regulation, vessels that have a track record for landing less than 5% cod can get 204 days at sea, and those that land less than 5% cod, sole and plaice can get 280 days at sea. For vessels that do not have a track record, there is an opportunity to participate in initiatives involving on-board observers, which would lead to the provision of similar days-at-sea allowances for them. The majority of vessels that fish for prawns will be able to take advantage of one of those provisions. That means that, if they choose to take advantage of the provisions, they will not suffer any loss of days, compared with 2007. Furthermore, those vessels that are involved in the Irish Sea data enhancement project could gain up to 12 further days from taking part in the project.

We also successfully negotiated provisions for managing days differently, and derogations for discard-reduction and cod-avoidance plans, which would also enable vessels to obtain extra days.

The fleet does not take up the full number of days that are available to it. That means that the most active vessels are still able to transfer in days sufficient for their needs from less-active vessels.

I wish to emphasise that the headline cuts in days do not represent the full story. There are other choices for our fishermen that allow them to fully fish the quota that is available to them. We successfully minimised the broad cuts that were proposed by the Commission and secured agreement for a system that provided appropriate incentives for fishermen. My officials will be discussing with the industry how the new provisions on days at sea can best be utilised by the local fleet.

I turn to the key stocks that are fished by our fishermen. There was a rollover for the prawn quota, which is by far the most important fishery for us. I secured a 5% increase in the haddock quota, in the face of an initial Commission proposal for a 15% cut. That is a lesser increase than I and the industry had hoped for. The Commission was very reluctant to budge from its initial proposal, only agreeing the 5% increase very late in the negotiations. Right until the final moments of those negotiations, we pressed the Commission for a larger increase, but it would not agree.

I also managed to get the Commission to agree to bring forward a proposal next year to establish a separate haddock TAC for the Irish Sea. Until now, the Irish Sea area has been part of a much wider management area, which includes the Celtic Sea and Atlantic waters on the west coast of Ireland. That approach will ensure that the TAC for the Irish Sea that is fished by our industry will better reflect the biological structure of those stocks, and not be influenced by changes in the wider area 7.

The Commission has also proposed an 8% cut in the TAC for Irish Sea herring, and a 6% reduction for plaice. We successfully argued for a rollover in the TAC for both stocks, and for the herring fishery in the Clyde area, which is fished mainly by vessels from the North. We have also secured an acknowledgement from the Commission that there is a strong case for the removal of the seasonal closure of the herring fishery on the Douglas Bank spawning grounds, east of the Isle of Man, once the formal advisory processes have been completed. The industry here has sought that measure for some time.

There have been particular concerns about the demise of cod stocks in the Irish Sea. Against a background of scientific evidence recommending a zero catch, the Commission was determined to see through a 25% cut in the quota. However, that was limited to an 18% cut. I pressed for a smaller reduction, but the Commission would not agree, on account of the scientific advice. There has been a fair amount of media attention on that species, and some commentators have either been misinformed, or have misreported the facts on the council results.

In 2007, our share of the Irish Sea cod TAC was 421 tons and, following the December council, that has been cut by 18% to 345 tons for 2008. The cod available to our fishermen for 2008 will also be increased through post-council swaps and the unused quota that has been banked from 2007. For 2008, there will be at least 495 tons of cod quota available: 345 tons from the council, augmented by 150 tons in post-council swaps, which I authorised, plus whatever cod can be banked from 2007. Our white-fish vessels had, until Christmas 2007, caught approximately 420 tons. I am, therefore, satisfied that the cod quota available for our industry in 2008 is more than was caught in 2007.

I am grateful for this opportunity to explain to the Assembly how the December council has affected fishing opportunities for our fleet in 2008. It is important to realise that this process is a negotiation that involves many member states, which have differing and sometimes contradictory priorities. The Commission's overriding concern is to ensure that the fish resources that are available to member states are fished in a way that is sustainable, while minimising the impact that fishing has on the wider marine environment. I share

that objective, and I wish to ensure that the fisheries for which I am responsible continue to be managed in a sustainable way.

Given the nature of the negotiations, whereby the outcome is determined by member states reaching a consensus with the Commission, I am satisfied that — in the circumstances prevailing in Brussels in December — I obtained the best possible deal for our fishing industry. That has involved a lot of hard work. I and my officials tried to be open and transparent in how we prepared for the negotiations.

I wish to thank the industry for the part that it has played. It is important that we build on the progress that has been made, and that we begin now the process of putting together the best case that we can for the 2008 negotiations.

Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

12.15 pm

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Elliott): At this stage, I want to put on record my thanks to the Minister for bringing forward the statement on the fishing industry. However, on behalf of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I have to say, in the absence of the Chairperson, that the Committee does not share the same optimism about that announcement and the EU decision as the Minister and her officials appear to do. The Committee does not believe that it represents the best possible deal that could have been reached — a view shared by the fishing industry.

Is the Minister suggesting that she and her Department are prepared to sacrifice the white-fish industry in Northern Ireland in order to achieve that agreement? Will she accept that, following the Irish Republic's refusal to swap back to the same levels as last year, there is, in fact, a 33% reduction in the amount of cod available to our fleet, as opposed to that being caught?

Ms Gildernew: The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development asks whether I am prepared to sacrifice the white-fish industry. The short answer to that is no. However, the reality is — and we have to work with the reality — that 95% of the industry either catches or processes prawns. There are only two white-fish vessels. It must be understood that we have to protect the industry as a whole and that we have to work as best we can. We were faced with scientific evidence that suggested a zero catch in cod. We resisted a 25% cut in white fish and got it down to 18%, which applies right around these islands. There is no scientific evidence of cod recovery in the Irish Sea. That is the reality with which we must deal.

With regard to the 33% reduction referred to by the Member, it is necessary to compare like with like. The

Hague Preference, which is what he is talking about, was also invoked last year and in previous years by the Twenty-six Counties. It was also brought in this year by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) Minister. The quotas, the days at sea and the environmental aspects — for example, the Irish Sea data enhancement project — that we achieved represent a very good deal for our white-fish vessels, considering the scientific evidence. It is also a good deal for the majority of our industry.

Mr Wells: Will the Minister accept that if that is the best possible deal, heaven help our fishing industry when she comes back with a bad deal? Does she accept that the fishing industry in County Down is suffering death by a thousand cuts? She talked about the deal. Let us examine that deal. Prawn days are down by 10% to 184 days. Three years ago, that was 264 days. That is what is happening in the industry. The figure for white fish is down by 18%. The TAC for cod is down by 33%. Will the Minister accept that one of the reasons behind that is the selfish approach by her Irish counterpart, who refused to swap back the tonnage that was given up by Northern Ireland's fishermen? What did she do apart from cosying up to her counterpart in the Irish Republic —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to please come to the question.

Mr Wells: — to stop that happening?

Ms Gildernew: I am not sure what I am supposed to say. I did not hear a question in there. Does the Member want to ask a question? [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind Members that there has already been a ministerial statement. It is important that we now have questions to the Minister about that statement.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Given the very poor state of cod stocks in the Irish Sea, is it reasonable for the European Union to seek such large cuts?

Ms Gildernew: The main cod spawning grounds in the Irish Sea are protected from direct fishing by the spring closure. The current cod TAC for the Irish Sea is only 8% of the level that it was 20 years ago. That level mainly permits the landing of small by-catches of cod from the prawn fleet. A zero catch level would simply result in small by-catches being discarded.

Although by-catch levels are low, we are nevertheless continuing to conduct research, with the industry's help, to identify selective gear that will help us to reduce cod-by-catch levels even further. However, as I have already pointed out, there is not yet the scientific evidence for increasing the cod quota. We shall work with scientific experts, and with the fishing industry, to

see how we might play a responsible role in the management of our fishing stocks and fishing efforts.

Mr P J Bradley: I, too, thank the Minister for her statement. In it, she said that it was a tough battle to resist cuts, and I imagine that it was. Something good that came from the negotiations is the 5% increase in haddock quotas. There could easily have been a 15% cut, so that news is to be welcomed. However, as a South Down representative, I have difficulty in accepting all the achievements that the Minister claims. Today's statement is similar to the press release that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development issued on 19 December 2007. It was not her own wording — it was worded for her — but its headline read:

“Gildernew delivers fishing industry priorities”.

In that press release, describing the fishermen, the Minister said:

“their needs have been heard and met.”

Having spoken to them since the negotiations concluded, I did not find that to be the view among trawlermen. I ask the Minister a simple question: will she please explain why Northern Ireland's fishermen, and their organisations, express completely different views to hers on the outcome of the talks?

Ms Gildernew: The fishing industry's views very much formed part of our preparations for the December Fisheries Council negotiations. Indeed, its representatives were in attendance in Brussels. Perhaps this was the first time that a Minister had done this, but I met with representatives of our industry during part of the negotiations. I left the Commission building to brief them on what had been discussed up to that point. Therefore, we were working hand in hand with the industry in order to agree our priorities. We knew what those priorities were going in, and those priorities had been agreed.

We also knew what the Commission's likely approach would be, and that we would not simply get everything that we wanted. However, we kept the industry fully apprised of the situation. Telephone calls were made through the night, and a meeting was held early the next morning, after the second compromise had been reached. How the fishing industry chooses to report the negotiations is entirely up to it — I cannot influence what the industry says. I will be meeting with the fishing industry again, because this is an ongoing situation, and we will want to assess our priorities for the 2008 meeting of the Fisheries Council. I also want to hold a pre-emptive meeting with Commissioner Borg in the coming weeks on this year's negotiations.

We asked for what the industry had requested, but we knew that we would not achieve all our aims. A difficulty arises in negotiations when other member states agree to a compromise position, and negotiating currency diminishes as more member states agree that they can live with the Commission's proposals. That is

what happened. Therefore, we were never going to get absolutely everything that we wanted, but we got the best deal that we possibly could, and we have explained that to the industry. We got the absolute best deal that we could for it. Our fishermen can catch as much cod, and more, than they caught in 2007. Ninety-five per cent of our fleet fish for prawns, and we have achieved a rollover in our prawn quotas. Moreover, as the Member has pointed out, the Commission was looking for a 15% reduction in quotas for haddock, which we know is extremely important to Kilkeel, but, in getting a 5% increase in our haddock stock, we overturned that by 20%. Overall, we have fought very hard for the fishing industry, with which we have worked throughout this long and protracted process.

Mr Shannon: Undoubtedly, the Minister will be aware that the fishing industry and its representative organisations are very unhappy with the outcome of the December Fisheries Council meeting in Brussels. The reduction in quotas and in the number of days at sea that our fleet may spend strikes a blow to the heart of the fishing industry and puts a question mark over the industry's viability, not to mention its future.

Some time ago, the Minister, in reply to a question from me, stated that she would be a champion for the fishing industry. Will she, therefore, explain why Scotland got a better deal in the negotiations than Northern Ireland? Scottish fishermen were granted more days at sea than their Northern Ireland counterparts. Scotland also achieved better fish quotas than we did. Will the Minister explain what went wrong at the Fisheries Council meeting in Brussels? More importantly, what help can she give to our fishing industry and our fishing fleet, in particular the white-fish fleet?

Will the Minister consider tie-up aid as one solution to a very serious problem?

I ask my questions because the future of fishing is at stake.

Ms Gildernew: I thank the Member for his questions, and hope that I can cover all of them. The Scottish quota that he mentioned is primarily North Sea cod. The west of Scotland TAC and quota on herring, haddock, prawn, and so on is the same as Northern Ireland's; therefore, by and large, Scotland's quotas and TACs are the same as ours. There is, however, a very strong cod-recovery scientific-evidence base for the North Sea, where the cuts have not been as draconian and difficult to live with. Although there is scientific evidence to support a cod-recovery plan in the North Sea, the Commission nevertheless made a reduction; however, that was less — 10% instead of 18%.

We deal with scientific realities and we must understand that scientists are there to ensure that stocks are not over-fished to the point where there is no more cod to catch. We must manage sensibly, and consider the

marine environment. I take the Member's point, however; the fishing industry is in a very difficult position. I have seen, and heard about at first hand, some of the pressures, and not all of those concern TACs and quotas. For example, the high cost of fuel is one pressure, and the Department is considering what can be done in that regard by the European Fisheries Fund.

The Member mentioned transitional aid. That was not paid in 2006-07, because it was found to be unjustifiable on economic grounds. However, I am prepared to ask officials to determine whether anything can be done about that. At this stage, I cannot give the Member a straight answer.

He is correct that I fight very hard for the fishing industry. I have made the point strongly at every meeting with the European Commission and with the presidency of the EU Council that our fishing industry is vital, not only economically but socially and culturally, and that we must find a way to keep it in business. It concerns me that scientific evidence, and the way that the fishing industry is going, indicate that, eventually, we will come to a point where the industry is no longer viable. I work hard to ensure that we do not reach that point and that we continue to crawl our way back up the line. I am committed to our fishing industry and to the people who work day and daily on our seas, and who often take their lives in their hands. I am very sympathetic to the fishing industry and the pressures on it, and I want to do all that I can to help.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, Cheann Comhairle. Tugaim mo chéad buíochas don Aire as a ráiteas.

I thank the Minister for her statement. What assistance will she provide to the fleet in cutting fuel costs?

Ms Gildernew: I thank the Member for his question. Members will be aware that, last year, the European Commission confirmed that membership subsidy of the cost of fuel constituted operating aid, or state aid, and is, therefore, incompatible with the treaty. However, the new European Fisheries Fund affords opportunities to the fishing industry to become energy efficient, through such measures as grant aid to support the purchase of more fuel-efficient engines, thereby reducing fuel costs. The Department will consult stakeholders in March on an operational programme for the fund's implementation here, and I hope that the purchase of such engines can be supported.

Mrs I Robinson: I have several points to put to the Minister. Over the years, the Northern Ireland fishing fleet was honourable in the tie-up scheme to protect the fishing stocks and encourage improvement. If we are to believe all that the scientists have indicated, why is there now no scientific evidence to show that that helped the depleted fishing stocks?

Secondly — and my colleague touched on the matter — will the Minister tell me how she intends to assist our fishermen financially?

12.30 pm

When the fishermen reach the meagre quotas, they will spend most of the year tied up, despite having to pay for the maintenance of their boats and their mortgages and despite having children to feed. Those payments must be made all year round, not just on the meagre days that have been granted out of the horse-trading — or fish-trading, if I might use that phrase — that took place in Europe.

Ms Gildernew: The industry has worked well with us in the past in attempting to get the stocks back to where we want them to be, and I hope that that good work will continue. The tie-up aid that the Member mentioned was paid in 2004-05; however, it has not been paid since, because the economic grounds to do so have not existed.

I have a great deal of sympathy with the socio-economic situation of fishermen; I have heard about it first-hand and, indeed, received correspondence from the Member about the pressures that our fishing industry faces. There are measures in the European fisheries fund that allow for diversification, if that is what is felt to be necessary. There will be consultation on those matters, and we will be glad to hear the Member's views on how best to help fishing families to get out of this difficult situation.

The Member is right to say that pressures exist, and I accept that it is becoming increasingly difficult to make a living out of fishing. I want to find ways to enhance fishermen's overall profitability. We must remember that we should not confuse matters: for example, the prawn industry accounts for 95% of the overall industry for both processing and catch. We have over 100 prawn boats, but two cod boats, and although we are working hard on behalf of the entire industry, we must remember those realities. Therefore, we will consider all the points that we can, and, as I said to the Member's colleague, I will ask officials to examine whether transitional aid can be applied. I am not closing my mind to any suggestion that may help the industry.

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

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for her statement. Does she agree that the Assembly needs to make fishermen in Northern Ireland a priority? Does she also agree that the way in which the negotiations take place in Europe must be changed fundamentally in order to end the current annual spectacle of last-minute bargaining? If so, what will she do to bring about that situation?

Ms Gildernew: In the overall scheme of things, it is a bit strange that the December Fisheries Council always

meets so close to Christmas. We were worried about inclement weather, and at the meetings that were held the year before last, there were some difficulties about people getting back in time for Christmas. However, if the Fisheries Council were to meet in a different format, we would never get agreement. That is because everybody is concerned about their respective fishing industries and how their overall economic climates will be affected. It is difficult enough as it is to get agreement, but if the meetings were conducted in any other way, it might never be reached. Therefore, I am not sure whether there is any appetite in the Commission to change how the negotiations are carried out.

However, I assure the Member that we did not leave everything to the last minute. We had a series of meetings, including two with Commissioner Borg in advance of the Fisheries Council meeting, and along with representatives from England and Scotland, we held meetings about priorities. We also had meetings with industry representatives on priorities, and I visited fishing ports and went on the *Corystes*, which is a ship that is used for scientific research. Therefore, a huge amount of work was done before the December Fisheries Council meeting occurred.

We must look at the situation in context. The fisheries sector is one part of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, and, as I have said already, it is an important part. As the Member is only too well aware, pressures exist in other sectors — for example, the red meat industry. Therefore, I must manage my time and effort to ascertain how to address the fisheries situation. I have committed myself to going back to Brussels in the next weeks to meet again with Commissioner Borg, but I must also bear in mind that I have meetings to attend with Mariann Fischer Boel, the Commissioner who deals with agriculture and rural development. We must continue to try to punch above our weight to ensure that we get the best deal not just for our fishermen, but for our farmers and our rural development community. I assure the Member that I am using all the time that is available to me to deal with the issue and that I am not leaving everything to the last minute. The series of meetings to ensure that we got the best deal that we could was very long and protracted, and the industry had been very much a priority throughout that process.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister and her team for their efforts. Credit is also due to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, which has made this matter its number-one priority. As someone from South Down who has met representatives of the industry, I believe that one of the biggest issues is the need to modernise the fleet, which consists of boats that are 30 or 40 years old, compared to vessels in the South,

which are between five and 10 years old. Will money and resources be made available to build a new fleet?

Ms Gildernew: I thank the Member for his question. I take his point — it was very welcome that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development met Commissioner Borg in Brussels, heard at first hand how difficult the negotiation was going to be, and heard the commissioner's views on protecting cod stocks. The Committee's support was very much appreciated. I believe that the best results are achieved when we work as a team to secure the best deal for the industry.

As for the purchase of new boats, the European Union ended grant aid for the construction of new vessels at the end of 2004, following a review of the European common fisheries policy in 2002. That move recognised that, at a time when there was overcapacity in fleets for the fishing opportunities available, it did not make sense to have grant aid to enable an increase in fishing effort.

The Council regulation governing the EFF specifically states that no EU aid can be granted for the construction of new fishing vessels. However, providing the vessel's fishing capacity is not increased, support will continue to be available under EFF to modernise vessels, to improve the quality of the catch, to improve working conditions on board, and to ensure the health and safety of the crew. Such modernisation may involve improvements such as engines that are more fuel efficient.

Obviously, health and safety and the welfare of fishermen is of great importance to me. As Members know, the Man Overboard scheme was launched in Ardglass before Christmas. We will do all that we can, and I reiterate that the consultation will be opening shortly, and I will welcome Members' views on how that money can best be spent to improve the lot of our fishing industry. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr T Clarke: The Minister suggested earlier that the proposed cuts were draconian — I agree with that. However, would the Minister agree that her Department is draconian, because, unlike other EU states, it lacks measures to financially assist fishermen?

Ms Gildernew: I am not sure what more to say about that matter. Yes, a 25% cut in the cod TAC was draconian, but we must consider the big picture. I again remind the House that we maintained an increase in the nephrops TAC, which was gained last year; we turned around a 15% proposed haddock reduction to a 5% increase; we achieved a move from 25% to 18% on cod; we achieved a change from an 8% cut to a rollover on herring; and achieved a similar figure on hake.

Although the headlines generally focus on cod, our industry is about so much more than cod, and the rest of the industry is equally important to me as cod. The cuts were draconian and we resisted them as best we could, but we were not the only member state to have

cuts imposed on us. All of the member states went to the Council with a shopping list of demands and, having sat through those negotiations, and heard those lists, I can assure Members that ours was substantially longer than all of the others.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's initiative in meeting other fisheries Ministers ahead of the Brussels Council meeting. Could the Minister provide further detail on the meeting with Minister Mary Coughlan TD? I hope that that meeting entailed a joint strategy aimed at protecting Irish national interests.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. I will be seeking opportunities to work on an all-island basis in order to maximise the opportunities for the fishing industry in Ireland, including ours. I regularly meet with Mary Coughlan to discuss issues of common interest in respect of a range of areas in agriculture, and I see our fishing industry in a similar light.

We have been particularly successful in securing a co-ordinated approach to our scientific research. Our research vessels work closely together. Although the bulk of the fleet in the South concentrates on the Atlantic coast, obviously we must work together on approaches to fishing in the Irish Sea. We will continue to do all that we can to maximise the opportunities that are available to our fleet.

Mr Irwin: The fishing industry will take cold comfort from the Minister's statement. She said that negotiations continued into the night and that other member states had agreed on their industries' needs. Is it not, therefore, the case that the Minister was left with the scraps from the table?

Ms Gildernew: No, that is not the case.

Mr McNarry: What implications does the Minister feel that the 18% reduction in the amount of white fish that can be caught in the Irish Sea will have for the hardship of fishermen, whose livelihoods depend on catching white fish? What comment will she make on the criticism of her negotiating skills in Brussels? That criticism does not support her view, which she has stated in the House today, that she secured the best possible deal — or even a good deal — for the industry.

Ms Gildernew: I have been in the job for a long time. Everyone gets criticised — the Member will understand that — therefore I cannot become too fixated on it. I must do my absolute best for the people who look to me for leadership, and that is what I am doing.

I reiterate the comments that I made in my statement: vessels that land less than 5% of cod can have 204 days at sea; those that land less than 5% of cod, sole and plaice can have 280 days. Environmental controls and initiatives, such as the Irish Sea data enhancement project, were worked out with the industry on how best

to get a fair deal for fishermen. However, it must be remembered that white-fish vessels, depending on the fishing gear that they deploy, now have either 146 days or 174 days at sea. That applies to two vessels. I did not examine the industry and decide that, because prawn fishing is a bigger part of the industry than cod fishing, I should, therefore, work harder for it. I worked hard for the entire industry right up until the last minute of negotiations. That is the approach that I have taken, and it is how I want to ensure the fishing industry's survival.

In 2008, 495 tons of cod will be available. However, by Christmas 2007, white-fish vessels had caught 420 tons of cod. Therefore, in 2008, a higher quota will be available to white-fish vessels than was caught in 2007. That must be considered alongside scientific evidence. We have secured the best possible deal that anyone could have.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. What are her objectives and priorities for the fishing industry in 2008?

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. My priorities for quotas in 2008 are to at least maintain the prawn quota at its current level and to seek a further, sustainable increase in the Irish Sea haddock quota. Achieving that will require a strong scientific case; therefore, it is vital that everyone works together to provide the evidence that is needed. Good participation in initiatives such as the data enhancement project and the provision of as much catch data as possible is absolutely essential. I hope that the industry will work with the Department in order to achieve that.

The number of days at sea will depend on the outcome of the European Commission's review of the cod recovery plan, which will be published later in 2008. My aim is to maintain existing fishing opportunities and, where there is scientific evidence, to push for increased opportunities. Although those are my priorities, I will work closely with the industry in order to ensure that its priorities are reflected in the Department's negotiations throughout 2008 until the Fisheries Council next meeting in December.

12.45 pm

Mr Burnside: There is probably no industry in the United Kingdom and Ireland that has been hurt more than the fishing industry has been hurt by the common fisheries policy. Since Sinn Féin is an anti-European party, will it commit itself to the United Kingdom's repatriation of its independence on fisheries policy?
[Laughter.]

A Member: You cannot look at your officials now, Minister.

Ms Gildernew: I am not looking at officials; that will tell the tale. It is for the United Kingdom to decide what it wants to do with its fisheries policy. I am interested in the Irish opportunities — in particular, for the fleet that currently fishes out of our fishing villages. If one looks at the ongoing history of fishing policy, one can see that other countries have not had the same burden on fishing opportunities that we have had over the years.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members, that concludes questions to the Minister —

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will you ask the Speaker to review the Hansard report of how he dealt with the first question that I asked on this issue? He will note that I asked at least three specific questions in my contribution. Clearly, the Minister was afraid to answer any of those questions, because she feigned not to have heard any questions. The Speaker agreed with her, and she failed to answer any of those questions. There is no sense in having Ministers hiding behind not hearing, or not understanding, the question. Will you please ask the Speaker to review the Hansard report and to rule, as soon as possible, on how that issue was dealt with earlier this morning?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will certainly refer the matter to the Speaker, who was in the Chair at that particular time. Undoubtedly, the Speaker will respond to you in due course.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

The Working Time (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I beg to move

That the Working Time (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 (S.R. 2007/340) be approved.

I seek the Assembly's approval for regulations to increase Northern Ireland workers' minimum annual leave entitlement from four weeks to 5·6 weeks. These regulations are subject to the confirmatory procedure as laid down in the parent legislation, the Work and Families (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. To continue to have effect, they must be approved by resolution of the Assembly within six months of their coming into operation. The regulations were made on 20 July 2007 and came into operation on 1 October 2007.

The increase in the statutory minimum entitlement will be phased in. By April 2009, it will equate to an extra eight days. The right to four weeks' paid annual leave was introduced by the Working Time Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1998. Since then, it has been recognised that some workers — particularly those who are low paid — are being required to include time off for bank and public holidays against their four-week annual leave entitlement. To address that matter, proposals were brought forward to increase the statutory minimum entitlement.

There are 10 bank and public holidays in Northern Ireland and eight in Great Britain. In 2006, my Department's first consultation on those proposals sought views on the potential benefits and impacts of the proposed increases, and the treatment of the additional two bank and public holidays in Northern Ireland. In 2007, a second consultation sought views on the draft legislation and on means for providing support and guidance. That consultation contained proposals for an increase of 10 days in Northern Ireland, which attracted criticism from a significant number of respondents, particularly those in the business community and those trading on a UK-wide basis.

The lack of robust impact data on the Northern Ireland proposals was another cause of concern. A UK-wide regulatory impact assessment estimated the cost to Great Britain of an additional eight days to be between £3·2 billion and £4·4 billion per annum.

That equates to an indicative cost of around £80 million to £110 million for Northern Ireland. Although we were included in the UK research, the sample sizes were too small to produce reliable data here. Also, there was no specific information on the effect of the additional two days on Northern Ireland businesses.

In light of the responses to the consultation exercises, and taking into consideration the lack of a robust regulatory impact assessment, I, with Executive agreement, decided to increase the statutory minimum entitlement for Northern Ireland workers by eight days. However, my Department will undertake further research on the impact of increasing the statutory minimum by a further two days and will engage with key stakeholders. Indeed, that process has already commenced.

The increase is being implemented in two phases: from 4 weeks to 4·8 weeks from October 2007, and from 4·8 weeks to 5·6 weeks from April 2009. The statutory entitlement will be capped at 28 days. To help businesses adjust to the new requirements — particularly in those areas most affected, such as the retail, care and hospitality sectors — the regulations allow for employers to make payment in lieu of the additional leave entitlement for a transitional period until 1 April 2009. However, from April 2009, workers must take their leave, as continuous “buy-out” arrangements would negate the intent and spirit of the law, which is to allow people a reasonable time away from the workplace.

The regulations also permit carry-over to the following leave year of some or all of the additional entitlement, where this is agreed by the employer and the worker, as long as four weeks' holiday leave is taken in the year.

My Department has produced guidance to assist both employers and workers. A dedicated web page has been designed, and an online calculator has been developed to help all those affected to work out their entitlement.

The increase in the statutory minimum leave entitlement is good news for an estimated 150,000 workers here, and it will particularly benefit the low paid, part-time workers, women and agency workers. It will help them to strike a better work-life balance and spend more time with family and friends. Good employers recognise that reasonable holiday provision is a key factor in recruiting and retaining staff and keeping them motivated. The increase will enable good employers that already offer 28 days or more to compete on a more level playing field.

I am most grateful to the Committee for Employment and Learning for its detailed scrutiny of the policy proposals and the regulations. At its meeting on 26 September 2007, the Committee recommended that they be approved by the Assembly.

I beg to move that the regulations be approved.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat. I rise on behalf of the Committee for Employment and Learning to support the motion, and I call on the Assembly to confirm the regulations. These regulations were on the Committee's agenda soon after

the return of devolution, and we considered them before summer recess last year, and again in September.

The Committee was briefed on the regulations by the Department on three occasions, and I take this opportunity to thank the Minister and his officials for their high level of consultation with the Committee on this important piece of subordinate legislation.

This was the first statutory rule subject to a confirmatory resolution to be considered by the Committee. The Committee agreed formally to support the confirming of these regulations at its meeting on 26 September 2007. The Minister has already outlined what these regulations will achieve; I will not repeat what he said. However, it is worth reinforcing a couple of key points.

This legislation will have a significant and positive impact on those local employees who are paid at a lower rate and who currently have the most disadvantageous terms and conditions. In many instances, those workers have been required to offset time taken for bank and public holidays against their annual leave entitlement. As the draft Budget and draft Programme for Government puts the future of the local economy under extensive scrutiny, it is vital that leave entitlement is considered and improved. People deserve and require appropriate leave arrangements, which should be seen as an integral part of a mature economy in which workers are afforded time to rest, refresh and spend time with their families and friends.

The regulations also recognise business needs by providing for “buy-out” — payment in lieu of the additional entitlement — in the transitional years 2007-08 and 2008-09. That should help employers to implement the new arrangements. However, it is important and appropriate that “buy-out” will not be permitted in future years. Were that permitted, there would always be a temptation to offer that option to employees, which would serve only to defeat the purpose of these important regulations.

I thank the Minister for giving the House an up-to-date briefing on the matter. I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr B McCrea: This is good news for approximately 150,000 workers in Northern Ireland. The Minister has spoken with commendable clarity on the detail of his proposals. I have no intention of regurgitating them, but some supporting points are worth making.

It sounds almost too good to be true that people’s holidays are going to be increased by eight days. It is something of a shock to many people that many employers were tempted to include statutory holidays in their employees’ holiday entitlement. This proposal is an attempt to level the playing field, not only for the workers, but for those employers that already give excellent holiday benefits.

It is worth pointing out that both the Labour Party in its 2005 manifesto, and Peter Hain, in a January 2007 announcement, said that something had to be done to

bring Northern Ireland up to the same level as the rest of the United Kingdom. The proposals that have been put forward differ slightly from that point of view, in that the Minister suggests increasing the number of holidays by eight, and not by 10 days. There are reasons for that, and I am gratified to hear that the Minister plans to keep the matter under review, in order to assess the impact of the extra two days. It was interesting that, during consultation, industry representatives pointed out some of the real practical difficulties posed by the two additional days that Northern Ireland enjoys as bank holidays, particularly for those companies that employ people on both sides of the Irish Sea, or for those that provide a mixed service. We must sort those issues out. There would be costs, such as for computer systems, if that arrangement were put in place.

Nevertheless, the Minister has pledged to keep the matter under review. I am sure, as he has said, that he will keep in mind the importance of ensuring that Northern Ireland remains competitive at all levels. It is important to ensure that our workers receive the holidays that they are entitled to, but we must keep an eye to our international competitiveness. With that in mind, and in comparison with other countries, it is worth stating that the Republic of Ireland will have 29 holidays, while Austria tops the league with 38 holidays, so there is still some room for manoeuvre, if that is what comes out.

I commend the Minister for the manner in which he proposed the motion and congratulate him for the excellent consultation and listening process that he brought to the entire exercise.

1.00 pm

Mr Attwood: I apologise for not being in the House to hear the Minister’s statement, but I was speaking at another meeting on the Stormont estate.

In one short statement, the Minister has arguably done as much to improve the lot of the working person in the North as any other Minister since the Assembly was set up. Measured against that standard, the Minister can be congratulated on a good day’s work. I welcome what he has said today, and I welcome the briefings that were provided to the Committee for Employment and Learning.

The announcement is timely, given that, tomorrow, Mr McLaughlin from Sinn Féin will introduce a motion on the pay, conditions and entitlements of agency workers. I am sure that that motion will get broad endorsement in the House, and I have no doubt that the Minister will reply to that tomorrow. It is timely to note the contrast between the lot of the agency worker and that of the permanent worker. Today’s announcement creates better conditions of employment for so many people in the North, when leave entitlement is considered.

I endorse Mr McCrea’s comments. This matter must be kept under review and monitored. A small body of employers in the North will feel that greater leave entitlements are more of a threat than an opportunity.

The small number of employers who may be somewhat hostile to this proposal must be monitored as best as possible and the Department must have a reporting framework to ensure that, especially over the next two years and in the early years thereafter, the new leave entitlement is claimed, and entitled to be claimed, by all.

Finally, I endorse the comments of the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning. She said that the test of the proposal is that the leave entitlement is improved. Over the next two years that standard of leave entitlement being approved must be reached. Employers who, without just cause or for some irregular reason, do not endorse this leave entitlement must be appropriately called to account.

Mr Spratt: I also endorse the comments made by the Chairperson of the Committee. I thank the Minister and the Department for the wide consultation that has taken place — including with the Committee, as the Chairperson said. On behalf of the DUP side of the House, I endorse everything that has been said in the debate. The Minister's announcement is good news for 150,000 employees in Northern Ireland. The increase in holiday entitlement and the protections afforded will help some of the most vulnerable people, including agency workers. From that perspective, the DUP fully supports what has been said.

I welcome the Minister's assurance that he will keep the whole process under continual review to ensure that it is properly implemented across the entire Province. I fully support the motion.

Sir Reg Empey: I am grateful to the Members who have contributed. Before the debate is closed, I have a couple of points of clarification in case there is any confusion. Although bank holidays will be included in the entitlement of 28 days, there never was and there will not be any requirement for people to take their leave on the days that are bank holidays.

That was one anxiety that people who work in the retail trade and in the caring professions expressed. However, there is no such requirement, because the employee and employer will decide between themselves when holidays are to be taken. There is no imposition on employers or workers to take holidays on particular days. Annual leave entitlement, incorporating statutory holidays, simply increases to 28 days.

Basil McCrea talked about the impact of the extra two days' holidays. The review process has already commenced, and my Department is in discussion with stakeholders. The statistical data and impact assessment for the UK as a whole were insufficiently detailed for Northern Ireland purposes, because the sample from which the data were taken was too small. The review will probably conclude by the autumn, after which my officials and I will be in a position to discuss its outworkings with the Committee. We realise that there are complications, but we were not satisfied that the information at our disposal was sufficiently robust to

allow us to make an informed decision. Therefore, a determination will probably be made towards the end of this year.

Mr Attwood rightly said that this is a good day for many workers. Members will debate working conditions for agency workers tomorrow. However, significant numbers of people work in sectors in which their holiday entitlements have been far less than those who work for many good employers, including those in the public sector. For example, everyone who works in this Building, including Members, benefits from a holiday entitlement of at least 28 days. By ensuring that there is a level playing field, many people are given new opportunities, particularly women who work while also coping with raising families.

We were cautious about including the choice to opt out in the legislation, because it could have been exploited and abused. However, as the Chairperson of the Committee has said, there is a transition period in order to allow employers time to adjust. People must understand that the legislation's objective is to allow people to spend more time away from the workplace.

Members have mentioned that we live in a competitive society and that our economy is under pressure. However, had we thought that regulations to reduce the amount of time that people have off work would make the economy more competitive, the Assembly would be having a different debate today.

I welcome the comments of the Committee's Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson. My Department tried to work with the Committee as a team on the regulations, because everyone in society must have cognisance of the issue. All Members are lobbied and pressured by various groups, and sometimes it is hard to stand back and make an objective decision. I think that we have managed to do that as far as was possible, and we have ensured that there has been as much of a consensus as was achievable.

I understand that no one wants to increase the burden on any business, but a work-life balance must be struck. Many people who become stressed end up taking time off sick. My Department is trying to deal with the problem of excessive sick absence, not least in the Civil Service, but improvements will not be achieved by giving people fewer holidays.

I have tried to respond to most of the points that Members have made. I thank Members for their contributions and the Committee for its co-operation.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Working Time (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 (S.R. 2007/340) be approved.

Health and Social Care Bill

Legislative Consent Motion

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 provisions of the Health and Social Care Bill dealing with the entering into of arrangements with the Care Quality Commission; regulation of health professions; the health in pregnancy grant (including provision for making such grant an excepted matter under the Northern Ireland Act 1998); and the abolition of the National Biological Standards Board.

The Health and Social Care Bill was introduced in Westminster on 15 November 2007 and deals with a number of issues arising from the White Paper ‘Trust, Assurance and Safety — The Regulation of Health Professionals in the 21st Century’. I could have brought the legislation forward as an Assembly Bill, but I did not wish to miss the opportunity of having the legislation available at the earliest possible date.

The first key provision that the Bill proposes is the abolition of the National Biological Standards Board, which provides independent testing of medicines for the UK market, such as vaccines for the children’s vaccination programme. In the last decade, Northern Ireland has not been significantly involved in the working of the body, but we contribute towards its funding by over £250,000 per annum. The functions will be transferred to the Health Protection Agency, which has a presence in Northern Ireland. It employs staff at the communicable disease surveillance centre, which is based at Belfast City Hospital and directed and funded by my Department.

The Bill will also legislate on a variety of regulatory issues affecting healthcare professionals in Northern Ireland. Those will include the appointment of an independent adjudicator to hear fitness-to-practice cases involving healthcare professionals; the amendment of the Health Act 1999 to provide for a majority of lay members on healthcare regulatory bodies; the adoption by healthcare regulatory bodies of the civil standard of proof in determining allegations of lack of fitness to practice; and the appointment by healthcare organisations of a responsible officer whose role will be to safeguard patients by identifying and handling issues of poor performance by doctors, liaising with the General Medical Council on possible fitness-to-practice cases, and making recommendations on the re-licensing of doctors.

The Bill also proposes to amend the constitution and functions of the Council for the Regulation of Health Care Professionals, a UK body that promotes best practice in the regulation of healthcare professionals.

With regard to pharmacy, in Great Britain, it has been decided to separate the regulatory and professional leadership function in favour of a general pharmaceutical

council for regulation and a college-like body for professional leadership. The Bill enables appropriate legislation to include Northern Ireland in the establishment of such a council. Although that would harmonise arrangements, not only across the profession but with other health professions that are already regulated on a UK-wide basis, I have not reached a decision yet on whether to adopt that approach.

The Bill will also establish for England a new single integrated independent health and adult social care body to be known as the care quality commission. There are proposals in the Bill for powers to enable Northern Ireland Ministers to enter into arrangements with the new single body.

1.15 pm

An equivalent body already exists in Northern Ireland — the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA), which was established in 2005. It is likely that our mutual regulation bodies will, occasionally, need to share advice or expertise, which is allowed for in the provision.

With the agreement of my Executive colleague, the Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie, the Bill allows for the introduction of a health-in-pregnancy grant, which is a single, one-off, payment of £190 to every expectant mother from the 25th week of pregnancy. The aim of the grant is to contribute towards an improved lifestyle and healthy diet during the final weeks of pregnancy. The grant will be introduced in April 2009.

The introduction of the legislation will help to provide safer and streamlined services to the public. High quality, responsive and safe health services are what the public demand and deserve. I ask the House to support the motion.

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

As the Motion indicates, the Health and Social Care Bill, which is being debated in Westminster, contains four main provisions that relate to Northern Ireland and require the approval of the Assembly: the power to enter into arrangements with the care quality commission; provisions relating to the regulation of health professionals; proposals for the introduction of a new health-in-pregnancy grant; and the abolition of the National Biological Standards Board.

In October, officials from the Department came to the Committee to explain the relevant provisions of the Bill. They explained that, at that stage, the Bill had not been laid before Parliament and was, therefore, still a draft Bill and subject to change. The Committee is grateful to the officials who visited the Committee again last Thursday to brief members in more detail.

The main issue of interest — and of concern — to the Health Committee, and which has the potential to bring about the greatest change, is the regulation of healthcare professionals, with particular implications for Northern Ireland's pharmaceutical profession. The Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland, which is the main organisation that is likely to be directly affected by the proposal, has made representations to the Committee.

The proposals on the regulation of healthcare professionals were set out in the White Paper 'Trust, assurance and safety: the regulation of health professionals', which was published in February 2007. In drawing up those proposals, the Government identified a potential problem relating to pharmacy: the pharmaceutical profession is regulated by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain and the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland, which are separate. Unlike regulating bodies for the medical, nursing and allied health professions, those bodies have a regulatory function and a professional leadership function. The White Paper put forward the view that those functions should be separated, and that the provisions in the Bill would replace the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain with a general pharmaceutical council, which would deal with regulation, and a college-type body to deal with professional leadership.

As the Minister explained, the new general pharmaceutical council will not automatically take over the regulatory function of the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland. However, the provision in the Bill will give the Minister the power to hand over that function, should he so decide. The Committee fully understands that it could be difficult to defend the perceived conflict of interest for a single body that exists to uphold the public interest, but that has a self interest. That argument has led to the view that those two functions should be separated, as they are for professions such as nursing and medicine. However, it must be recognised that, for the past 80 years, pharmacists in Northern Ireland have been successfully regulated, and professionally represented, by the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland. There is a strong case for asking why the system needs to be fixed if it is not broken. Furthermore, the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland has argued to the Committee that if the proposal is enacted in Northern Ireland, there is a distinct possibility that it would not be able to continue with its representative role, meaning that the local professional voice of pharmacy could be lost.

The Minister has advised the society that he is strongly minded to adopt the approach of having a single regulatory body — the general pharmaceutical council — that will cover the profession throughout the United Kingdom. However, he has assured the Committee that he has not reached a final decision on that, and he has

also given an assurance that he will return to the Committee with his proposals. On that basis, the Committee is content to support the inclusion of an enabling provision in the Health and Social Care Bill.

The Bill also proposes the introduction of a health-in-pregnancy grant. Although the administration of that grant will be a matter for the Department for Social Development, its aim and purpose is a health matter. The grant will help pregnant women to meet the additional nutritional — and other — costs of maintaining a healthy lifestyle during pregnancy. I particularly welcome the requirement on pregnant women to seek health advice from a relevant professional in order that they may qualify for the grant. I hope that that will result in women receiving one-to-one tailored advice and support on their dietary and nutritional needs at such an important time in their lives. I support the motion.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and many of the sentiments that were outlined by the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. It is imperative that the Minister returns to the Health Committee and listens to what it has to say. He must also listen to the Pharmaceutical Society before he makes his decision, given that legislative consent for the Bill will have greater implications for that body than it will for any other.

The health-in-pregnancy grant will have a direct impact on the health of expectant mothers and their ability to concentrate on their aftercare, and I welcome that. There is an equality-impact issue in relation to the payments made to mothers-to-be, regardless of how many babies they are carrying, so I would like a caveat added, if possible. There is evidence that women who have multiple pregnancies are under more physical stress than those with fewer pregnancies. Indeed, such stress has a big impact on them.

The entitlement for pregnant women to contact health professionals and to avail themselves of their advice is also welcome. I am not suggesting that that entitlement is a form of buying in medical advice that should exist at the point of service, but pregnant women will benefit from such services as reflexology, aromatherapy and other forms of medical intervention that are required throughout pregnancy.

I would appreciate it if the legislation could be introduced here before April 2009. Like the Chairperson of the Health Committee, I look forward to the Health Minister returning to the Committee before making his decision regarding the Pharmaceutical Society. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCallister: Although most of the points have been covered, we broadly support the legislation, particularly the health-in-pregnancy grant, which the Chairperson of the Health Committee and Carál Ní

Chuilín mentioned. Will the Minister support the idea of keeping in Northern Ireland the registration of the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland? Will he also work closely with the society in drawing up new proposals and in bringing them to the Health Committee and the Assembly? Perhaps he will respond to those questions in his closing remarks. Those proposals would go a long way in finding a solution to the difficulties and issues that have been raised in the Committee and in the House.

Mr Gallagher: As a member of the Health Committee, I support the provisions of the Bill.

I share the concerns that have been raised about health professionals, particularly the Pharmaceutical Society, and the possible implications that the Bill's provisions will have for its future role, not least in its registration and regulatory functions.

Northern Ireland is now taking responsibility for its own affairs through the Assembly, and, in many cases, there are special circumstances that must be recognised. I represent a border constituency, and sometimes the needs of those who live in border areas lead to peculiar circumstances, which very often the Government at Westminster do not recognise. Therefore, it is important that, in order to reflect local needs and the peculiarities that sometimes face us in Northern Ireland, we receive an assurance that the local voice of the Pharmaceutical Society will be heard.

As the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety stressed, it is important that the Minister assures us that, before any further decisions are taken, professionals, the Committee and the British Medical Association (BMA), all of which still have some concerns about the Bill's provisions, will be consulted.

Mr Buchanan: As a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I support the motion, while reiterating the concerns that my fellow Committee members have highlighted.

I have some questions to put to the Minister for him to answer in his closing remarks. I recognise that the regulation of doctors and other healthcare staff in Northern Ireland should be the same as in Great Britain, because we cannot get into a situation in which doctors are under any greater or lesser obligation than their colleagues in hospitals across the water. However, although I have no intention of opposing the position that the Committee has adopted, the BMA has raised some legitimate concerns that require clarification.

Can the Minister tell the House the likely impact of a change from use of the present criminal standard to the civil standard of proof in fitness to practise cases, which is outlined in clause 104? We do not want to have doctors who are afraid to take decisions. Everyone knows that it is almost impossible to get doctors in the

United States to specialise in, for example, obstetrics or anaesthetics, because of the high levels of patient litigation.

I call on the Minister to inform the Assembly of how we can be assured that defensive medicine will not occur in Northern Ireland. Moreover, what input will our elected representatives have in the legislative process across the water?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Campbell): The Health and Social Care Bill includes a grant that will provide financial support to expectant mothers to help them to meet the higher costs, including dietary and other additional costs, of living a healthy lifestyle during their pregnancy. The Committee welcomes the introduction of the grant that will be awarded to every mother-to-be from week 29 of her pregnancy, particularly the fact that it will be paid regardless of income.

However, entitlement to the grant does require pregnant women to seek health advice from a health professional. That will surely be of benefit to the mother, as it will not only provide a financial incentive to seek health advice at the right time but will provide an excellent opportunity to inform expectant mothers of the importance of good nutrition during pregnancy. The health-in-pregnancy grant will take the form of a one-off payment of £190 to expectant mothers for every pregnancy, regardless of whether a single birth or multiple births are expected.

When the Committee was considering the proposed introduction of the grant, it considered information received from the Twins and Multiple Births Association (TAMBA).

It believes that the grant should be paid for each expectant child, rather than for each pregnancy. Research has shown that compared to single pregnancies, multiple-birth pregnancies have additional nutritional requirements and that consequently there are additional costs in achieving healthy weight gain.

1.30 pm

Research has also shown that expectant multiple-birth mothers not only need to gain more weight than expectant single mothers, they also need to gain weight at an earlier stage. Due to the increased risk of premature birth, more weight needs to be gained in the first trimester; therefore, not surprisingly, TAMBA raised some concern about the timing of the payment of the grant for multiple-birth pregnancies. It believes that the optimal time for any intervention is in the very early stages of pregnancy.

In conclusion, the Committee for Social Development supports the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Health and Social Care Bill that deal with the health and pregnancy grant but wishes to

highlight the concerns raised by TAMBA in relation to the needs of expectant multiple-birth mothers. It is hoped that that will be considered both by the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and by the Minister.

Mr Easton: I support the motion. Time does not permit me to deal comprehensively with all material concerns. Nonetheless, I wish to draw attention to several specific areas, particularly the welcome area of the pregnancy grant, which is aimed at promoting health in the latter stages of pregnancy, and the sensitive area of the integrity of the responsibilities of the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland.

It is essential that the promotion of health for women in the latter stages of pregnancy is not open to abuse, as the priority must be that expectant mothers can receive the benefit during the time when rising costs can impact on healthy living, and particularly on diet and nutrition. I commend the fact that the financial incentive is linked to receiving advice from a suitable, qualified health professional but I will be seeking reassurances from the Minister that the financial incentive can be appropriately ring-fenced for the purpose for which it is being designed.

The pharmaceutical industry is ever-developing, and it is imperative that we have local, effective regulation. Will the Minister assure us that the needs of the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland are treated with the appropriate degree of sensitivity and that further development in the area will be communicated to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety?

Mr McGimpsey: Several valuable points have been made, and I will attempt to respond to them. The first point relates to the grant of £190 which is payable at the twenty-fifth week of pregnancy and which aims to encourage a healthy lifestyle and diet. It does not infringe on other rights of mothers; for example, Sure Start, maternity grant, healthy start schemes or other state support. As Gregory Campbell said, it is not means tested and it is applicable to everyone.

Tom Buchanan referred to doctors. It is true that the civil standard of proof rather than the criminal standard of proof is applicable. The General Medical Council has already moved to that form of proof in so far as the criminal standard of proof requires people to be wholly convinced. The civil standard of proof is more appropriate. The standard adopted should be appropriate to ensure patient safety and public confidence in the system.

The stimulus for those measures was the Shipman Inquiry. Shipman was a GP, and it is estimated that he murdered around 300 of his patients. There were instances that would have pointed to his criminal activity had they been appreciated. Proof needs to be collected, and in Shipman's case evidence was available but was not recognised, seized or acted on.

Had they been, a large number of lives would have been saved. That is another reason why the standard of proof that is required in civil law is regarded as the appropriate way forward, rather than that required in criminal law, whereby facts must be wholly proven beyond all reasonable doubt.

Tommy Gallagher, John McCallister and Alex Easton each properly pointed out that pharmacies must act as local voices for local needs, and I strongly support that. Local pharmacies must belong to the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain, but that does not preclude local leadership or representation. The Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland is concerned about those matters, and, for that reason, I have informed it that, although I will be empowered to by the proposed legislation, I will not proceed without having held discussions with the society about how to alleviate those concerns. I am also committed to discussions with the Royal Pharmaceutical of Great Britain in order to help to establish the proposed general pharmaceutical council, while ensuring that we retain a local voice and leadership. I will work on that and, in due course, report back to the Health Committee.

Alex Easton mentioned ring-fencing in respect of the health-in-pregnancy grant. It is difficult to envisage how that grant could be ring-fenced. When a grant is paid for a specific purpose, it is assumed that people are responsible for how they spend such money, and a £190 one-off grant, or anything like it, will by no means address the cost of a pregnancy. I believe that that is accepted. Such a grant is intended to encourage a healthy diet and lifestyle, which will have a positive impact on a baby — particularly as he or she grows up. Those are the reasons for the grant, and it is difficult to envisage how ring-fencing could be enforced, other than by providing advice.

Mrs Robinson also mentioned the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland's representations to the Committee and, as I said, I will return to the Committee on that point after I have spoken to the society.

I believe that I have covered the points that Members have raised, and I shall finish by asking for the support of the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of provisions of the Health and Social Care Bill dealing with the entering into of arrangements with the Care Quality Commission; regulation of health professions; the health in pregnancy grant (including provision for making such grant an excepted matter under the Northern Ireland Act 1998); and the abolition of the National Biological Standards Board.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

All-Party Assembly Group on Children and Young People

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 to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Beggs: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the work of Professor Heckman and Mark Greenberg on government investment with young children; urges the Executive to take note of the outcomes from this work, and to invest in early intervention and prevention; and calls on the Executive to protect, maintain and further develop the investment that has been made in children and young people, through Executive Programme Funds, the Children and Young People's Priority Funding Package, and the Supporting Families Package.

I declare an interest as a voluntary committee member of Horizon Sure Start in Carrickfergus and Larne, which was established in order to assist children. The All-Party Assembly Group on Children and Young People has been re-established, and meets at lunchtime on the first Tuesday of each month. We would welcome any other Members who might care to join us on that group in order that they might be better informed on children's issues.

I am pleased that the motion has been proposed during this critical Budget period, and I hope that Ministers are listening and that children's needs will be addressed by alterations to the draft Budget.

The previous devolved Assembly established the Executive programme fund for children to assist, in particular, with individual Departments that might not have prioritised children's issues because they were cross-cutting in nature. In reply to a question for oral answer on 5 November 2007, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety advised that:

"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"

— where a 3% saving must be made every year —

"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." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 25, p25, col 1.*]

That would result in a reduction by two thirds of the resources under that fund, and it would have a substantial effect on services that have been helping some of the most vulnerable children, young people and families in Northern Ireland. For example, Barnardo's has advised me that it would mean the loss of 11 services that operate in eight different constituencies.

Those services are working to help children with disabilities, children who have experienced domestic violence and children who are at risk of being taken into care or custody. This cut would also affect the support that Barnardo's is giving to young parents and to parents whose children display behavioural difficulties. To date, Barnardo's has helped 2,500 children and young people and over 600 parents.

A second stream of funding that is currently at risk is the children and young people funding package. In March 2006, the then Secretary of State, Peter Hain, announced that new package of £61.7 million over two years. The document which outlined the details of that package at the time stated that:

"this will be included in baselines of relevant participating Departments."

That funding will come to an end in a little over two months, and there is still uncertainty about the long-term funding of various programmes that have been helped to date. I believe that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has promised some £26 million, but, if that is over one year, it will represent a reduction. However, there is a lack of clarity, and the groups on the ground have yet to be told their future.

The types of activities that have been assisted have been extended schools, extended early-years provision, looked-after children and vulnerable young adults, youth outreach initiatives, child protection, and children with special needs and disabilities.

This comes on the back of a damning report by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), published in May 2007, which exposed the lack of public expenditure on children in Northern Ireland. That research was funded by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Department of Finance and Personnel. The report indicated that personal social services funding per capita was £287 per child in Northern Ireland, £402 in England, £513 in Scotland and £429 in Wales. Children's services in Northern Ireland are underfunded by at least 30%.

The former Homefirst Community Health and Social Services Trust area, which covers my constituency, had the lowest funding per capita of any part of Northern Ireland, with only £216 per child. As a public representative, I saw the outcome of that. There were excessive waiting times for special needs assessments, speech and language support and mental-health support. Children who were in need of support were let down. As Members will be aware, early intervention is critical in many cases.

Soon after the re-establishment of the all-party group, we picked up concern from the children's sector about funding and the implications of the draft Budget.

Children's and parent's hopes are often built up, only to face uncertainty or be dashed due to the stop-start nature of the funding arrangements. We must accept that we need long-term investment in children and young people. Therefore, we must commit to resourcing a robust action plan to deliver the 10-year children's strategy. The resources for that are not apparent in the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget.

In my experience, the voluntary sector can often reach those in need when the statutory sector somehow fails to reach them. Therefore, I suggest that there is an ongoing need for the children's voluntary and community sector to be a key partner in that work.

1.45 pm

It is important to appreciate the type of services that are at risk if funding is not granted. Today, I attended a Home-Start press launch in the Long Gallery; the junior Ministers will also attend that event. Some of Home-Start's projects are at risk. Will funding be available to ensure that volunteers are co-ordinated in order to help families that are at risk? If that does not happen, it is likely that more children will go into care, resulting in poor outcomes. I urge the Executive to ensure that vulnerable families are not put at increased risk.

PlayBoard has administered the extended schools projects and supported children in breakfast clubs and after-school groups. Those after-school groups, by assisting children with homework, can improve educational outcomes and enable parents to take up employment. Both those factors can have a significant effect in the reduction of child poverty. When a parent is working, household incomes are boosted and children have a positive role model, which, in addition to the support that they are getting with their homework, also encourages them.

I am aware of waiting lists for affordable childcare in my own constituency. If the full cost of childcare had to be met by parents, some of them may be better off on benefits. If such people did go onto benefits, how would anti-poverty targets and employment targets that have been set out in the draft Programme for Government be met?

The NCH, formerly known as the National Children's Home, has indicated that funding is uncertain for some of its services, including those that have been acknowledged as successfully assisting vulnerable children. Include Youth, which works with young people who are at risk of offending, also indicates an uncertain future.

The all-party group has met the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to press for funding, as well as junior Ministers Ian Paisley Jnr and Gerry Kelly.

The role of Northern Ireland's Minister for Children was established under direct rule. The Minister's main

role was to be to co-ordinate ministerial subcommittee meetings on children's issues, including cross-cutting issues. When the all-party group met the junior Ministers, it learned that, after seven months of devolution, a ministerial subcommittee meeting to address those issues has not been held. The group urges the junior Ministers to meet the relevant Ministers before the consultation period for the Budget is finished so that relevant issues can be addressed. I hope that the Minister of Education, who is present today, will be able to advise Members whether that has happened. It certainly should have happened. If it has not, there is a danger of children's issues going by default.

Professor James Heckman of the University of Chicago, who also assists at University College Dublin, is a Nobel laureate in economic sciences. We are fortunate that he is working in Northern Ireland and assisting Early Years, which was formerly known as NIPPA (Northern Ireland Pre-School Playgroup Association). His research has shown the benefits of investing in the skills of children in their early years. Investment in human capital is likely to be more effective and to produce more favourable outcomes in the long run if it is targeted at children and young people.

Mark Greenberg is an American economist who also works in this area. He has indicated that it is important that guaranteed childcare assistance to low-income families should be available to promote early-years educational opportunities for all.

The draft Budget is supposedly aimed at the future economic growth of Northern Ireland. However, it does not maintain previously committed expenditure for children. I urge Members to support the motion and to ensure that we invest in young people.

Miss McIlveen: An essential aspect of investing in young children is through education. That is an area in which I have a particular interest.

In the Executive's draft Programme for Government, the Department of Education, as well as the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, aims to:

"Provide for effective early intervention through more coherent education and care provision for pre school children."

The Department intends to that by ensuring that:

"a solid framework is in place to support the development of resilient children who are skilled communicators and competent learners prepared for life at school and beyond."

The Department of Education, along with the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure further aims to reduce the gap in educational outcomes by addressing the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people by, among other things, implementation of the literacy and numeracy strategy,

the school improvement policy, and improved access to the Youth Service for young people most at risk of exclusion. However, there is no reference to maintaining or furthering the already-established elements of the children and young people funding package, which contributes to reducing gaps in the educational needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable young people.

What does the Minister of Education propose to do regarding extended schools provision? That is an initiative to assist schools that wish to extend the use of school facilities in order to benefit the community more widely, for example, by providing support for after-school provision, pre-school childcare, creative learning centres, adult learning and other community needs. Schools can provide any facilities or services whose provision furthers any charitable purpose for the benefit of pupils, their families or people who live or work in the area.

Furthermore, what does the Minister of Education propose to do about extended early-years provision? There are now 25 Sure Start programmes across Northern Ireland, where Sure Start represents an investment of £9.3 million for 2006-07. That means that over 22,000 children under the age of four and their families have access to services provided through that programme. In England, the Sure Start scheme guarantees all three- and four-year-olds a free, part-time — that is, 12.5 hours per week — early education place and there are over 37,000 settings delivering free, Government-funded, early education. No mention is made of a similar expansion of the Northern Ireland Sure Start programme.

In England, through Sure Start, it has been promised that:

“There will be a childcare place for all children aged between 3 and 14, between the hours of 8am to 6pm each weekday by 2010, when there will be over 2 million sustainable childcare places for children up to the age of 14.”

We have no equivalent to that promise in the Programme for Government. There is no mention of a planned-development programme for two-year-olds. It seems incredible that a literacy and numeracy strategy has been mentioned, but that there is a disregard for Professor Heckman's research in early-years learning, which an extension of what Sure Start would offer.

What does the Minister propose to do about improving education support and provision for children and vulnerable adults? Again, that is not mentioned in the Programme for Government. Such support could provide invaluable assistance for those children who feel detached from society by virtue of being placed in residential care and assisting foster parents in the role of first educators.

What does the Minister propose to do about children with special needs and disabilities?

Increasing numbers of children whose first language is not English are coming to live in Northern Ireland. Core documents need to be translated so that those children do not miss out on their education.

Additional child and youth respite places are needed as well as social and life-skills training for young people aged over 14 with statements of special educational needs. In the latest monitoring round the Minister of Education has handed back £5 million for revenue and £28 million for capital. She is wasting millions of pounds on under-attended Irish-medium schools. Ministers are given a huge responsibility and, arguably, the Minister of Education has been given the biggest of them all: the education of our children, our most valued asset.

We require value for money. Investment in early-years learning gives us that. Focus is needed. I feel that young children, vulnerable children and those with special needs have not been well-served by what is contained in the Programme for Government. I ask the Education Minister to clarify her position in relation to the current initiatives funded by the children and young people's package. The current funding structure is about to end. Those employed under the schemes, and those benefiting from them, have a right to know what will happen. These initiatives are crucial: if adequately resourced and properly implemented in a sustained and well-planned manner, they can make a significant contribution to reducing the gap in educational outcomes, which, after all, is a key objective of the literacy and numeracy strategy.

As Professor Heckman states:

“Early learning begets later learning and early success breeds later success...”

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. As a member of the All-Party Assembly Group on Children and Young People, I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on the motion which has been proposed by all of the parties' spokespersons on children's matters. That, in itself, is an issue.

I take a slightly different, though complementary, angle to the previous speakers. As a signatory to the motion, I agree with it totally, and I remind Members that it calls on the Executive to:

“invest in early intervention and prevention; and calls on the Executive to protect, maintain and further develop the investment that has been made in children and young people, through Executive Programme Funds, the Children and Young People's Priority Funding Package and the Supporting Families Package”.

I will mention the supporting families package; however, it is naive that we, as spokespersons for our respective parties and for children, should criticise any investment in children and young people. As a group, we should not go down the path of saying that money should be taken away from one thing and allocated to another; we should be calling for additional investment.

At a time when there are great pressures on public finances and a need for innovative thinking, no issue is more important than investing in parenting — political investment, as regards leadership; policy investment, as regards strategy; and financial investment, as regards service. I regret that I am unable to say that there is a coherent strategy on parenting; regrettably, there is not. While valuable work has been carried out by various Ministers, Departments and officials, we have yet to see a clear road map and way forward.

Following the change to the law on physical punishment in 2005, Jeff Rooker, the then Minister of State for Children, Young People and Families, established a working group on positive parenting to take forward positive parenting and raise awareness of the change in the law. A number of very useful publications have followed, including 'Top Tips for Parenting Toddlers' and 'Top Tips for Parenting Teenagers'. The group has carried out valuable awareness-raising among health and social care professionals, parents and the wider legal profession and in education.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety published its 'Families Matter' strategy last year, and we have seen other helpful publications from the Department, such as 'The Safe Parenting Handbook'. As a strategy, 'Families Matter' provides a useful start as it makes a range of suggestions regarding policy and service development. In their responses to the consultation document, many children's organisations made further suggestions regarding investment in parenting, particularly the availability of parenting programmes.

The Department of Education is also developing a strategy for children aged nought to six, which will contain elements of parenting and parenting support through early-years settings, extended school development and the curriculum. We must bring those parenting initiatives together and have a clear, agreed focus, which brings me back to my earlier point concerning the Executive and the need for a joined-up approach on issues relating to children and young people. Many ideas could be progressed in a joined-up way across Government that would maximise the use of resources and ensure better outcomes for parents.

I thank the Minister of Education for attending today and for responding to the debate on behalf of the Executive. I take this opportunity to ask her for an assurance that there will be an investment in parenting and a clear joined-up approach to the various elements that I have described. I ask her how the strategies of the Departments of Education and Health and the work of the group led by the Department of Finance and Personnel will be taken forward.

In conclusion, and following the comments of the Chairperson of the All-Party Assembly Group on

Children and Young People, I urge the Executive and the Minister of Finance and Personnel to review the Budget and send out a clear message that the Assembly cares about children and will invest in them and in our future. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs M Bradley: There are more people with learning disabilities in Northern Ireland than in any other region of these islands. We are all living longer, and that is one of the reasons why our children need to be properly cared for and educated, especially those with a learning difficulty or a disability of any ilk.

As a member of the All-Party Assembly Group on Children and Young People, I am very concerned about the draft Programme for Government and associated budgets. I am even more concerned about the financial uncertainty that is hovering over the future of budgets associated with spending on children's services.

Many families, on discovering that a child has learning difficulties, face a daily struggle in deciding the most suitable path for securing a stable and effective future for their child.

Members, no doubt, are familiar with the work and ideas of Professor Heckman, which are based on good, safe common sense. However, in the draft Budget, there is by no means even a glimmer of hope that the proper financial resources will be provided to allow delivery of the Programme for Government's objectives. The uncertainty is palpable in every Department. The watchwords of fairness, inclusion and equality of opportunity, which we have been told will govern every strand in every Department, encourage great expectations. However, meetings that the group has held with various Ministers give no such hope for even a small percentage of that delivery of promise.

2.00 pm

Many issues need to be addressed in making provision for children with special needs, not least the severe lack of speech and language therapy, which prevails in all our constituencies. The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People has recommended that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister should place an emphasis on this issue in order to begin, at least, to address this huge problem.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's announcement in June 2007 that he intends to reduce the waiting list times for speech and language therapy was extremely welcome. His confirmation that children will be at the centre of his programming went some way to dispel the belief that, in all Departments, children had all but been forgotten in the draft Budget.

Autism is also an extremely prevalent disability, and Northern Ireland has many sufferers — one in every 100 — and the figure is rising every year. The issue of respite care in general must be addressed, and the provision of

respite care for the families of children and young people who suffer from disorders that have symptomatic portrayals of disruptive behaviour and/or violent outbursts should be an inescapable budgetary priority.

At present, the entire process of statementing is a minefield for parents and teachers. Each time a child is bullied by other students and frowned on, he or she is dealt a metaphorical blow. Early intervention is essential if we are to learn from Professor Heckman's theories.

If Members read the report, I am sure that they will agree that it makes good sense. Professor Heckman's theories represent the right road to go down. The provision of appropriate class support, the delivery of after-schools activities and the appropriate diagnostic procedures are essential, basic needs that should — and must — be delivered through the Programme for Government.

However, when members of the group approached the Minister of Finance and Personnel, they were told that they had to approach Ministers, who had already been allocated their departmental budgets. That shocked me, and, regrettably, I have to say that, on the part of the Minister of Finance and Personnel, there was an unwillingness to discuss the possibility of ring-fencing the Barnett consequential, as I suggested, in order to provide for children with special needs. Today, I ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel to review that situation. The value of the Barnett consequential — £11.3 million — should be ring-fenced for disabled children's services, and it is the collective responsibility of the two junior Ministers to ensure that that happens by challenging the Minister of Finance and Personnel's proposals. A start must be made now, because the problem will exist for many years.

The Department of Education's planned review of special education needs is welcomed, and I await an early and positive outcome. The conclusion of the children's fund and the subsequent reduction — if not total obliteration — of the associated projects will result in the absolute destruction of any groundwork that had been laid down during the fund's existence. A recent report commissioned by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Department of Finance and Personnel, and launched by NICCY, clearly illustrates the substantial gap in per capita spend on children's services here. Northern Ireland fared pitifully against the rest of the UK; Scotland, being the highest contributor, sits at £513 per capita, and Northern Ireland limps home at a pathetic £287 per capita.

I urge all Ministers —

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

Ms Lo: I am speaking on behalf of Mrs Naomi Long, who is a member of the All-Party Assembly Group on Children and Young People.

I entirely agree with all the points that Members have raised, and I have very little to add to those contributions.

I agree with Miss McIlveen that investing in children represents value for money. Any society will reap the future benefits of investing in children now.

There is an issue of specific concern in the Budget. It seems to my party that the idea is to abolish Executive programme funds, including those specified in the motion, and simply place money into the general pot. That would lead to a total lack of transparency concerning how much money the Executive are setting aside for children and young people, and for much of the work that has been outlined by other Members and in the reports that have been mentioned. We must be sure that funding is being set aside and that it represents value for money. That does not mean that the Executive programme funds must continue exactly as they are or that money must be ring-fenced. However, specific funds must be demarcated for expenditure on children and young people along the lines suggested.

MLAs, Members who sit on all-party groups and the public at large must have access to appropriate information so that they can judge the merit of the ongoing work. As we call on the Executive to protect, maintain, and further develop the investment that has been made in children and young people, we also call on the Executive to make clear what funding is being set aside for that purpose in the Budget. We urge consideration of that matter before publication of the Budget later this month. The motion is to be strongly commended and we welcome and support it fully.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion that has been proposed by my colleagues, whom I thank for bringing this matter to the attention of the Assembly. It will be no surprise that I, as a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, wish to speak on this issue.

The commitment has been made to cut poverty in Northern Ireland by half by 2010. There is also a long-term goal to eradicate child poverty in Northern Ireland by 2020. To fulfil that commitment, it is essential that there are programmes in place with long-term strategies that provide long-lasting benefits.

In that context, I read the report by Professor Heckman and Mark Greenberg, and came to the same conclusion as those two men — as, obviously, have other Assembly colleagues. That conclusion stems from the fact that, if we invest in our children in order to enhance their social and academic skills, the result will be a new generation of well-adjusted and well-balanced individuals. That is simple common sense.

It is a sad fact that, in Northern Ireland, children who are born into troubled homes and who end up in short-term or long-term foster care are less likely to finish school. Of those children, girls are five times

more likely to become teenage mothers, and boys are six times more likely to become teenage fathers. That trend alone translates into the fact that children who are born into single-parent families are more likely to live in poverty than those who are from a complete family unit. That again translates into the fact that children from backgrounds of poverty are less likely to finish their education and go on to further education, and so the cycle continues.

The Heckman and Greenberg Report suggests that the answer lies in early investment in order to produce financial and social long-term benefits. If we invest in children during their formative early years in order to give them a sense of well-being and confidence, it follows that those well-adjusted children will be more likely to get a job and less likely to follow the crowd and underachieve at school and later in life.

The report demonstrates that children who receive stimulation and love from a young age are better able to adapt to the schooling system and interact with their peers. It has also been proven that children who are more settled within school and confident in their role in the classroom are better able to achieve their full potential, inside or outside the classroom.

The unfortunate fact is that there are many single-parent families in which the parent is not home very often and low-income families in which both parents must work. That means that the stimulation and love that are essential for the well-being of the child are not readily available. Therefore, such a child will be disadvantaged. It is logical, therefore, that the more help children are given during their formative years by way of social interaction and stimuli, the more they will achieve in life. The knock-on effect of that will be a generation who are higher achieving and who generate more wealth and finance in our economy.

The 28% child poverty level in the Province concerns us all. In my constituency of Strangford, in the Ards area, that level is 30%, which is above the provincial average.

Many children do not have sufficient clothing and food or do not receive the attention that they require. It is important that the Assembly takes those matters on board. I am not saying that everyone must be an academic — indeed, those of us who are Members of this Assembly perhaps exemplify that point. Whether a person's expertise relates to the bin lorry or to brain surgery, everyone's particular skills are essential for a community if it is to survive and thrive.

In acknowledgement of that, the children's fund was set up to fund projects that would make a difference to early-years development and would provide a positive influence in children's lives by, for example, allowing them to express themselves through art in an after-school club or by giving them something to eat at a breakfast club. All those are vital to children.

As a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and having subscribed to its pledges on poverty — particularly child poverty — I feel that the findings of the report should be taken into account and that the children and young people's funding package should not only be maintained but enhanced. The positive impact that that fund has on many children and young people in the Province is hard to measure, but it has made a difference. We are unsure about what benefits will be reaped from it in years to come, but I believe that they will be significant.

We will reap from long-term investment in the lives of children in years to come. The Northern Ireland in which our grandchildren will grow up will be a completely new Northern Ireland. Poverty will be part of a history lesson — a thing of the past.

That is not a pie-in-the-sky idea; it is achievable if we invest now. I urge the Assembly to invest in the lives of children and to sit back and watch the benefits that that investment will bring about for the generations of the not-so-distant future.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion, and I commend the members of the all-party Assembly group on children and young people on bringing the motion to the House today.

Many Members spoke of the benefits of investing in the skills of children in their early years. Research has shown time and time again that that is the case. Professor Heckman's report demonstrates clearly that early intervention and investment will create more favourable outcomes in the long run if they are targeted at children and young people.

That is also true of investment in parenting, to which my colleague Sue Ramsey referred. As we enter 2008, children and young people across the North still face far too many inequalities. There are dire levels of fuel poverty, and 24% of children live at 60% below the average income. Children and young people who live in poverty are much less likely than children overall to achieve five or more GCSE passes at grades A to C. In order to address that, Sinn Féin wants to see in place a strategy that will focus on increasing the level of qualifications for those children who live in poverty in the most deprived areas. That must be a cross-departmental priority. The Assembly and the Executive must commit to addressing those inequalities by implementing a policy and monitoring its outcomes. The motion calls on the Executive to:

“protect, maintain and further develop the investment that has been made in children and young people”.

At this stage, Members should remind themselves of the goals of the children and young people's funding package. That aims to reduce underachievement and to improve the life chances of children and young people by enhancing their educational development and by

fostering their health, well-being and social inclusion through the integrated delivery of the support and services that are necessary to ensure that every child has the best start in life. As I mentioned earlier, research shows that that approach will pay off in the long run.

Roy Beggs, in moving the motion, referred to some of the activities that are funded by the children and young people's package. Those activities include: the extended schools' youth provision; addressing the requirements of children with special educational needs; extended early years provision; and examining how, overall, those activities have worked towards achieving those aims. The Assembly must continue to support those activities.

In conclusion, Sinn Féin believes that the re-establishment of the children's fund by the Executive will be a strong sign of their commitment to the future of our children and young people. I support the motion.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): As Chairperson of the Committee with responsibility for scrutinising the children's strategy, I thank the members of the all-party group for tabling the motion and for creating the opportunity to have such an important issue debated in the Assembly.

2.15 pm

The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has identified children's issues as one of its main priorities for the current session. Members will be aware that it has just published an interim report on its inquiry into child poverty. The report reveals that, according to official statistics, more than 100,000 children still live in poverty in Northern Ireland. It is also estimated that around 44,000 children live in severe poverty. Statistics are always a matter for debate. However, it is indisputable that behind those statistics, there are children who lack basic necessities and whose life chances are reduced as a result of their impoverished start in life.

As part of its inquiry, the Committee received over 40 written submissions from key stakeholders. The evidence that it has considered highlights the need for early action by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and, indeed, by the Executive. The Committee welcomes the Programme for Government's commitment to work towards the elimination of child poverty by 2020 and severe child poverty by 2012. However, the Committee is concerned that insufficient information is available in the Programme for Government, the Budget and the accompanying public-service agreements on how those challenging targets are to be delivered. Of course, there is still time for that to be corrected and for the inclusion of more detail on how child poverty is to be tackled in the Programme for

Government and in the forthcoming delivery and investment plans.

My Committee has not reached a final decision on the specific policies and programmes that will need to be enacted in order to improve outcomes for the most disadvantaged families. However, it is already clear that a key element of any effective strategy to tackle child poverty will be the provision of high-quality services that offer support to families during the first few critical years of a child's life. It appears that that conclusion is supported by Professor Heckman's research. On the basis of the weight of evidence that supports such interventions, the Committee, in its interim report, has highlighted the need for action to expand the availability of accessible high-quality childcare and to expand access to interventions such as Sure Start. I hope that the Executive give careful consideration to my Committee's recommendations as they seek to finalise the Programme for Government and the Budget.

My Committee is also aware of the immediate concerns that exist about the long-term future of programmes that were established with Executive programme funds, the children and young people's priority funding packages and the supporting families package. The Committee has, therefore, written to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ask for a detailed breakdown of the funding that has been allocated through such programmes, and for clarification on how much of that funding will continue to be available to each of the programmes during the next three financial years. In addition, it has invited the two junior Ministers to attend a Committee meeting to discuss their role in the action that is being taken by the Department to ensure that adequate resources and comprehensive plans are in place across Government to deal with priorities for children and young people. I expect that the meeting will take place before the end of the month.

In conclusion, I offer my support for the motion and assure the House that my Committee will monitor carefully the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's work in order to ensure that there is, indeed, sufficient investment across Departments in early intervention and prevention. Without such investment, another generation will be condemned to a cycle of poverty.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members are aware that absolutely nothing gets in the way of Question Time, which will begin at 2.30 pm with questions to the Minister of Education. I propose, therefore, that the House take its ease until then.

2.30 pm

(*Mr Speaker in the Chair*)

Oral Answers to Questions

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed, I wish to address the issue of flexibility during Question Time, and to draw Members' attention to an agreement that I have reached with the Whips. Members will be aware that the 30-minute period of questions to Ministers is very rigid and, on occasions, has prevented a Member from asking a supplementary question or a Minister from answering one. I have agreed with the Whips that we should be more flexible, and we shall begin to be so today.

For example, when the time for questions to the Minister of Education runs out at 3.00 pm, I will indicate that time is up but, if necessary, will allow the Minister three minutes to answer a supplementary question. If we are close to the end of the allotted 30 minutes, Members can ask a supplementary question, subject to the Minister's giving a brief answer. I stress that answers must be brief, particularly when time is up, in order to allow all three Ministers to answer questions in the time allotted. I hope that that flexibility will allow a Member, when time is running out, to ask a supplementary question and the Minister to answer it. Each Minister will still have 30 minutes in which to take questions, because the clock will automatically stop. We may run slightly beyond 4.00 pm as a result, but I am sure that Members will not object to that.

EDUCATION

West Belfast and Greater Shankill Task Forces' Report

1. **Mr Adams** asked the Minister of Education to outline the progress made on the implementation of the recommendations made by the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Task Forces' report in 2002.

(AQO 1330/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. D'aithin tuarascálacha ó thascfhórsaí iarthar Bhéal Feirste agus mhórchéantar na Seanchille an tábhacht atá leis an oideachas agus dhírigh siad a n-aire ar an riachtanas le caighdeán oideachais a ardú.

The 2002 joint report of the West Belfast Task Force and Greater Shankill Task Force recognised the

importance of education and focused on the need to raise educational standards.

Tá mo Roinn ag obair ar pholasaithe agus trí Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne Bhéal Feirste agus le Comhairle na Scoileanna Caitliceacha faoi Chothabháil le bua a fháil ar an tearcghnóthachtáil agus leis an dul chun cinn a chothú.

My Department has been working at policy level, and through the Belfast Education and Library Board and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, to tackle educational underachievement and promote improvement. That is one of the key areas that the Executive, and I, as Minister of Education, must deal with in the coming years.

It is important to realise that, out of the 18 wards in the west Belfast and greater Shankill area, 14 fall within the top 30% most deprived wards in the education domain. We must break the link between educational underperformance and social disadvantage by supporting schools that work with the most disadvantaged children in order to achieve the clear prospect of good qualifications and skills for all. I have seen at first hand how schools can be placed at the centre of the community, where children and adults can learn in a relaxed, welcoming and stimulating environment. That has been particularly evident in my visits to a range of schools in west Belfast and the greater Shankill and at my meetings with primary school principals in the Shankill area.

Specific interventions have been introduced to help communities, and the schools that serve them, to put in place some of the foundations that are needed to promote the value of education and to raise standards. Those include the west Belfast and greater Shankill education initiative, the extended schools programme, measures in the greater Shankill area, the full-service school model in Belfast Boys' Model School and Belfast Model School for Girls, and the recent approval of a full-service community network in Ballymurphy.

I expect to publish for consultation revised strategies for school improvement in literacy and numeracy shortly. Those strategies are designed to ensure that every young person be given the best possible chance to succeed, regardless of background or ability. Recent evidence clearly shows the importance of parental and community support for schools. In the case of schools, such support is particularly important in challenging circumstances, and I ask colleagues to play their part in encouraging positive engagement in their constituencies.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom bliain úr faoi mhaise a ghuí duit agus do gach duine anseo, go áirithe don Aire Oideachais. Tá mé buíoch den Aire as an fhreagra a thug sí.

I wish you and other Members a very happy new year, particularly the Minister. The young people in my

constituency of West Belfast, which includes the Shankill, the Falls, Whiterock and Glencolin, are particularly looking forward to this new year, during which we will finally see the end of the 11-plus.

Will the Minister commend the work of the West Belfast Taskforce to her colleagues in the power-sharing Executive? That is part of a policy framework that has been endorsed by all of the parties in the first power-sharing Executive, and I ask the Minister to use her good offices to encourage action by all Departments to alleviate the disadvantage and deprivation that that report seeks to do away with.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Ghearáid. The West Belfast Taskforce is an important initiative, and I will commend it to the Executive. We are in the middle of a debate on early-years provision, and west Belfast and the greater Shankill area have benefited enormously from the children and young persons' package. The Executive will be judged on how we deal with disadvantage and our most vulnerable children and young people. As I said, 14 of the 18 most deprived wards are in the area that Gerry Adams represents, and that is important.

Mr McCausland: The report highlighted several important matters. Parental and behavioural support in early years are particularly welcome initiatives in the Shankill area. However, does the Minister agree that those benefits will be undermined by her decision to de-prioritise youth work? A 5% cut in funding is proposed in year 1 and a 1% cut is proposed in year 2, which will have a devastating effect on youth services throughout west Belfast and the greater Shankill. Her decision will devastate youth provision in those areas, both in the statutory and the voluntary sector.

Does she also agree that her decision to increase funding for youth work by 7% in year 3, on the other hand, is somewhat disingenuous — to put the best spin on it — since the education and library boards will make the cuts in years 1 and 2, but the Minister's newly formed education authority will take the benefits in year 3? Will she acknowledge that her decision to de-prioritise youth work will receive a negative reaction in the entire West Belfast constituency, and in North Belfast, too?

Ms Ruane: I welcome the Member's concerns on the important area of youth work. The Member will know that final decisions on the comprehensive spending review will not be made until later this month. He will also know that I have written to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, highlighting my concerns about the absence of funding for those programmes, the difficulty that the Department of Education has in finding resources of the scale that is required, and the impact that that is likely to have on our most vulnerable children.

I have asked that, if there is any possibility of additional funding, youth programmes and children's programmes be considered urgent priorities. I absolutely reject that I have de-prioritised youth work; I have always said that it is one of our key priorities. I hope that the Member joins the debate that began earlier about the importance of funding for children and young people. I hope that he will stay after Question Time and join that debate.

Mr Attwood: The Minister may be aware that on the RTE programme 'Morning Ireland' this morning there was a discussion on the target that has been set in the Republic of Ireland, which is that 80% of students who are leaving education should have studied at least one science subject. The report by the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Task Force recommended that clear measurement tools be established to assess the performance and outcomes of schools in the area. Therefore, will the Minister confirm that such tools have been put in place; detail what information has been brought to bear on those measurement tools, and describe what action has been taken as a result? The experience in the South shows that in order to achieve the best outcomes students need to study the right subjects.

Ms Ruane: I thank Mr Attwood for his comprehensive question. I agree that it is important that young people learn science and that the subject is made more relevant. Indeed, the Department has introduced the revised curriculum, which seeks to make science and other vocational subjects available. In many cases, the study of those subjects is on a much more practical basis now than it was previously. The Department is also carrying out a science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) review. It is important that young people are stimulated by science and that science is introduced into their everyday lives, because it is part of everyone's daily life.

Last week, I attended the BT Young Scientist and Technology exhibition with my colleague in the South, Micheál Martin. I commend that wonderful exhibition, which many schools from the North attended: in fact, there were more schools from the North than last year. I plan to meet the organisers to discuss how to increase the level of interest in science.

The Department is also considering setting up a task force on literacy and numeracy, the proposals for which I will detail soon, and I will ensure that the Member receives the relevant information on that.

Club-Bank Scheme

2. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Education to confirm the date for the introduction of the club-bank scheme for Irish-medium education.

(AQO 1312/08)

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá cur i bhfeidhm shocrú chlub na mbanc d'earnáil an oideachais trí Ghaeilge idir camánaibh idir an Roinn Oideachais agus Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta. Tá roinnt ceisteanna le freagairt ag baint leis an scéim sular féidir í a chur i bhfeidhm.

The implementation of the club-bank arrangement for the Irish-medium sector is a matter for discussion between the Department of Education and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta. Some issues need to be resolved before a scheme can be established, at which point the Department will draw on the integrated schools sector's experience of the club-bank scheme.

There is a question about what role a club bank will play when the new education and skills authority (ESA) is established and when local area-based planning is in force. The ESA should be able to identify the overall needs for an area and prepare investment proposals on that basis. Those arrangements still need to be finalised.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Is léir go bhfuil níos mó ceisteanna ná freagraí ann. There appear to be more questions than answers.

Does the Minister agree that her Department is responsible for providing accommodation that is fit for purpose? The Irish-medium sector's accommodation is significantly worse than that of any other sector and must be addressed urgently. Does she also agree that the club-bank scheme is an innovative attempt to get to grips with that accommodation crisis and that any further delay to its introduction penalises pupils in the Irish-medium sector? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Ruane: I agree that accommodation in many Irish-language schools is not fit for purpose. It is not the only sector that has accommodation that is not fit for purpose, but it is one of the most under-resourced sectors.

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, the Department and I have issues to discuss and I will take advice from Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta before making a decision on its concerns. If some Irish-medium schools almost qualify for a capital grant, the club bank may not provide the best value-for-money solution, and that is one of the issues for discussion.

My Department also needs to work with the Comhairle to identify schools for which the club-bank arrangement will provide a cost-effective solution. We also need to consider the issues that may arise with the establishment of the education and skills authority. Go raibh maith agat.

2.45 pm

Miss McIlveen: At a time when the Minister and her Department have slashed the school maintenance budgets and proposed the decimation of the Youth Service budget, which will affect tens of thousands of vulnerable

young people and volunteers, how can she justify pouring yet more money into a sector that caters for just a few hundred people and financing capital projects for schools with enrolments of as little as six pupils?

Ms Ruane: I noted Miss McIlveen's comments in the earlier debate, and I was disappointed by them. We should not be sectarian in our comments. Every time we talk about the Irish language, Miss McIlveen and some — but not all — of her party colleagues continue along that line. I absolutely reject the argument that my Department wastes money on the Irish language. Children who go through the Irish-medium system have the same rights as children who go through the English-medium system.

Mr S Wilson: They have more rights.

Ms Ruane: I ask Miss McIlveen and Mr Sammy Wilson not to interrupt. I ask Miss McIlveen to move with the times on the basis of respect. She has duties in relation to the Good Friday Agreement. One of those duties is to promote and respect Irish-medium education. If she does not wish to learn the language, that is entirely a matter for her. It is disappointing to see such a young woman having such a rant.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a thabhairt don Aire as a freagra.

What issues are being discussed between Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and the Department of Education about the establishment of a club bank scheme? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat to my colleague. We are discussing issues about all aspects of the Irish-language sector. A review into Irish-medium education is being conducted, which was recommended by George Bain. I took the entire review team to Connemara to see Irish being used as an everyday language in a Gaeltacht area and to discuss with our colleagues in the western Gaeltacht what lessons we can learn.

The club bank may not provide the best value for money for schools that are close to qualification for capital grants. We are setting up area-based planning, and I will produce proposals on that. The Irish language must now get fair play and equality of treatment in relation to other sectors, and that is something that we will examine. We also need to consider issues that may arise with the establishment of the education and skills authority.

Grammar School Admission

3. **Mr Burnside** asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to assist children from areas of social deprivation to gain admission to grammar schools if

academic selection for post-primary transfer is ended.
(AQO 1261/08)

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom córas a chur i bhfeidhm a chuideoidh le páistí ó cheantair atá faoi mhíbhuntáiste oideachas den scoth a fháil, is cuma cad é an scoil a bhfuil siad ag freastal uirthi — ní leis an oideachas sin a laghdú. Ba mhaith liom córas a bheith againn a thugann cothrom na Féinne do chách — rud nach bhfuil na socrúithe atá ann faoi láthair a chur ar fáil.

I want to put in place a system that will strengthen the possibility that children from areas of social deprivation will receive a high-quality education in whatever school they attend, not dilute it further. I want a system that gives everyone a fair chance regardless of background, and the current arrangements certainly do not do that.

The 2006 Audit Office report into literacy and numeracy standards in the North showed that, among our school leavers, 6,000 are at risk of having inadequate standards in literacy, and 7,000 have the same risk in numeracy every year. Those are substantial figures, and they are concentrated in our secondary schools.

Implicit in the question is an assumption that grammar schools currently admit a large number of children from areas of social disadvantage: if only that were the case. The indicator used for social deprivation shows that only 3% of some grammar schools have children on free school meals, while the average for all grammar schools is 7%.

In the non-selective sector, or secondary sector, the average is well over 20%. If grammar schools took a proportionate share of children who receive free school meals, it would be 18% of pupils.

I will quote from a report entitled ‘The Effects of the Selective System on Secondary Education in Northern Ireland’ by Tony Gallagher and Alan Smith:

“a selective system produces a disproportionate number of schools that combine low ability and social disadvantage in their enrolments.”

Many parents feel obliged to pay for out-of-school coaching. However, parents from socially-disadvantaged areas are less likely to pay for coaching, because of the cost, and because they expect local primary schools to provide adequate preparation. Therefore, the cost of coaching reinforces social disadvantage. In 2000, a study published by Peter Daly and Ian Shuttleworth of Queen’s University, Belfast showed that, although 84% of children from professional families attend grammar schools, only 13% of children with unemployed fathers do so. Those figures suggest that academic selection does not provide social mobility and is not good for working-class and disadvantaged communities. They suggest that the opposite is the case.

I am determined that, in every area, there will be high-quality schools that are open to all and ready to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum. My new school-improvement policy, ‘Every school a good school’, is designed to achieve that. There will be a clear focus on academic excellence as well as access to other pathways — including vocational options for those children who want to study professional and technical courses. I am determined that the new arrangements will be constructed to ensure equality for all, and will promote social inclusion.

Mr Burnside: The Minister of Education has maintained the same low standard that she achieved last year, since she became a Minister. If that is the standard of answer that the Minister gives to a sensible question, which asks how working-class children can — as they do at the present — get into our grammar schools, it is a pathetic performance.

There are two grammar schools in my constituency — Ballyclare High School and Antrim Grammar School. If there is a geographic postcode system, in which a three-mile barrier is a catchment area, how will working-class children in socially deprived areas outside that get the opportunity to go to those grammar schools? There was a time when Sinn Féin called itself a socialist party. The prospects of working-class children are being damaged, which is pathetic.

Ms Ruane: The Member is entitled to his opinion; I do not agree with it. I have given comprehensive answers on how the Assembly should deal with social disadvantage. I have said that my policy, ‘Every School a Good School’ will be advanced, and my Department will introduce policies on area-based planning. It is time to deal with the tale of disadvantage that children in the North of Ireland suffer from: according to the Northern Ireland Audit Office, more than 6,000 children a year do not receive sufficient support, and are not literate enough to get on the first rung of the ladder. We can play politics —

Mr S Wilson: She is the Minister.

Ms Ruane: I am the Minister, and I have introduced — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, order. The Minister has the Floor.

Ms Ruane: I have introduced proposals and some people do not like them. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ruane: I want to reach a consensus. However, make no mistake — those who continue to play politics with the issue must realise that change is happening, and will continue to happen, regardless. I ask people like Mr Sammy Wilson and Mr Burnside to join me in creating change, and to stop trying to block the change that is urgently needed.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire cad é mar a chinnteoidh sí go mbeidh na roghanna a dhéanfar in aois 14 bunaithe ar ábaltacht agus ar chumas agus nach mbeidh siad ag teacht leis an chúlra shóisialta agus eacnamaíoch de na daltaí agus nach mbeidh iontu ach aithris ar na torthaí is measa den scrúdú aistrithe?

How will the Minister ensure that pathways chosen by children aged 14 genuinely reflect ability and aptitude, rather than coinciding primarily with social and economic background and, consequently, reflecting the worst effects of academic selection, even after it is abolished?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. I thank my colleague for that question. I am bringing forward proposals that will ensure that children have access to a range of educational provision, and that their life and educational choices remain open for as long as possible. It seems that we have reached consensus that 14 is a better age at which to make those choices. Interestingly, it is difficult to find anyone who used to support the 11-plus, and I welcome that.

Grammar schools are not the only route available to bright disadvantaged children to get to university. The North provides greater access to university from less-privileged backgrounds despite the unfair selective system. I have visited different schools, and, in the past, I mentioned arrangements that operate in schools such as St Patrick's High School in Keady. For 25 years, the primary and post-primary schools got together, and the 11-plus system does not operate there. Members should look at the results from that school as well as those from Ashfield Girls' High School; Lagan College; Cookstown High School; and St Mark's High School, Warrenpoint. Those schools are doing tremendous work against the odds. There are many other secondary schools in the same situation; I have mentioned only some of them. Members must work together to ensure that the Assembly creates a system that benefits all children, and I look forward to working with Members in that regard.

Ms Lo: What steps is the Minister taking to reduce the significant social inequalities in outcomes for primary school children, which will remain a problem regardless of the change to the transfer procedure?

Ms Ruane: I thank Ms Lo for that important question. The Member will be aware that the Department of Education is in the midst of a debate on funding for early-years provision and the importance of early intervention. We will have a fairer system — there will be far less disruption and less distortion of the curriculum — when the 11-plus goes and the new arrangements are in place.

The revised curriculum was implemented in September 2007; it is bedding in. Teachers in many schools that I visited said that the revised curriculum is

a huge improvement, because children are learning in a more stimulating environment with good pedagogical — that is as difficult to say as the word “phenomenon” — efforts. The revised curriculum is an important part of the system, and we will see its benefits. The Education and Training Inspectorate is compiling reports on the revised curriculum, and I will ensure that Members get copies of any results.

Health Checks/Grief and Trauma Counselling in Schools

4. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Education, in light of the recent death of a primary year 2 pupil, what plans she has to introduce health checks in schools; and to confirm what facilities are in place to provide grief and trauma counselling for children within the schools system. (AQO 1348/08)

Some Members: Are we only on question number four?

Ms Ruane: If there were not so many interruptions, we would get through more questions. *[Interruption.]* I will proceed when Members stop interrupting me. This is an important question, and Members should be serious.

I am grateful to the Member for asking the question. It gives me the opportunity to express my sincere condolences to the family of the young child and the staff, pupils and parents at St Patrick's Primary School and the wider community. I spoke to the school principal to offer my support at this difficult time for the school and its community.

A teacher who is trained in Heartstart was with the child within one minute of his collapsing, and the ambulance arrived within five minutes of the call for it. The critical incident team from the Southern Education and Library Board was in the school the following day. I congratulate the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the board and the principal and staff of the school for their prompt and sensitive handling of the tragic situation. In such a tragic situation, it behoves all of us to respect the family's privacy in grief and that of the school.

Tá ról tábhachtach ag an scoil tacaíocht a thabhairt dá cuid scoláirí, agus dearbhaím go bhfuil an fhoireann teagmhais chriticiúil ó Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Deiscirt sa scoil go fóill.

The school has a key role to play in providing support for its pupils, and I confirm that the critical incident team from the Southern Education and Library Board remains in the school. They have already developed a support strategy and have been providing support for individual pupils and staff in the school. As part of that support, parents of all pupils

will be receiving a letter and a critical incident response team leaflet providing advice and guidance information, and individual pupils who need additional therapeutic support following the trauma will have been identified. You may be aware that the independent schools counselling service became fully operational in September 2007 and is also available.

3.00 pm

The Member asked what plans I have to introduce health checks. Routine health checks in schools are a matter for the school health service, and therefore decisions on their introduction lie with my colleague Mr McGimpsey. By law, schools are obliged to provide reasonable facilities for the school health service to carry out such checks, and all children have regular health checks, which are carried out from birth and through the pre-school years and school years. Those checks are carried out by the school health service within the context of the national child health surveillance programme, 'Health for all children'.

The Department of Education co-operates fully with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in planning new health checks and programmes for schools. Indeed, in direct response to the recent debate on heart screening, which was prompted by the recent tragic deaths of two of our young schoolchildren, my Department has been actively engaged with colleagues in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in planning a workshop on that issue. Officials from my Department have attended an initial planning meeting lead by the Chief Medical Officer to examine research evidence on heart screening. The group will include leading health experts, Departments, public-health bodies and sport and voluntary organisations.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Shannon for a supplementary question if he is very quick.

Mr Shannon: I have just realised that the Minister has taken almost 29 minutes to answer four questions.

We are all very aware of the horrendous death of the young child at the school, and many of my constituents who are worried parents have asked me about health checks. The Minister said that the responsibility for those checks lies with the Health Service. Will the Minister indicate what discussions she has had with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on that issue? Will she also tell the House whether grief and trauma counselling for children will be available for all children at short notice if the situation should occur again?

I have just finished before the 30 minutes is up.

Mr Speaker: The Minister has around three minutes to answer the supplementary question, although time is up.

Ms Ruane: My Department had discussions about health checks after the two young people died, and that is why I spoke about the workshop and how health screening is being looked at. Michael McGimpsey and I are working very closely on health and education matters because there is an overlap between those areas, but the issue is urgent and we are working with experts in the field and my officials are very active.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Unionist Attendance: Queen's University, Belfast

1. **Mr Burnside** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to encourage more students from a unionist background to attend Queen's University, Belfast. (AQO 1262/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): Queen's University is designated under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and, therefore, when carrying out its functions, it must have due regard for the need to promote equality of opportunity between persons of different religious beliefs or political opinions. It must also have regard for the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious beliefs or political opinions.

The university, like other higher education institutions, is an autonomous body, legally independent of Government and completely responsible for its own policies and procedures.

Mr Burnside: I thank the Minister for his answer.

The sooner that we get rid of the Minister of Education and combine those two Departments and put them in the charge of a responsible Minister, the better it will be for the House.

Will the Minister give us a statistical breakdown of the religious headcount at Queen's University and at the University of Ulster, although I know that that will not completely correlate with political views; and will he tell us what the trends are? In my view, the trend in Queen's University in recent years has been moving in the right direction going by the last figures that I looked at, which were at the beginning of 2001, when the Catholic student population was about 58%. However, the University of Ulster gives me some concern.

Will the Minister enlighten the House on the current numbers and on what action he can take with the two university authorities to ensure that there is some degree of balance, especially after the chill factor that Queen's University had during the worst of the

Troubles? I believe that there are now some problems at the University of Ulster.

Sir Reg Empey: There has been a perception of a chill factor and perceptions matter in determining where people study. However, there is no definitive evidence as to the scale of the chill factor. Data are not collected on the political affiliation of Northern Ireland students, nor, indeed, should they ever be; data on religion are poor and do not always allow for reliable conclusions. Nevertheless, data are collected by the university on religion. However, 29% of students at Queen's University and 25% of students at the University of Ulster choose to exercise their right not to declare their religious affiliation.

Statistics for the academic year 2005-06 at Queen's University showed the religious composition at enrolment as 31% Protestant, 36% Roman Catholic, 5% stated their religion as "other", and 29% refused to comment. In the same year, the student population at the University of Ulster was 29% Protestant, 44% Roman Catholic, 2% "other", and 25% of its students chose not to respond.

We believe that both universities are conscious of their social responsibilities in this matter, and we encourage them to ensure a welcoming environment for students of all religious beliefs and none. We are moving in that direction, although some local issues remain to be resolved. However, that is the present position.

Mr Lunn: Does the Minister agree that sectarianism is one of the factors that puts local students off staying in Northern Ireland? Does he agree that this kind of question is a good example of what makes so many young people leave, and will he outline what steps he intends to take to combat sectarianism?

Sir Reg Empey: There were significant issues pertaining to students leaving during the worst of the Troubles, and it is a sad fact that about a quarter of our students choose to study outside Northern Ireland. However, that in itself is not necessarily a bad thing, provided that people gain experience and can come back. Some students who study here leave to go elsewhere and that circulation continues. Nevertheless, I regret that it happens on such a scale.

The quality of the teaching, the success of the universities in getting research ratings, and the subjects available to be taught are probably more to the fore in determining where a student chooses to study. One must also remember that social issues are involved. For example, if a student lives in the greater Belfast area and wants to go to Queen's University, does that represent going away to university?

The honourable Member must be aware that he and his colleagues are drawing these matters to the attention of the general public virtually every day of the week.

There is inevitably a run-off effect, and I urge him to use caution when pursuing that policy.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. A similar question was asked at the Committee for Employment and Learning. It was thought that there was a problem at Magee College in Derry, when in fact there was no evidence to suggest that there was any chill factor. Will the Minister clarify whether the chancellor or vice-chancellor of Queen's University or the University of Ulster raised the issue with him or has he discussed any chill factor with them? It is regrettable that we are focusing on the religious background of students at Queen's University rather than on their achievements and how we can get more students attending university.

Sir Reg Empey: I want to focus on the universities' achievements. I have been asked several questions in the past few months — most of them written — on those issues from a wide variety of Members.

I have answered those questions and made it clear that, in order to better inform policy in that area, we have commissioned research into the decision-making processes used by students. In other words, we are asking them about the steps that they take when making up their minds about where to study. It is better to go to the people who are making those decisions in order to gather accurate information. I hope to have the results from that research in the next couple of months, and, in light of the interest that has been shown by several Members on this matter, I will be happy to share that information. We must ask the people who make the decisions, and that will better inform us about the direction in which we should go and the policies that we should pursue.

Employment Services Board

2. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action he is taking to support the work of the Employment Services Board for West Belfast and the Greater Shankill area. (AQO 1400/08)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department is funding the Employment Services Board for West Belfast and the Greater Shankill area in order to help in the operation of a Belfast-wide stakeholder forum for the Department's local employment intermediary service initiative, which offers a community-based employment service for the most severely disadvantaged areas. Officials are also actively involved in several of the board's employability subgroups.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tugaim buíochas don Aire.

I thank the Minister for that brief answer to my question. In a previous incarnation, during the first

power-sharing Executive, the Minister endorsed the 'Report of the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Task Forces', from which the Employment and Services Board emerged.

Does the Minister agree that the full implementation of the task forces' recommendations must be a priority for the Executive, and that the Employment Services Board, which includes representatives from the Shankill part of my constituency, is generating new thinking on policy and effective interventions for a spectrum of marginalised groups, including Travellers, lone parents, political ex-prisoners, and people with disabilities. Consequently, will he confirm that the Employment Services Board's funding, which is required if it is to continue beyond March 2008 — and which will ensure the sustainability of the pioneering work that is under way in the area of the greatest social need — will be secured by his Department? Go raibh maith agat.

Sir Reg Empey: I concur that that board does, and has done, a good job. The Executive have set growing the economy and associated matters as priorities in the draft Programme for Government. However, the Department has moved away from core funding for such organisations, and has sought tenders from people who will deliver services on behalf of the Department in particular local areas.

Having said that, I recently met the chairperson and a delegation from that board, and I am awaiting a paper from them about some matters pertaining to work that they have been undertaking over the past couple of years. When I receive that paper, I will consider the available options; however, today, I am in no position to offer guarantees about its future funding, other than to say that the Department's methodology has changed. I firmly acknowledge the work of that board, and I look forward to receiving its paper as soon as possible. Apparently, there were some hiccups over the holiday period, but I have been promised the paper within a few days.

Mr K Robinson: I accept what the Minister said about moving towards a tendering process, but does he agree that his Department must treat all voluntary and community organisations, or training providers, consistently and equally? In other words, it would be wrong to provide core funding for some bodies, while others do not receive any.

Sir Reg Empey: I thank the Member for his question. He has outlined the obvious difficulty. We are in a transition period, and several Members have written to or approached me about several organisations that are being core funded, or whose core-funding contracts are coming to a close.

Instead of spending the Department's money on paying rent, rates, heating, lighting and staff costs, we have tried to reach the point at which we are paying for

actual delivery of service. Several bodies that do not get core funding have approached my Department.

3.15 pm

The flip side of the question that the Member for West Belfast Mr Paul Maskey asked is that those bodies are asking whether the Department is operating a closed shop and why it is not giving all groups an opportunity to see whether they are capable of contributing. That is why the policy has taken that particular direction.

Equally, organisations have work ongoing, and I am anxious to ensure that, while we are examining such matters, we do not throw the baby out with the bath water and lose the money that we have already invested in work that we have commissioned. All those matters must be considered. However, the pattern is now well established, and, given the background and the fact that groups are demanding access to opportunities, we must pursue that policy in consultation with the Department of Finance and Personnel's procurement branch, which usually spearheads competitions for us.

As I have said, the policy does not diminish the efforts that other groups have made or their successes.

Mr Attwood: As the Minister will be aware, the task force said that it was very important to protect those who provide training and employment in west Belfast. The Minister will agree that one such organisation that does so is USEL — Ulster Supported Employment Ltd — which the Minister has visited in the upper Shankill.

I have two questions for the Minister about USEL. First, will he intervene in order to enable it to receive funding from Invest NI for marketing and other requirements? As a non-departmental public body, it faces the problem of not being entitled to dual funding.

Secondly, will he use his good offices to accelerate an economic business appraisal that is ongoing for proposed new accommodation for USEL in the upper Shankill? That proposal includes a land swap, where there are some technical and other difficulties. I urge the Minister to intervene and to consider how an organisation such as USEL can access funding, including that from Invest NI, in order to achieve the task force's recommendations of enhancing and extending the providers of employment and training, particularly in the upper Shankill.

Sir Reg Empey: The question that the Member asked is somewhat distant from that on the list of questions for oral answer, but I am happy to respond to him. He asked that question with some aplomb, as what he said was well away from the original question. As the Member said, I visited USEL's premises; I have had a discussion with its chairman and the board of directors; and I have had a tour of the shop floor. I was exceptionally impressed with the work that is being

done there and with the attempts being made to market skills and make them commercial. I am aware of the issues concerning Invest NI and accommodation, to which Member referred.

I am not Wikipedia, and, therefore, the Member must excuse me for not having every fact at my disposal. I am happy, however, to write to him with the details. USEL's status is a major hurdle as far as Invest NI is concerned. I am not sure that that matter can be resolved. The accommodation issue is slightly more complicated, but I will apprise the Member as soon as possible.

Seagate Technology

3. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline what plans he has to assist those affected in the north-west by the impending closure of Seagate. (AQO 1409/08)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department, in partnership with the Social Security Agency and other organisations, will provide advice on employment, education and training opportunities, job search, careers and benefits. A training-needs analysis is being carried out by North West Regional College to determine the level of reskilling required to prepare workers to apply for other job opportunities. Training provision will be made as appropriate. I am meeting the employees' forum and Seagate management on 23 January to discuss further how the Department can assist the company and integrate with its outplacement programme.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he guarantee that any plans that he has will be implemented as a joint approach that involves the local council and that ensures that the needs of the people of the north-west are addressed?

Sir Reg Empey: I confirm that my office remains in close contact with Limavady Borough Council. It is my intention to meet with the mayor and deputy mayor of the council on 23 January 2008. We will also meet with other people in the district, including the president of the Roe Valley Chamber of Trade and Commerce, the employees' forum, and, as I have indicated, Seagate Technology Ltd.

I want an office to be established on the premises so that we can work with the individual employees while they are at work. However, the agreement of the company is required before that can happen. So far, it has agreed to the training-needs analysis, which started last week. Representatives from the North West Regional College will interview every employee for approximately 30 minutes to assess their individual ability profile, what they might need, what help we can give them, and what training is appropriate.

Whether we can get any of that started before production ends is a matter for the company, which is focused on its production schedules. If the company is prepared to be flexible, we can start work immediately. However, that is a matter for negotiation with the company.

I look forward to meeting with the representatives of the employees' forum on 23 January 2008. That should give us at least some sense of how the issues are progressing. I assure the Member that I will continue to keep Limavady Borough Council fully informed.

Mr Dallat: I congratulate the Minister on his initiative. I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the Educational Guidance Service for Adults, which has done tremendous work in the north-west, particularly in Magilligan Prison.

Does the Minister agree that the best way of co-ordinating all the plans is to agree to a special economic task force that would involve not just the councils, but regeneration groups, community groups and the chambers of commerce?

Sir Reg Empey: I will certainly bring that suggestion to the attention of my colleague the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. We are, of course, working closely with the Social Security Agency. All our organisations, including Invest NI, are working closely on this issue. Obviously, one always has to consider whether any value would be added by setting up such a task force. Indeed, we have established task forces in the past in certain circumstances.

It is undoubtedly the case that the north-west has been hit with a series of hard blows in the past few months, the impact of which will roll out this year. Therefore, I am open to discussion on the matter. However, we must be satisfied that such a task force would bring something to the table that is not already there.

I am not aware of any such scheme at the moment, but I will certainly draw the matter to the attention of Minister Dodds and assess whether there is anything that we can do together. As I have said, I will meet with the president of the Roe Valley Chamber of Trade and Commerce during my visit to Limavady next week.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for his response to the original question, and I welcome news of his visit to the Limavady area later this month. Will the Minister advise the House of the track record of DEL in dealing with large-scale redundancies in the north-west?

Sir Reg Empey: Basically, a mechanism to deal with such issues exists. DEL does not operate unilaterally; it operates in conjunction with other agencies. We have close links with Invest NI, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and the Social Security Agency. Once we become aware of a problem with a company, we start to work together immediately.

Obviously, one of the biggest redundancy cases that we have had to deal with recently has involved former members of the Royal Irish Regiment, a number of whom were based in that particular area.

That was the largest redundancy caseload that we have had to take on in the short term. Most Members who have been through that will be aware that we have dealt with many thousands of people, quite a number of whom live in that area. I am confident that the system, if it is allowed to work, will work. However, it requires the co-operation of employers. Where there is co-operation, the system will work effectively. If it runs into difficulties, it will be less effective, but I do not anticipate any such difficulties in the Seagate situation. I am optimistic that, as a result of our work with the company and local interests, we will be able to do a good job on behalf of the employees, who are the key players.

Higher Education Strategy

4. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the time frame for development and implementation of a higher education strategy.

(AQO 1408/08)

Sir Reg Empey: Development of a higher education strategy is at an early stage. I am in the process of determining appropriate mechanisms for the development of the strategy, and a full public consultation will form part of that development. It is my intention that the strategy will be complete by the academic year 2009-10.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for his response. Skills are clearly a major priority for the Executive. One of the key lessons of the Varney Report — which was a most disappointing report overall — was the example of the South of Ireland. The Government there took a decision to match the skills of people coming out of universities to the needs of investors. Will that approach be considered for Northern Ireland?

In view of the 300 additional PhD places mentioned in the Programme for Government, I ask the Minister to comment on the concerns raised by the Employment and Learning Committee and many others at the lack of funding in the draft Budget to match those 300 places.

Sir Reg Empey: Members are being inventive today in how they get things in.

I share the Member's view on the requirement for skills. The first conclusion that one encounters in the Varney Report is that that is a critical factor. There is no doubt that, before the Celtic tiger emerged, a decision had been taken to go for professional and technical education, or vocational education using technical colleges, in the Republic. That provided a

pool of labour that was the genesis of the economic growth that took place there.

Grant regimes are coming to a close and we cannot buy in investment any more. Companies will only come here if there is a pool of capable people willing to work. The Varney Review has now morphed into Varney II, and that presents an opportunity to make suggestions. The Executive are looking at this, but I hope that the Minister of Finance and Personnel, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I can combine to work up specific proposals to put before Varney II.

With respect to the 300 PhDs, the Member leads me into responses on the Budget. He knows that that is one of our top priorities. As the Member for South Belfast and Deputy Chairman of the Committee Mr Spratt knows, we have the full support of the Committee on this issue. If we are unable to take a relatively basic step such as that, we will be struggling. We have made the point firmly to the Department of Finance and Personnel, and I hope that the settlement, when it emerges, will be sufficient to allow me to deliver that target, which has received virtually universal support from Members.

Mr A Maginness: The Minister has referred to the higher education strategy's being complete by 2009-10. However, an essential basis for that strategy must be the attraction of people from the broadest range within society. A recent media report indicated that the Russell Group of universities, of which Queen's is one, considers that student fees should double to £6,000.

Has the Minister had any confirmation of that or had any discussions with representatives from Queen's University on the matter? That would adversely affect people's ability to go to university, particularly to Queen's.

3.30 pm

Sir Reg Empey: I wonder whether Question Time should be dispensed with and replaced with a weekly free-for-all.

The Member has raised a pertinent point. At present, there is a higher education strategy. However, for the sake of expediency, it is being reviewed, amended and updated in the light of recent developments. I welcome the fact that Queen's University is now part of the Russell Group, of which 20 universities are members. Universities are invited to join the group, so it is an achievement.

I have not run away from the matter of fees: I will return to that issue in a moment. Northern Ireland has the best record in the UK of attracting students from disadvantaged economic backgrounds to universities. Its participation rate is almost 48%. The rate of participation by people from disadvantaged economic

backgrounds is significant and far higher than that of any other region.

I urge Members to be cautious about last week's reports. All statistics must be examined carefully. Certain figures that appeared last week could easily misdirect Members. I promised the House that a full review of student fees would be carried out in the next academic year and that it would be an open and transparent process. That work has already started. It will be open to Members to examine and make their own judgements.

I have not been advised of such a proposal about fees. Nobody has indicated to me that that is the direction in which Queen's University is going. If that is a proposal, it will have to go into the mix during the review. I understand that fees are already a matter of considerable concern to Members, and doubling those fees would be a matter of exceptional significance. Therefore, I suggest that the Assembly awaits further details. I accept the Member's point that the doubling of fees would be an extremely significant development.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Seagate Technology/Hüco

1. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what meetings his Department has had with local councils in Limavady and Coleraine to discuss the job crisis arising out of the pay-offs at Seagate Technology and Hüco.
(AQO 1415/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): Along with senior officials from Invest Northern Ireland, I met local council representatives at the time of the initial Seagate announcement in October 2007. Since then, Invest Northern Ireland has had numerous meetings with both companies. However, engagement with stakeholders is somewhat constrained because of the statutory consultation process that is due to conclude at the end of January 2008. Nevertheless, Invest Northern Ireland has also facilitated company contact with the Department for Employment and Learning. A Seagate training needs analysis is currently in hand, the outcome of which will be crucial to inform next steps.

On a more general level, the House will be aware that Invest Northern Ireland maintains regular contact with local councils on economic matters. I am confident that specific issues that relate to Seagate and Hüco will be dealt with appropriately outside the constraints of the consultation process. The companies will then be

better placed to confirm effective closure dates and to discuss matters such as employee access to various support, advice and guidance services, as well as broader issues such as the fate of the sites and factories.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the Minister's response. Is he aware that, because of operational difficulties in Malaysia, there may be a delay in the transfer of the plant — about which, I must say, I am not a bit sorry? Does the Minister support the setting up of a special economic task force, as has been favoured by Limavady Borough Council and Coleraine Borough Council in recent motions that were passed unanimously?

Mr Dodds: I am grateful for the honourable Member's comments. I entirely understand his views on the possible impact of news from Malaysia.

The Assembly debated the question of a task force on 19 November 2007; the Member spoke in the debate. The Assembly took the view that a co-ordinated strategy should be agreed to assist Seagate Technology's workers back into employment. That work is continuing.

The Member will also be aware, when he talks about task forces, that the north-west action plan has brought various players together over the past four years. Indeed, we are now in phase 2. Such co-ordinated action, which was endorsed by the Assembly, is behind the Member's call and it is what we see in the north-west action plan. Nevertheless, I am always open to further suggestions about what can be done to help the north-west. I will do all that I can to ensure the implementation of the action plan and of specific measures that will help the north-west to get over what has happened there recently.

Mr Campbell: The Minister outlined the actions that he and his officials have undertaken with regard to Seagate Technology and Hüco Lightronic (NI) Ltd. Are there any openings that the Minister can report on either of the sites that will shortly become vacant? Does he have additional information to assist the workers to gain productive employment for the long term?

Mr Dodds: I am grateful to the Member for his question. The use of the sites came up in discussions when the closures were first announced. The Member will be aware that both companies own their respective properties and sites under a 999 lease. Therefore each company is free to dispose of its facilities on the open market. Invest Northern Ireland's property services branch is well aware of that and will promote the facilities. An independent valuation of the Seagate site has been undertaken, and a report is due in the coming weeks.

Through Invest Northern Ireland we have initiated an assessment of the site and the factory with a view to identifying possible industrial uses and targeting relevant companies. An enormous amount of co-ordinated work is being done between Invest Northern Ireland, the

Department for Employment and Learning, the Social Security Agency and other bodies. I reiterate the commitment that I made to the House in November: we are focusing strongly on the north-west, particularly because of the blows that it has received recently. Invest Northern Ireland is acutely conscious of the needs of that area. We continue to work hard to promote the north-west — particularly in light of recent events — as well as other areas.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. We are all aware of the historic neglect of the north-west. It is time to stop the hand-wringing and the sending of condolences to the workers and the population of the north-west. Has the Minister had a serious meeting with the Roe Valley Chamber of Trade and Commerce? What are his plans to attract sustainable jobs to the north-west? To what extent is he prepared to help those in the north-west who are willing to put their money where their mouth is?

Mr Dodds: What was said at a previous Question Time and what I have said today shows that much is being done. We are in regular contact with Seagate Technology, and we have pressed the Department for Employment and Learning for early intervention. We have worked to ensure that the Department for Employment and Learning has been able to access the employees' forum and that there is access to workforce training.

We have also facilitated, through Invest Northern Ireland, a meeting between Seagate, the Department for Employment and Learning and Michelin to discuss the lessons that could be learned from the task force that was set up after an earlier withdrawal of multinationals. We are following up on sites and clawback. We are also working with stakeholders to find out what can be done to ensure that those workers get back into work and also to provide new work opportunities for the north-west.

All that work is continuing in a co-ordinated fashion, and we will continue to work at it. There are no quick fixes, but I am very confident that, as we put our resources and energy into this matter, we will be able to achieve results. I will certainly talk to people in the north-west about those specific issues very shortly. We will also continue with other work that we are doing, and I hope that I will be able to elaborate on that in due course.

Grants to Inward Investors: Monetary Protection

2. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the monetary protection available to Invest NI in awarding grants to inward investors. (AQO 1435/08)

Mr Dodds: Invest Northern Ireland is committed to maintaining the highest standards of corporate governance and accountability in the award of Government grants to all of its clients, including inward investors. The agency has in place rigorous systems and controls. Projects are carefully scoped to ensure that they are in line with Invest Northern Ireland, departmental and broader UK economic priorities. Business plans are subject to comprehensive independent appraisals that assess the viability of the project and the net economic benefit that will accrue, both to Northern Ireland and to the United Kingdom as a whole.

In addition, Invest Northern Ireland carefully assesses the need for financial support and identifies the minimum amount of public funds necessary to secure the project for Northern Ireland. Furthermore, all grant support must receive formal approval, typically from Invest Northern Ireland's executive board, and also at ministerial level. Support for very large projects, where the assistance exceeds £10 million, requires the approval of the Department of Finance and Personnel.

In addition, clients who are offered grant support must enter into a binding legal agreement with Invest Northern Ireland. Those agreements specify the conditions associated with the grants, the expenditure against which grants will be paid and the circumstances in which companies will be deemed to be in default of the legal agreements and, consequently, subject to clawback. It is also important to stress that grants that are offered are paid only when the companies have either incurred eligible expenditure — for example, in the case of capital grants — or when Invest Northern Ireland is satisfied that they have achieved agreed milestones, such as employment levels.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer.

The Programme for Government implies that foreign direct investment (FDI) will continue to be attracted to Northern Ireland through selective financial assistance. Does the Minister recognise the limitations and risks involved in such an approach, including the risk of dead money, particularly after the period of a legal agreement is up? It also limits the range of possible industries that will come to Northern Ireland, in that the jobs tend to be low rather than high added value.

Mr Dodds: If I have understood the Member correctly, he seems to be questioning the rationale behind the emphasis on FDI in the Programme for Government and the comprehensive spending review.

Dr Farry: My question was about selective financial assistance.

Mr Dodds: Selective financial assistance is an instrument that helps to attract FDI.

I have heard those arguments before, but, as far as I am concerned, as with every major economy and regional economy, everyone is keen to attract foreign direct investment of the right quality. It is absolutely essential that we in Northern Ireland focus on that. That is why we have included in the Programme for Government the very stretching target that 85% or more of all the new FDI that comes into Northern Ireland must pay wages above the private-sector median. We do not want to continue to bring in jobs that are all low-paying, although there will, at times, be opportunities to bring in jobs that are in and around the private-sector median. Also, 2,750 of the jobs that we intend to bring in over the next three years under FDI will pay 25% above the private-sector median. We are very conscious of the need to close the gap in productivity and attract higher-value jobs. That is why the Programme for Government sets out the targets that it does in the way that it does.

However, Members must realise that not all our eggs are in the one basket. It is not a question of supporting FDI and nothing else. The figures clearly show that FDI is important, but so also is growing our indigenous local companies to become more export-oriented and growing the economy in that way — that is why targets are included for such companies, too.

3.45 pm

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I listened carefully to the Minister's response to the Member for North Down Dr Farry. In light of that, I wish to raise a particular case. The Minister will be aware that in February 2006, Trivirix, a US-based high-tech company, pulled out of the Springvale site in West Belfast with the loss of 119 jobs, just after it had received £4 million from Invest NI. That was a devastating blow to the workers, the constituency and the local economy.

In 2005, Trivirix had an annual revenue of \$51.5 million. It was in the top 100 fastest-growing companies in the USA. After it went into administration, I was among those who raised serious concerns about the apparent inability of Invest NI to account for the manner in which all the money it had given to Trivirix was spent. More importantly, a year later — and this is interesting — the company claimed that 2006 was a successful year. It boasted of positive growth, a major expansion in the US in 2007 —

Mr Speaker: The Member must ask his supplementary question.

Mr Adams: What efforts were made by Invest NI to recover any of the money that was handed to Trivirix? Do we know how that money was spent? Can we account for that £4 million of public money?

Mr Dodds: I am well aware of that issue, although, as the Member has indicated, the dates show that those

events happened under direct rule. The issues of clawback remain, however, and I have no doubt that he will be in the Chamber next week when those matters are debated at greater length. Invest Northern Ireland has implemented full recovery procedures to claw back all public moneys owed. Invest Northern Ireland remains in regular contact with the joint administrators, who continue to review creditor control and who have indicated their intention to pay a dividend to creditors in the coming months. I have agreed, in response to previous questions from other Members for West Belfast, to keep the House fully informed about the recovery of public funds in that case. That is very much work in progress.

Mr Hamilton: What is the total amount of financial assistance that has been offered in support of inward investment since the inception of Invest Northern Ireland several years ago?

Mr Dodds: The Member has put the issue of clawback in context: fortunately, it does not often arise. It is important that we pursue clawback when it is necessary, prudent and effective to do so. As I recall, more than £210 million in assistance has been given by Invest Northern Ireland since its formation to companies involved in inward investment projects. Many dozens of companies have received assistance — well over 150 in total — all of which have had a major impact on employment, investment and salaries paid in Northern Ireland.

St Columb's Cathedral/First Derry and Claremont Presbyterian Church

3. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress was being made on the refurbishment and restoration of St Columb's Cathedral and First Derry and Claremont Presbyterian Church in the context of the tourism offering of Derry/Londonderry. (AQO 1298/08)

Mr Dodds: Both St Columb's Cathedral and the First Derry and Claremont Presbyterian Church are key elements of the history of the city of Londonderry and are extremely important to tourism in that city. The projects are vital parts of the built-heritage programme, which is administered by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board as part of the Walled City signature initiative. Funding has been secured through the integrated development fund, and I am eager to ensure the full implementation of those extensive renovation and restoration projects.

The costs for the First Derry Presbyterian Church project have been finalised. The Tourist Board has approved funding of £690,000 for the project and continues to work closely with the project promoters to seek to address the shortfall in the overall funding

available to take the project forward. The target is to have contractors on site by late spring. In addition to the funding secured through the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, the St Columb's Cathedral project has recently applied to the Environment and Heritage Service to secure additional support for its planned renovation works. As I understand it, the St Columb's Cathedral project also intends to submit an application to the Heritage Lottery Fund, for which an in-principle decision on its level of support is likely to be made by September 2008.

The Tourist Board is working in close co-operation with the cathedral to help secure the funding package that will be necessary to take this important project forward.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that we will soon be marking the 400th anniversary of the plantation of Ulster, in which the city of Londonderry played such a pivotal role, will the Minister update Members on the progress of the Walled City of Londonderry signature project? That project is of great cultural importance to the remaining unionist population of Londonderry, as was highlighted by last week's BBC programme, 'Exodus'.

Mr Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. He referred to the recent television programme, which I thought was a significant one. He is right to point to the significance of the anniversary of the plantation and the Walled City of Londonderry project, which is one of five signature projects being undertaken to improve the tourism product across Northern Ireland. Along with other Members, he will also be aware that phase one of the project has already received £4.6 million of funding from a variety of sources. That money has been allocated to the refurbishment of the Tower Museum, the fitting out of the 'Armada in Ireland' exhibition and the wider story of the city. A visitor orientation programme has also been implemented.

Recently, I had an opportunity to see some of the work that has taken place as a result of the signature project and the investment that has been put in. It is an important and extremely good example of what can be done to build up the tourism product in the city when money is used well. I commend everyone who has been involved, including the council and all the other stakeholders, as they have played an immense part. Funding has now been secured to implement phase two of the signature project, which will entail the implementation of a lighting scheme, the built heritage programme and a business and cultural animation programme.

Mr P Ramsey: Mr Speaker, as a Member for Foyle you will be only too familiar with the subject. I welcome the Minister's comments; it is clear that he has been to the city. The built heritage programme sought to address the inability of congregations and

community groups to create match funding. Those projects, alongside the Apprentice Boys memorial hall and St Columba's school at Long Tower church, Aras Colmcille, are part of the same signature project. Will the Minister accept that those two projects will lead to the story of Derry being told through the Walled City project, leading to the bid, which is being prepared, for world heritage status?

Under the built heritage programme, the money that has been allocated for phase two will not stretch to meet all of the projects. I accept that First Derry and Claremont Presbyterian Church has done tremendous work, but its bids were underestimated and there is a shortfall of £500,000. It would be a crying shame if that project did not go ahead. Together with my colleague Mr Robinson, I appeal to the Minister to recognise that part of the Walled City project is about telling the story and leaving a legacy of the plantation of Ulster. However, it is important that all of the projects that are part of the signature project are developed holistically as part of one package.

Mr Dodds: I am grateful to the Member for his comments. I met representatives of the cathedral and the council at Stormont, and I was impressed with the case that they put. The Member is right to mention the importance of the built heritage programme and the contribution that it can make. The programme has identified six of the most important historical buildings located within the walled city, including St Columb's Cathedral, the Playhouse, the Apprentice Boys museum, the Guildhall and Long Tower church. I reiterate that I want those projects to come to fruition. The Department will work with people to secure the necessary funding. As the Member knows, we must ensure that we get the best out of whatever funding opportunities are there. I am well aware of the tremendous opportunities that exist if the projects can be brought to fruition.

Financial Services Sector

4. **Mr Burnside** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions he has had with HM Treasury in relation to financial and tax incentives for the financial services sector in Belfast.
(AQO 1263/08)

Mr Dodds: I have had no direct contact with Her Majesty's Treasury on the subject of tax incentives. As the Member knows, the Executive liaise with the Treasury through the Minister of Finance and Personnel. However, my discussions with my colleague the Finance Minister on a range of strategic tax issues are regular and ongoing. Furthermore, in the context of the next phase of the Varney Review, I will continue to work with him to ensure that we secure the best possible outcome for our economy.

Mr Burnside: The Minister will acknowledge that, over the past 20 years since the big bang in the city of London, there has been tremendous centralisation of financial services such as merchant banking, investment banking, private equity and even hedge funds. Stockbroking in the great cities and the provincial centres of the United Kingdom has declined and been centralised. It benefits the whole UK, but it is based in London.

The Minister and I will have no admiration for the former Fianna Fáil crook who was Prime Minister, Charlie Haughey. However, during his term of office, Charlie Haughey produced a package to create a financial services sector in Dublin. Are any other cities doing that? In the United Kingdom, Edinburgh is an exception in that it has its own financial centre. In trying to recreate a financial services sector in Belfast — and its financial services sector is much smaller than it was 20 years ago — is there anything to be learned from the incentives that were used in Dublin or Edinburgh?

Mr Dodds: I am grateful to the Member for his question on financial services, which is a crucial sector for foreign direct investment. Despite the credit crunch and the gloomy news from the financial services sectors in the United States and elsewhere, compared with the rest of the UK, Northern Ireland remains under-represented in employment and investment in financial services.

I am glad that the Member identified the particular crook, because I thought he was about to paint everyone with the same brush. He is correct in saying that the Irish Republic placed an emphasis on financial services. The sector presents a great opportunity to Northern Ireland, not least because of the skills of many of the young people who attend its tremendous universities and because of its fine education system.

Northern Ireland has enjoyed recent successes in the financial services sector, not least of which was that Citi, one of the world's leading financial institutions, created 700 jobs in Belfast. More recently, in July 2007 the securities services section of the Bank of Ireland, a bank that is based in Dublin, announced the creation of almost 150 high-wage jobs in Northern Ireland.

There is an opportunity to consider the situation and to recognise that the Irish Republic, for example, does not have the same supply of skilled workers in the financial sector as it had previously, and Northern Ireland could take advantage of that. I am focused on the financial services sector, and I would be grateful if the Member would liaise with me on that subject.

Mr Durkan: In an earlier answer, the Minister spoke about how some issues may be progressed in the second Varney review. Was Varney 2 simply volunteered by Sir David Varney and his team to carry out a further review or were Ministers consulted and did they agree

to it in advance? Given that the first Varney Review shut the door on a reduction in corporation tax, does the Minister hope that other tax windows will be opened by the second review? Many fear that it will turn into an exercise whereby the Treasury marks devolution's homework.

Mr Dodds: If that were either the purpose or the outcome of a further review, no one would accept it. It is not the job of the Treasury or anyone else to mark the Assembly's homework. A second Varney review was agreed following discussions between the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Treasury. As I said earlier, that Department takes the lead in the relationship between the Executive, the Assembly and the Treasury. As the Member knows, the work will include an assessment of the extent to which tax incentives might contribute to improved economic performance. Tax incentives are a reserved matter and, therefore, it cannot be a question of those involved in the second review simply examining the work of the Assembly. Our work on investment, innovation, skills enterprise and infrastructure is important.

That is all important. We have clearly set out our priorities in that area. We recognise what needs to be done; however, we seek something on which only the Treasury can help. The terms of reference for Varney mark II indicate that it is not simply a matter of telling the Assembly or the Executive what it needs to do: it is a two-way process.

4.00 pm

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister has said that the mechanism for lobbying the British Treasury is through the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Will the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment speak directly to that Minister about financial and tax incentives or compensatory arrangements for petrol retailers in border areas? That is a different sector, but a very relevant one. In my constituency of West Tyrone, businesses in Castlederg, Strabane, Clady and other towns along the border have been disadvantaged by the proximity of similar retailers just across the border where prices tend to be lower.

Mr Dodds: Again, that supplementary question strays a long way from the original question, but I am sure that the Minister of Finance will have heard what has been said. There are a number of issues there, not least that of illegal and fraudulent trade in fuels, which has been highlighted recently. All of us want to do what we can to support the Health and Safety Executive, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the Police Service in cracking down on that trade and in providing any information that will lead to the apprehension of those involved. I am sure that the Minister of Finance will have heard what the Member has said about tax incentives and other fiscal issues.

Ulster-Scots/Scotch-Irish Heritage

5. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the level of representation of Ulster-Scots/Scotch-Irish heritage in the promotional material produced by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland.

(AQO 1338/08)

Mr Dodds: Ulster-Scots heritage and culture is integral to the story of Northern Ireland. I am, therefore, encouraged that the profile of the Ulster-Scots and Scotch-Irish heritage is gaining increasing recognition in the promotional material produced by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland. However, there are further opportunities for improvement in that important area.

I am also encouraged that the Tourist Board and the Ulster-Scots Agency will focus on developing the definitive Ulster-Scots trail — a tangible product that visitors can explore on their own, or as part of an organised tour. The agency has agreed to take the lead on that, and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board will support them with marketing expertise.

Furthermore, I am pleased that the chairman of the Ulster-Scots Agency is also involved in a major branding review, recently conducted by Tourism Ireland. The review indicated, among other things, a desire among potential holidaymakers to experience a greater diversity of culture and things to do and see in Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: Order. That ends questions to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr S Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On the list of questions for oral answer, there were 20 hopefuls for each of the three Ministers. Apart from the last session — and then it was only barely — we never got past question 4 on any of the lists. That makes the list of questions for oral answer a fictional publication, because Members do not get an opportunity to ask their questions. In one case, it took the Minister seven minutes to respond to a question and a supplementary. Surely there is an obligation on you, Mr Speaker, not only to cut questioners short, but to demand some rigour from Ministers to prevent what many see as cynical time wasting to avoid questions further down the list.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. I assure him and all sides of the House that the matter has concentrated the minds of the Business Committee and me. I have reminded Members on a number of occasions to make their supplementaries brief, but that seems to be impossible for some. I have also told Members that their supplementaries must relate to the original question. Some Members were far off the mark from the original question.

Mr Durkan: It was the same with the answers.

Mr Speaker: I am coming to that. In future, if Members' supplementaries do not relate to the original questions, they may not be allowed to ask them. We are keeping a list of those Members who, for whatever reason, do not adhere to the original question when asking a supplementary question.

We have also been discussing a new format for Question Time with all the party Whips. There have been some fairly good discussions at Business Committee meetings and with the Whips, and I have prepared a paper to which I hope to receive a response. However, there are some Ministers who take a long time to answer a question or a supplementary question. That cannot and will not continue.

We are examining all those issues, and I am glad that the Member raised them in his point of order. I assure Members that Question Time will not continue in its current format.

Mr Burnside: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, as the representative of the House against the Executive — although the four main parties are represented on the Executive — you might be able to help the House in this matter. It would be useful if you could bring evidence of time-wasting by Ministers to the House, and to quantify and qualify the performance of all Ministers since taking office by showing how long they have taken in making statements. Civil servants are fudging answers so that Ministers have to answer only three or four questions instead of having to work down the list. The time taken by Ministers to answer questions is much longer than at Westminster, or any other Assembly or Parliament of which I have experience.

Mr Speaker: Members will know which Ministers take longer to answer questions and supplementary questions — they have only to read Hansard. The Speaker's Office has examined the Hansard reports of debates in the last number of months, and some Ministers take a very long time to answer questions and supplementary questions. However, the support of the whole House is required to resolve those issues. I assure the Member that those issues will be resolved. As I said to Mr Sammy Wilson, the honourable Member for East Antrim, Question Time will not remain in its current format, and there has been discussion with the Whips about how to accomplish change.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On 17 January 2000, a Member raised a point of order to ask how Members could catch the Speaker's attention to express their desire to speak on a particular issue, even if they did not raise the original question. At that time, there was some advice in the 'Assembly Companion' about how to do that, but things have changed since then. I had my name down to speak on the first issue of today's Question Time and, as the UUP spokesman on education, I was keen to speak. I realise that you will

examine this issue, and that some flexibility will be introduced, but a better way must be found for Members to express to you their desire to speak, so that they might be called.

Mr Speaker: That is one of the issues that we are examining with the Whips in devising a new format for Question Time. I agree with the Member. However, introducing a new format does not mean that Members who bob up and down in the Chamber will automatically be called to ask a question.

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for the Member for East Antrim Sammy Wilson to read a broadsheet newspaper during Question Time? *[Laughter.]*

Is it the case that perhaps the Member's name was called, but he was so engrossed in reading his newspaper that he missed it?

Mr Speaker: It is not in order for Members to bring any newspaper into the Chamber and to read it.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As these matters are being reported, there is another issue. I do not intend to get into the rights or wrongs of speaking in two languages, but Members who speak in two languages impact on the amount of time available. How will the House take cognisance of that, because we must ensure that as many questions as possible are asked?

Mr Speaker: I do not want to stop anybody speaking in any language, but it is obvious that some Ministers take a long time to answer questions. Members ask supplementary questions, but some Members try to get three supplementary questions into one question. That is not good either. Those issues are being looked at, and consideration is being given on how they will be handled in the future.

Mr P Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Do you agree that the Minister of Education — who spoke bilingually — got through the same number of questions as the Minister for Employment and Learning who spoke only in English?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Floor of the Chamber is not the best place for this debate. With the co-operation of all the Whips, it is hoped that we will bring a new format to the House that will work for everyone. However, it will require the co-operation of all Members and Ministers.

Mr S Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you make it clear to the House that although I was illegally reading the broadsheet referred to by the Member I was not called and did not miss a question?

Mr Speaker: I remind the House that there is nothing wrong with Members bringing newspapers into the Chamber when they wish to quote from them. However, Members are not permitted to bring newspapers into the Chamber with the specific intention of reading them.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

All-Party Assembly Group on Children and Young People

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the work of Professor Heckman and Mark Greenberg on government investment with young children; urges the Executive to take note of the outcomes from this work, and to invest in early intervention and prevention; and calls on the Executive to protect, maintain and further develop the investment that has been made in children and young people, through Executive Programme Funds, the Children and Young People's Priority Funding Package, and the Supporting Families Package.

Mr Durkan: Unfortunately, I missed some of the earlier contributions to this important debate, but I support the motion from the All-Party Assembly Group on Children and Young People.

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

Funding for children's services and projects — particularly those that tackle early-years provision, help children in need and support families in stress — was accorded priority during the previous period of devolution. Not only did the previous Executive agree to the establishment of a children's fund, all Executive programme funds gave priority to projects or bids that addressed the needs of children and families, particularly those families with members with disabilities. Therefore funding was not only allocated from the children's fund but from the new directions fund; the modernisation fund; the social inclusion/community regeneration fund, and the infrastructure/capital renewal fund.

Those funds showed that the Executive had a particular interest in, and supported, new measures and ways of taking forward the children's agenda — not only through early-years provision, although that important aspect was addressed also. The early-years agenda was also strongly addressed through mainstream budgeting at that time, when the Executive made a commitment to provide a free nursery place for every child for one year. Therefore funding allocations were made through discreet non-departmental funding as well as departmental funding.

Although appreciating the importance that Professor Heckman and Mark Greenberg have placed on providing support for child-supporting measures, we must recognise that within the European funding programmes — for instance, the peace and reconciliation programme — emphasis was put on support for funding for services and projects that were supporting children and young people. There is a dropping-off in European funding of some of the funds that will remain and a skewing of the funds away from some of the social and community support projects.

4.15 pm

We face a situation where many people who brought forward very good pilots and developed new measures and programmes — not only in the community and voluntary sector, but also in the statutory sector and in partnership work between all sectors — now find themselves literally at a loss as to where they can look for funding.

Both the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education face difficult budget constraints, and finding funding for those services is not going to be easy, particularly for some of the new measures. In the past, we deliberately created funding windows outside departmental budgets, so that Departments would be encouraged to come forward with good cross-cutting bids, and, in the context of the children's fund, we encouraged non-statutory players to come forward with good bids too.

In circumstances where direct rule abolished the children's fund, only for a later phase of direct rule to recreate some of its logic in the funding package for children and young people, it is regrettable that in the draft Budget the Executive have decided to do away with any such funding, just as they have decided to do away with the integrated development fund. I hope that, in the time that is still available to Ministers and the Executive before we have the presentation of the revised Budget, there will be a rethink on that issue, because it is not enough for the Executive to point to the fact that there are some commitments to children in the Programme for Government. If we have a children's strategy with no budget to support it, we do not have a meaningful children's strategy. It simply does not translate into anything meaningful.

The child poverty targets that the Executive have set are only a recycling of the child poverty targets that were set by direct rule in the anti-poverty strategy. All of us criticised them at the time for their lack of ambition, yet now, according to the Executive, they are very important. The fact is that the anti-poverty strategy is not properly resourced within the Programme for Government or the Budget.

I hope that Ministers will reflect on those points, and that we will see some suitable improvement in the revised Budget.

Mrs I Robinson: Spending on services for children and young people represents a wise investment of public resources. Spending on children is likely to have a greater impact, prove more cost-effective and produce better long-term outcomes. Early intervention programmes, for instance, are more effective in children than in adults.

We should all welcome the challenging child poverty commitments in the draft Programme for Government. Statistics, including some from the Children's

Commissioner, indicate that spending on children in Northern Ireland has been significantly lower than in the rest of the United Kingdom. However, I note that the Department of Health has not assimilated the findings of such research into its expenditure on children and young people. Some research suggests that up to twice as many children in Northern Ireland may be living without basic necessities as in the rest of the United Kingdom.

We must do all that we can to reduce child and infant mortality, which varies markedly across the Province. Investment in preventative measures and early intervention is essential. Directing resources towards early-years provision will pay the maximum dividends.

Northern Ireland has a very high number of children on the child protection register, and we must continue to shift our emphasis from mere protection towards prevention. Greater inter-agency co-operation and information exchange are essential. It is imperative that the Irish Republic has systems that are equally as robust as those in Northern Ireland to ensure that the border does not permit sex offenders to escape easily from one jurisdiction to another.

We must also do everything that we can to safeguard against sexual exploitation and trafficking. Sufficient resources must be provided for young people in care, and more accommodation options should be available, such as supported lodgings and the ability to remain in foster placement if that is what the children prefer.

We recognise that inequalities exist in educational achievement, and we want fewer young people leaving school without qualifications. It is important to raise aspirations, particularly in families where multiple generations have obtained a job.

Given that Sure Start has proved effective, it could be of benefit to older children. Many would be assisted by greater access to the extended schools programme. High-risk behaviours, such as alcohol misuse, early teen sex and drug and solvent abuse, are strongly interrelated and have a profound impact on our society. Much more must also be done to combat bullying.

Waiting times for appointments to access child and adolescent mental-health services remain unacceptable. We must see the speedy implementation of the Bamford recommendations. The key theme of the Bamford Report 'Vision of a Comprehensive Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service' was the development of a holistic and integrated service that crosses organisational and institutional boundaries.

Closer partnerships and better working relationships are vital. For example, collaboration with the education sector is crucial. Schools have been found to be effective settings for intervening in aggressive and acting-out behaviours, as was recognised in the Audit Commission's report 'Misspent Youth'.

Pryce and Twyble et al in their 2004 paper, 'Mental Health Promotion Among Young People' state that:

"Schools have a significant influence on the behaviour, attitudes and development of young people."

The regional strategy document 'Promoting Mental Health: Strategy and Action Plan 2003-2008' identifies specific actions that relate to the promotion of young people's mental health. Action 9 in the document refers specifically to pupils' mental health. It states that:

"DE in partnership with DHSSPS, Health Promotion Agency (HPA), schools and the voluntary and community sectors will develop a regional education resource for the promotion of pupils' mental health and emotional well-being including anti-bullying approaches for use in schools."

The target date for that was set at March 2004.

The Health Promotion Agency Action has taken forward the Health Promoting Schools initiative. That has proven to be internationally effective, and it offers a vehicle for change in Northern Ireland. However, there have been issues with that in regard to funding and to the fraction of schools in Northern Ireland that have been targeted.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat. I am delighted to have the chance to speak to the motion. It deals with an area that is within the remit of the Department of Education, following the transfer of policy responsibility in November 2006 for early-years matters from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The Department of Education is also the lead Department in the co-ordination of the children and young people's funding package.

I also met with the All-Party Assembly Group on Children and Young People before Christmas, and I am delighted that its members tabled this important motion. I find myself in agreement with Mr Jim Shannon. He is not in the Chamber at the moment, but tackling child poverty is not a pie-in-the-sky aspiration — it can be done if all Departments and the Executive prioritise it. Child poverty can be eradicated.

The purpose of transferring responsibility for the early-years policy was to enable Government to build an integrated policy platform from which to deliver services to very young people and their families and to be able to do so in a joined-up way with the child, rather than the institutions, at the centre. My officials are currently developing a nought-to-six strategy to take that work forward, but I will return to that point in a moment.

"Early years" is not simply another phrase for early intervention, which encompasses a wide range of issues. Early intervention means identifying and addressing specific needs in a timely way, whether they are a child's speech and language needs, learning or behavioural needs. Those needs all contribute to the individual's ability to grow and learn, to develop and fulfil his or her potential, and, vitally, to enjoy the very

best start in life that every child deserves. The early years of a child's life are critical for his or her future development and well-being. It is during those early months and years that a high percentage of a child's learning takes place, attitudes are formed, first relationships are made, concepts are developed, and the foundation of all later skills and learning are laid.

It is therefore vital that early-years intervention — and indeed preventative measures — are part and parcel of our commitment to children and young people, and their parents and carers.

Earlier, I spoke about giving every child the best start in life. Making — and delivering on — that commitment to a vision of equality for children and young people is important to me, and that is captured in the 10-year strategy for children and young people. That strategy contains six high-level outcomes and indicators of progress for all children and young people in the North of Ireland, including those who are vulnerable or marginalised.

Is straitéis fhad-téarmach í seo. Aithnimid nach bhfuil cóngar ar bith ann agus go nglacfaidh sé am athrú tairbheach a chur i bhfeidhm. Caithfimid a chinntiú mar sin go ndéanaimid ár ndícheall lena chinntiú go dtéann an straitéis chun sochair dár ndaoine óga.

That is a long-term strategy, and we recognise that there are no quick fixes and that meaningful and sustained change will take time. Therefore, we must ensure that our energies and resources are wisely and coherently applied in order to ensure that all our young people are served by that strategy.

International evidence, including the work of Professor James Heckman, shows that there are significant benefits in investing in early intervention and prevention. One of the supporting themes of the strategy is that of making a gradual shift to preventative and early-intervention approaches, without compromising those children and young people who currently need our services most.

Junior Minister Kelly and junior Minister Paisley have been given particular responsibility for the co-ordination of policy for children and young people. They have a key role to play in driving forward the 10-year strategy and keeping the needs of children and young people high on the agenda. The junior Ministers will shortly bring proposals for the establishment of a ministerial subcommittee on children and young people to the Executive in order to improve the integration of policy and service delivery on cross-cutting issues.

The ministerial subcommittee was originally established under the previous Administration in the wake of the appointment, in August 2005, of a Minister for Children and Young People. The first ministerial subcommittee sat in October 2005, and its purpose was

to enable resources to be used to the best effect and to facilitate joined-up working. It was chaired by the Minister for Children and Young People — first, by Jeff Rooker, from August 2005 to May 2006, and then by Maria Eagle from May 2006 until the restoration of devolution. All Ministers and permanent secretaries, or their deputies, were invited to ministerial subcommittee meetings, and representatives of the Court Service in the North of Ireland also attended.

A draft Executive paper has been circulated to Executive colleagues for comments on the re-establishment and membership of the group, and that is scheduled to be discussed at a forthcoming Executive meeting.

The junior Ministers are aware of the growing body of evidence that supports investment in young children, and they plan to bring that to the ministerial subcommittee for discussion at an early stage. In addition, they secured funding in the draft Budget for exemplar, area-based interventions, which will help to demonstrate the effectiveness of early interventions locally and will highlight the benefits to children, young people, families and communities of joined-up working between Government and the voluntary and community sector.

The Department of Education's appreciation of the significance of early-years provision and its recognition of the importance of early intervention and prevention is drawn from extensive research — locally, nationally and internationally — into what works. In the Department of Education, research has helped, and continues to help, to shape both the content and delivery of education policy — particularly in the early-years sector, in which we are developing a new strategy for children under seven years of age.

That work has been helpfully informed by the work of Professor James Heckman and Mark Greenberg, both of whom were met in November last year in Belfast by departmental officials, and I will highlight some of the key findings that have emerged from the work of those distinguished academics and others. James Heckman, a Nobel laureate, has noted that ability gaps open up early — long before formal schooling begins — and that the highest returns are from early interventions that set the stage and create the abilities that are required for success in later life.

The longer we wait to intervene in the life cycle of a child, the more costly it is to remedy any problems and restore the child to his or her full potential. Early interventions produce much higher returns than later interventions. Other conclusions from Professor Heckman's work were that those who benefited from early investment completed, on average, almost one more full year of schooling; spent, on average, 1·3 fewer years in special-education services, such as those

for mental, emotional, speech or learning impairment; experienced a lower proportion of births in single-parent families; and experienced fewer teenage pregnancies.

4.30 pm

Early-childhood education and care has experienced a surge of policy attention in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries over the past 15 years. The Heckman study is one of many that are used in formulating the policy on early-years education.

The recent OECD conference that I attended in Dublin — jointly hosted with Mary Hanafin, my counterpart in the South — highlighted that early education is a shared issue in building strong, equitable and prosperous societies. The economic rationale for early-childhood education and care is based on the benefits to children, families and to society, compared to the costs incurred. Studies show that longer-term benefits accrue to society in the form of reduced crime, workforce productivity and a strengthening of the economy. The well-known longitudinal study in the United States, the Perry Preschool Project, showed a cost-benefit analysis of a £17 return for every £1 invested.

Our nought-to-six early-years draft strategy will draw on policy conclusions from a range of research material, including Professor Heckman's study. It will also draw on the excellent work that has been undertaken in that area in Britain, the North of Ireland and the South of Ireland.

I wish to turn to what I am doing to reflect that the needs of children, both in the early years and in the later phases of their childhood, are holistic and that we cannot allow our focus to be only on the academic progress of the child. Much of that work has been supported by the children and young people's funding package and shows just how important that resource has been, and continues to be, in making a difference to the lives of children.

Work in my Department is under way to formulate a new joined-up strategy for early-years provision that will bring Sure Start, pre-school and the home childcare agendas together in a cohesive way. A draft strategy will be put to the Assembly's Committee for Education in the next few months.

Our commitment to personal health and well-being has been reflected in the development of a pupils' emotional health and well-being programme that aims to provide young people with the skills to deal with the challenges of day-to-day life and thus build resilient young people. We have also provided counselling support to pupils in post-primary schools, enabling one day a week or three counselling sessions in each post-primary school that wished to avail of the service. Current provision is delivered by Contact Youth Counselling and our partnership with that third-sector organisation

is one way in which my Department contributes to Government commitment to effective working with the voluntary and community sectors, as outlined in 'Partners for Change'.

Young people, of course, have needs that transcend the classroom. Some do not make it over the classroom door or over the door of any youth club. Such young people have been supported, in particular, by our investment in outreach youth workers who work where the young people are, engaging with them and signposting them towards activities that will enhance their development and divert them from antisocial behaviour.

Outreach workers have also formed a vital bridge to young people who feel excluded because of their rural location, disability or sexual orientation. Youth workers enable vulnerable or excluded young individuals to be included in society.

Schools have also been able to make stronger links with the communities that they serve. The previous Member who spoke mentioned the extended schools programme, which has seen 500 schools throw open their doors, enabling activities such as breakfast clubs, after-school sports, study support and booster classes to take place.

The extended schools programme has developed the role of schools as learning hubs in their communities, responsive to community need. The core aim of the extended schools initiative has been to make a significant contribution to reducing differentials and improving the quality of life for children and young people from disadvantaged areas. One striking example of that is the Belfast Model School for Girls and Belfast Boys' Model School, which I visited recently. People will also know that I launched a full-service school in Ballymurphy. Those are models of good practice.

The motion refers to the important investment that is being made in children and young people through Executive programme funds. Mark Durkan mentioned some of those — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry to interrupt, Minister, but someone's mobile phone is switched on, and it is interfering with the transmission. Will the Member responsible please switch his or her phone off?

Mrs I Robinson: Minister, it is your phone.

Ms Ruane: Is it mine? The Member is right. I thought that it was switched off. I am very sorry about that.

Gabh mo leithscéal. As I have said, the Executive programme funds, the children and young people's funding package, and the supporting families package have all been mentioned.

The Executive programme funds were established by the previous Executive as a means by which resources could be focused on the Programme for Government

priorities, and as a mechanism to encourage co-operation between Departments.

In my own Department during 2005-06, the Executive programme funds resource funding of £10.5 million was provided for 17 projects, and, with the exception of one project that did not require continued support, funding for the other 16 was mainstreamed. Once mainstreamed, funding for the 16 projects was in excess of £10 million.

The children and young people's funding package was announced in three separate stages, and a total of £100 million was available. The overall objective of that package was to reduce underachievement and to improve the life chances of children and young people. A key aspect of the package was to fund actions and activities that were new, or expansions or developments of proven innovations, which would be underpinned by greater co-operation between Departments and their agencies to secure more effective services through integrated service delivery.

The supporting families package was developed as an addendum to the children and young people's funding package, and amounts to £6 million. In her contribution, Sue Ramsey mentioned the package, which involves a range of measures including parenting classes — another issue that Sue Ramsey raised. The package is also aimed at tackling antisocial behaviour through a regional database of family support services across the North. Furthermore, the package enables 25 additional speech and language therapists to work with schools, and provides services for young carers. That is only a flavour of the important work that the package has supported.

Priority funding packages, by their nature, are often intended to provide support for specific projects for a finite period only. During that time, the projects will have had an opportunity to prove their worth and ultimately should be either mainstreamed into departmental baselines or scaled back. In that regard, it is for the main sponsoring Department to decide whether individual projects should continue and whether they are of sufficient value to merit being mainstreamed.

When the children and young people's funding package was introduced, it was on the grounds that it was a baseline allocation, not a short-term funding measure. The activities and programmes that have been supported by the package have been progressed on the basis that they are long-term programmes that will make a difference. That is why I have written to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Peter Robinson, highlighting my serious concerns about the future of the children and young people's funding package. Those concerns were raised by a number of respondents to the public consultation on the draft Budget: many urged

that any possibility of securing additional funding should be considered.

I have also highlighted the difficulty that my Department has had in finding resources of the scale required to achieve the impact that is needed. It is important that the money is made available if there is extra funding.

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

Mr Beggs: The motion calls for the Executive to:

"invest in early intervention and prevention; and calls on the Executive to protect, maintain and further develop the investment that has been made in children and young people".

Many groups have made contact with members of the all-party group and with other Assembly Members to indicate the degree of uncertainty that presently exists regarding their funding. It is important that additional funds are found and that clarity is given to those groups. They have responsibilities as employers, and they have responsibilities to the communities and the children they have been working with.

I, and many other Members, referred to the impressive work of James Heckman, a Nobel-Prize winning economist. We are fortunate that someone of his calibre has been assisting groups such as Early Years in Belfast.

Michelle Mclveen advocated the expansion of the Sure Start scheme and also advocated giving additional assistance to young children and vulnerable children. To do that, she suggested that the Minister of Education should find funds from her existing budget by cutting other services.

Sue Ramsey concentrated on the need for positive parenting and the family matters programme. I agree that as parents we play a huge role in the development of our children. I also agree that help and guidance is needed for new parents, particularly for those who do not have extensive family support to help them in difficult times. Ms Ramsey also highlighted that the motion calls on the Executive to protect, maintain and develop children's services further.

Mary Bradley drew attention to the work of James Heckman and the concern of the All Party Assembly Group on Children and Young People for the children's sector in the current uncertainty about funding. She emphasised the need for funding and mentioned particularly vulnerable children and those with special needs. As a member of the Committee, she expressed her concern at the response of the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who has taken almost no responsibility for children's funding: he believes it to be the responsibility of individual departmental Ministers.

I am concerned that junior Ministers do not seem to accept any responsibility for that matter, which I will return to later. Many of those issues are cross-cutting

and do not therefore appear high on the priority list of individual Departments.

Jim Shannon spoke of the need for long-term strategies and about the common-sense recommendations made by James Heckman. I concur that investing early and giving young people the best possible start to life is a common-sense approach. In that way, they will be able to make the most of their early education, whether it is in pre-school education or in primary school. That is important.

I am still uncertain as to what actions will be taken to reduce child poverty, which Mr Shannon mentioned. What actions in the Programme for Government will effect a reduction in that? Are we just adopting the figures and targets set by Gordon Brown and the Labour Government? We appear to have adopted those without having in place a clear programme that will be funded and that will enable child poverty targets to be achieved.

Michelle O'Neill expressed concern at the high number of children living in poverty and urged the Executive to target that area. She also spoke of support for existing funding programmes and indicated her support for the re-establishment of a fund to address children's issues.

Anna Lo indicated support for investment in young children and voiced her concern at the uncertainty of funding for existing programmes. She expressed the wish that children's funding should be clearly demarcated, so that expenditure levels are clear.

I, too, am more interested in achieving the funding and the result that will follow than in the mechanism for achieving that. If the Executive and the Minister of Finance and Personnel decide upon a particular mechanism, that is fine. However, it appears to me that, in the current Budget, the funding is not there. Departments are largely expected to try to find funding from within their budgets and from money that was previously allocated to them. Some £26 million has been allocated for expenditure on children, but even that represents funding at a lower level than that which came from the children's fund over the last two years, where £61.7 million —

Ms S Ramsey: Does the Member agree that one way of taking this forward is through recent announcements made by the British Labour Party? It has agreed to put additional money into funding for children and young people. Our cut of that money will go straight into the block grant, rather than being ring-fenced for children and young people. Does he agree that we should be calling for it to be ring-fenced for the purpose?

Mr Beggs: That is an obvious method of dealing with it. However, should the English funding level out, we would then be exposed. Current expenditure in Northern Ireland is at a much lower level. We would

not wish to become purely reliant upon future increases in England.

I appreciate that there has been a recent announcement; however, I want to know whether that is new money or whether it is money already accounted for in the settlement passed to the Minister of Finance and Personnel. The issue is clear: additional money is needed for children's services or children will suffer.

Danny Kennedy highlighted the OFMDFM Committee's inquiry into child poverty and the resulting reduction in life chances that it presents to those children. He indicated that, while the report is not yet complete, there is concern that, if the challenging targets in reducing child poverty are to be achieved, more action will be required.

4.45 pm

Mark Durkan spoke about a range of funding programmes that could improve children's services. He noted that European funding had recently changed, which has resulted in less funding being available to the sector.

Iris Robinson supports the early-intervention programme and highlighted the variations in child mortality rates in different areas of Northern Ireland and the need to identify and reduce those rates even further. She also supported a move towards preventative programmes. She supports Sure Start and wants it to be extended to an older age group. She again urged the introduction of the recommendations of the Bamford Report, but she did not indicate how they might be funded, an accusation that has been made against me in the past.

The Minister of Education believes that it is possible to reduce poverty, and she supports the early-years programmes. She stated that there should be a shift towards early intervention and prevention. That shift would be gradual to avoid adversely affecting other programmes. She stated that there was a proposal to establish a ministerial subcommittee, at the behest of the junior Ministers. I am absolutely astounded that, after eight months of devolution, the two junior Ministers propose that they are going to call a meeting with the relevant Ministers. I cannot believe that. The Budget process will have been completed, and the opportunity to deal with cross-cutting issues will have been lost. I am astounded that the junior Ministers have not had a meeting with relevant Ministers to deal with Budget issues; we are being told today that we can expect a ministerial subcommittee to be established after the funding has been allocated. That is nonsense.

I urge the Minister to take those thoughts — with which I hope that other Members concur — back to the Executive and express Members' concern that that is a clear case of shutting the door after the horse has bolted. Those issues must be addressed now, not after the Budget settlement.

I ask Members to support the motion, which attempts to address the needs of the most vulnerable children in our society, to ensure that all children have a good start in life and can make the most of their education. I reiterate what Professor James Heckman said about investing in young people because it makes economic sense.

Mr Spratt: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is not very often that I jump to the defence of the Minister of Education, but there appears to be something wrong with the microphones in the Chamber today. There was a problem when the previous Member was speaking, and the microphones need to be checked.

Mr Deputy Speaker: A problem was reported earlier, and I am told that it is being dealt with.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the work of Professor Heckman and Mark Greenberg on government investment with young children; urges the Executive to take note of the outcomes from this work, and to invest in early intervention and prevention; and calls on the Executive to protect, maintain and further develop the investment that has been made in children and young people, through Executive Programme Funds, the Children and Young People's Priority Funding Package, and the Supporting Families Package.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Deputy Speaker:*]

ADJOURNMENT

Funding Crisis for the Enler Project, Ballybeen

Mr Deputy Speaker: All Members who wish to speak will have up to 10 minutes to contribute to the debate. The Minister will speak for the final 10 minutes.

Mrs I Robinson: It is quite amazing that the Member who leads and promotes the Adjournment debate receives only the same amount of time to contribute as other Members who wish to speak.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The direction that I have been given from the Business Committee is that Members will have up to 10 minutes to speak.

Mrs I Robinson: Is there flexibility?

Mr Deputy Speaker: We have one hour for the debate, and the Minister has to be called before the final 10 minutes.

Mrs I Robinson: I ask Members to consider the details they want to put on record and to be mindful of time constraints.

The future of the Ballybeen estate in Dundonald is uncertain. The area can either continue to experience the economic and social decline that it has witnessed during recent decades, or, as an area of recognised social deprivation, it can be rejuvenated and reinvigorated through initiatives such as the Enler project. The future of the estate's 9,000-plus residents now rests upon the shoulders of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Minister for Social Development. If action is not taken immediately, £3.5 million of investment that is absolutely critical to the area's future could be lost.

The area's economic and social history does not make for great reading. Industries and businesses that formed the foundation of the local economy are declining and disappearing. If one takes into consideration the repercussions of Harland and Wolff's demise and the huge losses from Bombardier Shorts, the number of manufacturing jobs that have been lost in the area easily runs into the tens of thousands, while my constituency's biggest private employer, TKECC in Dundonald, closed in 2004 with approximately 2,000 job losses. During the same period, much of the Ballybeen Estate became rundown. Buildings became derelict and businesses were discouraged from expanding into the area. That created a distinctly negative feeling across the estate,

which was compounded by the closure of the local post office in October 2004.

Mr Deputy Speaker, the very facet of social cohesion is at stake — the future of schools, businesses, the voluntary sector, and of the local community in general. The Enler project has been shaped since 1999, following the closure of the Enler day-care facility by the South and East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust. I took part in a campaign to retain provision for the elderly in the Ballybeen area. Following several failed attempts to develop the former nursing home, the building fell into disrepair and became derelict. A campaign succeeded in getting the building demolished because it attracted a considerable degree of antisocial behaviour.

In 2002, Landmark East was given responsibility for driving forward the redevelopment of the site. The organisation is a not-for-profit company whose aim is to develop vacant and derelict buildings and properties for the benefit of local communities. It was invited to take over the development of the Enler project by a loose consortium of interests that included Castlereagh Borough Council, the South and East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and an umbrella group of local community organisations.

After considerable consultation, a plan was agreed to develop a centre that would provide community facilities that were managed by Castlereagh Borough Council, and retail units that were directly managed by Landmark East and would replace semi-derelict units at Ballybeen Square. The new retail facilities would enable existing retailers who were based in the square to relocate. The project would also provide much-improved services for older people. A new 50-person day-support facility for vulnerable elderly people was promised by the South and East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust. The new facility would be linked to other parts of the development in order to provide more opportunities for older people to engage in stimulating activity with other members of the community.

So, what happened? An economic appraisal was initiated in January 2002; funding was agreed in principle in June 2003; the economic appraisal was completed in October 2004; funding was confirmed in March 2005; a project manager was appointed in January 2006 and a design team was appointed in May 2006. In August 2006, the South and East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust informed Landmark East that it must purchase and own the facility. Subsequently, a new economic appraisal was ordered by the Department for Social Development. Planning permission was granted in December 2006.

In February 2007, the South and East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust submitted its business case to the Department. In April 2007, the trust was dissolved

as part of the reorganisation of local trusts and became part of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. In June 2007, the Department for Social Development's reappraisal of the project was completed. Matters appeared to be moving in the right direction until October 2007, when the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety plunged the entire project into chaos by withdrawing its support.

In doing so, by using the excuse of inadequate funding from the Department of Finance and Personnel, it attempted to absolve itself of any responsibility for failure. That announcement was followed by one of similar tone from the Department for Social Development. Landmark East, a community-based charity, had agreed to deliver the project in response to requests from statutory and community organisations. To date, it has borrowed £400,000 to fund the project, only for it to be aborted as a result of the withdrawal of potential funding by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department for Social Development.

Moreover, interest charges of approximately £2,000 a week are building up. Landmark East has, to date, paid out professional design fees of £112,633 on behalf of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, specifically for its facility. Landmark East asked, in writing, for those fees to be reimbursed on 31 October 2007, but it has not received a satisfactory response. That is an incredibly embarrassing situation in which the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust finds itself, and one that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety alone has created. Therefore, I take the opportunity to ask when that money will be reimbursed.

Over approximately 10 years, a huge amount of public and community resources has been used on the project. It would be a total waste of public funds were it to collapse now. At the same time, the project would be losing out on £400,000 of time-based funding from the International Fund for Ireland. The Enler project was agreed more than five years ago, and the delay since then has been caused by various statutory decision-making processes, including an appraisal process that has been spread over several years.

Why has the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety decided to renege at this late stage? Last year, the underspend in his Department could easily have covered the cost of the Enler project, never mind the savings that could have been made from efficiency savings, which the Minister refuses to initiate. Therefore, there is absolutely no reason why Mr McGimpsey should have abandoned the people of Ballybeen.

The Enler project, without the health facility, is still financially viable. However, as the trust had originally given a commitment to cover the cost of its facility, it is an utter disgrace that politics is being played between Departments at the expense of the people of Ballybeen.

The cost of the retail and community facilities could be met from existing funding. Even if the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety chooses to abandon that project's people, there is no reason why the Minister for Social Development should follow his lead.

The Department for Social Development recently designated Ballybeen as an area of risk. However, immediately after that announcement was made, that Department seemed prepared to withdraw £1.5 million of funding that had already been allocated. It is one thing to waltz on commitments to Castlereagh Borough Council, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Landmark East, but it is another thing entirely to treat the welfare of individuals with such casual disregard.

One local businessman has invested all that he has in the development of his businesses in Ballybeen, based solely on the support that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department for Social Development gave the Enler project. He has now been well and truly hung out to dry by those two Ministers. All that that businessman did was to act in good faith. If the Enler project collapses, it will make it doubly difficult to engage all such important players in any future partnership approach.

In conclusion, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department for Social Development have it in their gift to deliver the project for the long-suffering residents of the Ballybeen estate. Michael McGimpsey and Margaret Ritchie have the ability to secure those people's futures. The only question is whether they accept their ministerial obligations and commit the funding that is so desperately needed and that had previously been promised.

I conclude with the words of a few local stakeholders. Maurice Kinkead, the chief executive of Landmark East, whose commitment and dedication to the project is second to none, has said:

"As a charity, we agreed to help deliver this project 'in good faith' but have now been left with nothing but a substantial debt while government departments simply walk away. Having the Department of Health withdrawing funding was bad enough, but for DSD to join the mutiny is devastating. After many years of working with statutory agencies, confidence was being built within the community of Ballybeen that something positive was now being done. The collapse of Enler will destroy that confidence."

Adrian Donaldson, the chief executive of Castlereagh Borough Council, stated:

"We have invested a great deal of time and money in this project and have worked in good faith with fellow stakeholders. We are therefore deeply disappointed with the stance adopted by the Department of Health in withdrawing promised funding at the 11th hour. Ultimately it will be the people of Ballybeen who will pay for this."

Blakely McNally, the chairman of the Ballybeen Improvement Group — he is in the Gallery this afternoon, and I welcome him — said:

"Living on the estate I am only too familiar with the problems that local families and local communities face on a day to day basis."

5.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

Mrs I Robinson: I will.

Mr McNally continued:

"This project represented light at the end of a tunnel in the history of Ballybeen and should have been a turning point in the development of the area. Instead, we have been abandoned at the 11th hour."

Mr Shannon: I support the comments of my colleague Iris Robinson. I pay tribute to Iris for the hard work that I know that she has personally done. She does not particularly look for credit, but it is only right that I should say that she has worked very hard for the estate over a large number of years. I hear that from the people on the estate and from Government bodies, and it is worth putting on record.

We are here today because we care about our constituency and the people in it. We are aware of the statistics and the need for action in our communities, and of the need to improve them and give our children a better future and a better life than we had when we were growing up. It is with that view that a number of community groups and Government bodies met in the Ballybeen estate to set up a regeneration project.

Ballybeen is a housing estate with over 9,000 occupants. I will provide some statistics to give those Members who may not be familiar with the area a flavour of the problems that exist there. It covers three electoral wards, one of which is in the Strangford constituency. The following statistics come from the Ballybeen Women's Centre, with which my colleague has been directly involved. In the Noble index, it ranked one hundred and twenty-third out of 566 wards in Northern Ireland — with 1 representing the highest deprivation in Northern Ireland. It was in the worst 15% of wards in relation to health, education and poverty. The area is poorly serviced for statutory provision and has been affected by the polarisation that has occurred as a result of the Troubles. It has a strong single-identity Protestant culture. Some 20% of lone single parents in the Castlereagh borough live in the Ballybeen estate.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Member for giving way.

The Member has already paid tribute to my colleague Iris Robinson, who has undoubtedly put many years of work into this project. Does he agree that officials from Castlereagh Borough Council, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and other statutory agencies have also put tremendous work into this project? Does he agree that they are devastated, as are the long-suffering people of Ballybeen, whom he has mentioned?

They have been looking forward to this project for many years. They are totally devastated at the Health Department's failure to move forward on this all-important project. It is absolutely disgraceful that the Minister has taken the action that he has.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I endorse his comments.

On the Ballybeen estate in 2001, 13% of births were to teenage mothers. Again, that is above the regional average. That comes back to the point that my colleague Iris made earlier: this is an estate that needs help.

In a review of the local economy in 1998, Castlereagh economic partnership found that the most deprived wards of Ballybeen distinctly lacked employment opportunities in professional occupations, with the majority of the unemployed population being in the semi-skilled manual occupations. It was also a huge blow to the estate and the local workforce when the TK-ECC factory closed its doors in 2004. Over 550 people lost their jobs. Again, a lot of those people were ladies, and it, therefore, hit them particularly hard. Statistics show that over 80% of those unemployed and living in Ballybeen have no formal qualifications.

These statistics are grim, but they must be acknowledged. They paint a very grim picture of the major issues on the estate. However, there is no doubt that there is a very real determination to change things. Be aware of the determination of the people of Ballybeen and their elected representatives to turn the situation around. That was very evident at the meetings on the health impact assessment during talks on the possible regeneration of the site at Enler. Although opinions may have varied on which option was best, it was clear that there was a real desire to regenerate the estate, and that desire was also shared by the Executive, the education and health sectors, the PSNI, Castlereagh Borough Council and the South and East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust. All those bodies are collectively trying to do something for Ballybeen.

The Department for Social Development provided £5 million to start the Enler project, and it was believed that it would not be long until the site was completed under option 5 of the economic evaluation. I do not intend to go into the details, but the positive outcomes that were anticipated included an increase in jobs for local people; the improved appearance of the immediate vicinity of Enler; an integrated approach to the provision of services, facilities and amenities; and the provision of a meeting place and community facility, a purpose-built day-care centre and medical facilities.

A phenomenal number of elements was supposed to come together as a result of that regeneration, which people had worked hard to achieve, and which would improve the estate now and for future generations. The community was to come together to improve the

appearance of the area and provide a place for children to have fun — that is also an important part of the Assembly's strategy. The estate was to be given a boost, community development would take place, and there would be greater involvement of residents. The residents want to be involved; they want to know what is going on.

No one in the Chamber could help but become excited at the possibilities that that regeneration project was to create. The statistics show how vital it was for the area. However, it is now clear that a severe crisis exists: not in the desire for the project, which remains as strong as ever, but in funding. Unless there is an immediate injection of cash into the project, it will falter. Not only will the estate be none the better, unfortunately, in my opinion, it will be worse off, and the hope that was building will have been destroyed.

The people to whom I have spoken about the project have made it clear what it meant to them as a community. To snatch the project away from a community that has suffered so much discouragement is not an option. More funding must be made available, and I call on the Department for Social Development to complete that which it started. It must pledge money to ensure that the project can be completed. The residents of Ballybeen must be allowed to become a fuller, more thriving community. The area needs a venue for those who wish to take evening classes to gain skills, a day-care centre to enable parents to go out and find work, and facilities that will bring the community closer together in an attempt to provide a better future for their children.

There is also an onus on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to deliver on the project. I am aware, as my colleague said earlier, of the businesses that depend on it, and which borrowed up to their necks on the grounds that it was going ahead, only to find that it is stumbling at the final hurdle. What is happening is morally incorrect, and I urge the Minister to respond in a positive fashion. I look forward to hearing his comments and genuinely hope that he will be able to offer the people of Ballybeen some hope.

The project is worthwhile, to say the least, and there are many who depend on it. I urge the Minister not to let them down. Grant the funding, Minister, and do so quickly, before morale falls any lower than it stands currently. I urge Members to endorse the proposal so ably made by my colleague Iris Robinson, and I ask the Minister to respond positively. The ball lies at his feet.

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. There is no doubt that the Enler project is worthy of funding and that the matter deserves to be discussed in the Chamber. I look forward, along with the other Members for Strangford, to hearing what the

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has to say. However, on a number of occasions, references have been made to the Minister for Social Development. The debate cannot fully transpire without the acknowledgement and response of both the Ministers concerned. The Executive have sent one Minister to respond to this issue, despite the fact more than one is involved. Two Departments have repeatedly been mentioned. Will the Minister for Social Development respond in writing? How will that Minister respond to this debate?

Mr Deputy Speaker: As the Member will know, only one Minister can respond in the 10 minutes that are allocated for a ministerial response to an Adjournment debate. I am certain that the Member's point will be noted by the Executive, and that Mr McGimpsey will share it with his Executive colleagues, and, in particular, the Minister for Social Development.

Mrs I Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. On this side of the Chamber, the DUP has made it very clear that two Departments are responsible and that we are not targeting only the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, although his thumbprints are on the outcome.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I take that point.

Miss McIlveen: I commend my colleague Mrs Iris Robinson MP for securing the Adjournment debate. For over 20 years, Mrs Robinson has worked tirelessly for the people of Ballybeen, and I fully endorse everything that she has said today.

Ballybeen is the second-largest housing estate in Northern Ireland, with around 2,400 homes. In 2001, the area had a population of over 9,000, approximately 2,500 of whom were aged between five and 25. Over the past three decades, the estate has seen a constant decline in social and economic capital. Economically, the greater east Belfast and Strangford area has witnessed the decline of its traditional manufacturing industries, such as shipbuilding, aerospace and textiles. The local people depended upon those industries for wealth generation. At the same time, the NIO took little action to direct inward investment to the area, choosing instead to provide areas such as west Belfast and Londonderry with attractive financial incentives.

When measuring social deprivation, the clumsy and inaccurate Noble indices do not recognise the three wards that comprise Ballybeen — Carrowreagh, Grahamsbridge and Enler — as being among the most deprived, due to the fact that they include areas of perceived wealth. The Noble index simply cannot identify significant pockets in respective wards and, as a result, is an inaccurate measure of deprivation in the Dundonald area. According to a local analysis of greater east Belfast, Carrowreagh is the lowest-ranking ward in east Belfast for access to services. Enler is among the more deprived half of wards in the area in

all domains except housing, which highlights relative deprivation in the ward more clearly than does the general Noble index. From the information available, it can be concluded that several local areas in the estate rank among the 30% economically most deprived in Northern Ireland.

In 2004, the Belfast Regeneration Office (BRO) cut the estate adrift from its work, with the loss of millions of pounds of future investment. Despite the fact that BRO existed to direct and co-ordinate the implementation of a regeneration strategy aimed at the most deprived areas in and around Belfast, it chose, on the basis of the Noble index, to exclude Ballybeen. The Enler project, therefore, represents a real chance to bring a halt to the ongoing decline of the estate and to instil a degree of hope and optimism in Ballybeen that has been missing for years.

Landmark East is committed to the regeneration of disadvantaged areas, and, in 2002, took up the challenge to help save a project that had previously collapsed due to the legal and financial mistakes of others. The intervening years have seen many delays, caused by a long drawn-out appraisal process and changes to the project by the local health trust. Landmark East has so far committed £400,000 to the project to keep it going, based on the commitment from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department for Social Development to actively support it.

Just as we thought that the project would proceed, the Health Minister essentially pulled the plug on it, leaving Landmark East stranded and robbing the people of Ballybeen of investment that could well secure the estate's long-term future. The partnership approach that was adopted by Landmark East set a new precedent in local development and brought together a number of different public, private and voluntary bodies. That approach represented an innovative way in which to deliver regeneration. If the project does not proceed, Michael McGimpsey will have shot a hole in the bow of such partnerships for the future. Landmark East has put a huge amount of unremunerated time and effort into the project. For its desire to improve the lives of the people of Ballybeen, it has received a slap in the face from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department for Social Development.

If the initiative were to collapse as a result of the withdrawal of funding, Landmark East would have to take measures to recoup the hundreds of thousands of pounds that it has already invested. To do that, it may well be forced to sell the Enler site, and a resource that has been set aside for community benefit will, in effect, end up in the hands of a local developer.

Mrs I Robinson: Is the Member aware that if the Enler project were to fall, it would have an incremental effect on further plans for Ballybeen square? The Housing Executive sees the Enler site as only the beginning of a whole new regeneration project to include doing away with the square, which has been identified mostly with antisocial behaviour, and putting housing and various other facilities in its place. The Enler project represents only one part of a greater plan. It would be a disgrace to lose such a project for the community.

5.15 pm

Miss McIlveen: I thank my colleague for her intervention and I endorse what she says: the Enler project is critical to a much bigger plan for Ballybeen. I ask — almost plead with — Michael McGimpsey to think again and not turn his back on the residents of Ballybeen. Perhaps the Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie, will also consider her Department's position on the matter. To do otherwise could be perceived as a total abdication of ministerial responsibility.

Lord Browne: I am pleased to support my honourable colleague Mrs Iris Robinson on this important subject. The Department for Social Development has identified Ballybeen as an area of need. It is imperative that no organisation or Department do anything to jeopardise the Enler project, which is an important high-priority scheme. If the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety withdraws the commitment to provide funding, the business case for the entire project will be considerably weakened.

Ballybeen urgently requires regeneration, and Members have heard in great detail how the scheme would provide new retail outlets and new day-care facilities that could be of great benefit to the community. Ballybeen is unquestionably an area of special need, and I call on the Minister of Health to release immediately the capital funding that his Department had previously committed in order that the provision of the long-awaited and much needed facilities for one of the largest and most deprived housing estates in Europe can proceed without further delay.

Mr Newton: Like other Members, I pay tribute to Mrs Robinson for raising the issue and for her work in the area. I know that she will not mind my paying tribute to the people of Ballybeen who, in the belief that the project would make a positive contribution to the betterment of the estate and the quality of life of all its residents, put their shoulders to the wheel. The importance of the Enler project in Ballybeen cannot be overestimated. The deprivation in the area has been acknowledged, and the Department for Social Development identified it in legislation as an area of need.

As a director of Landmark East, to which Members have referred, I declare an interest. That charitable organisation is an arm's-length company in the East

Belfast Partnership. Many of my fellow directors were highly enthusiastic when they first became involved. Various agencies asked Landmark East to help by delivering the Enler project. The directors, who took a positive, responsible and professional approach to the project's delivery, are now left with incurred debts of £400,000, yet Government agencies appear to be walking away.

Regardless of the legal implications, one would hope that Government bodies operate according to a moral and ethical code under which that unacceptable situation must be rectified. I am sure that the directors are protected from having to settle the debts of Landmark East. However, we may be asked to settle the debts by selling the site. No one can possibly believe that that would be in the best interests of the Ballybeen community — that option should not even merit consideration.

Expectations have been raised, and they will be dashed if that is the road that we follow. I have already referred to the enthusiasm of the people of Ballybeen. Their time and that of the professionals, business people and community groups who contributed significantly to the development of the project will be exhausted.

Perhaps worst of all is the fact that £400,000 will have been wasted at a time when financial prudence and accountability are being called for. Many will view that as departmental incompetence and mismanagement. Many questions must be asked. For example, why is funding from the Department of Health not available at this late stage, thus putting the whole project at risk? Why is that happening at this stage, when other commitments have been given? Why is the Department for Social Development also withdrawing funds that have already been allocated, especially as the project has been through all the necessary forms of appraisal, is viable and meets the needs of the community? Even without funding from the Department of Health, the Department for Social Development could go ahead. The project is viable regardless, yet the Department for Social Development is bowing out. Landmark East has paid out professional design fees of over £112,000, and, as Mrs Robinson said, on 31 November it requested reimbursement of the money, but did not get a satisfactory reply.

Ballybeen has been designated as an at-risk area. The announcement of the withdrawal of funding for the project came just as it was classified as such.

Mrs I Robinson: Is the Member aware that when the Minister for Social Development met community groups and other interested bodies at Northern Ireland Housing Executive premises, she openly agreed that Ballybeen was an area at risk and said that she would give it her undivided attention when she returned to her office?

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for that information, which well makes the point about the priority that has been verbally attached to the project. However, that verbal agreement must be supported by action. Pulling the plug will send a negative message to the whole Ballybeen community. The Enler project is critical to the entire future of the whole estate, not just the area that immediately surrounds it.

Reference has been made to Ballybeen square. It must be redeveloped to put the heart back into the community, which has suffered much over the years as a result of both the economic downturn of manufacturing and of paramilitary activity, which we all hope has now passed.

The project has been in the talking and in the making for 10 years. A huge amount of time and public and voluntary resources have been devoted to the project, only to see it now potentially collapse. The project was agreed five years ago, but since then, delays have been caused by all the statutory bodies that are involved dragging their feet and by an appraisal process that was spread over several years. There could have been no doubt that, at the end of that appraisal process, a thorough job had been done and that it stacked up in economic terms and in ways that would result in benefits to the community. If the project does not proceed, that will all have been wasted.

Landmark East agreed to help to deliver the project, and it did so in good faith. It has been left with nothing but a large debt, while Departments walk away. It is not just the directors of Landmark East, which was professional in its approach, or the businessmen and professionals who gave of their time free of charge who have been let down — the people of Ballybeen have been left stranded.

Mr Hamilton: All Members have clearly heard what the Member and the other contributors have said on this important matter. Does he agree that it is incumbent on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to send out a positive message today? It has been made clear by the Department for Social Development that although its side of the project is viable, it will not divvy up any funding until the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety does the same.

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for that intervention.

I will leave Members with a final remark. The people of Ballybeen have been left stranded: if this project goes down the tubes, people will ask where the benefit of the peace process is for those who live in the Ballybeen estate.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank the honourable Member for Strangford Mrs Iris Robinson for tabling the Adjournment debate because it gives me an

opportunity to set the record straight. As I have said before, I support the development of the Enler project, which is a community-partnership project in the Ballybeen estate that has been commissioned by the Department for Social Development.

The local community in Ballybeen has given careful thought to the development of an exciting and innovative project that will bring many benefits to the wider community. It is exactly the type of project that I want to see across Northern Ireland: local communities working together to tackle health and social inequalities in their local environment. The project will provide a mixed use, modern and accessible building, which will include retail units, offices and a recording studio. It is also proposed that the Millars Lane Day Centre for the elderly, which is past its best, will be replaced and relocated to the Enler complex.

Following misinformed comments in the press in recent weeks, it is important to set out my Department's involvement with the project. The business case for the health component of the Enler project was submitted to my Department in February 2007. That component is the replacement of the Millars Lane Day Centre, which provides 30 places on the outskirts of Ballybeen.

The Enler project proposals have been under development for some time, and the former South and East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust was a partner in that development. At the beginning, the trust proposed a contribution of £0.5 million, which would allow it to be a stakeholder in the new facility. The trust would then rent the space required to run a day centre for elderly people, thus investing in new and modern services for the elderly in the Ballybeen area. At that time, the financial commitment was entirely a matter for the trust, as the sum involved was within its delegated limits and did not require approval from the Department.

However, the trust was later advised that that arrangement could cause accounting difficulties. Accordingly, a decision was taken to develop a new business case for the full capital cost of the health component of the Enler project. With that new approach, the Department for Social Development also had to revise its economic appraisal for the project. When the new business case for the replacement Millars Lane Day Centre was developed, the capital cost towards the Enler project had significantly increased — from £0.5 million to £1.4 million. Due to the higher level of funding, the trust was required to submit its proposals to the Department for approval, which in turn had to seek approval from the Department of Finance and Personnel.

From April 2007, my Department has been working closely with the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, which now has responsibility for the health component of the project, to try to progress the scheme as rapidly

as possible. Many issues have been resolved, not least the justification for the substantial increase in the cost of the health component.

The total capital cost of the Enler project is £3.3 million, and that comprises £1.4 million from my Department, £1.5 million from Department for Social Development and £400,000 from the International Fund for Ireland (IFI).

5.30 pm

Following an urgent request from the honourable Member for Strangford, I met a delegation from the Enler project in August 2007. Our discussions were positive and constructive, and no one was left in any doubt that, although I supported the development of the project, I could not make any commitments on capital expenditure until the final outcome of the comprehensive spending review was known. I also advised the group that the indicative allocation of capital to my Department was well short of what was needed. At that meeting, I was advised by Mrs Robinson and the delegation that a possible plan B could be advanced. It would allow the Enler project to commence without the health component, with the understanding that the trust could get involved in the future through a phased development approach. At that meeting, I gave a commitment to progress the business case for plan A as quickly as possible.

The business case was submitted to the Department of Finance and Personnel two weeks later, in September 2007. I undertook to keep Mrs Robinson informed of the business case and funding position, and I wrote to her again in October. By that time, my Department's draft Budget capital allocation had been significantly reduced by some £30 million, to £714 million. I also advised Mrs Robinson in October that, despite the considerable difficulties presented by the draft Budget allocation, I would continue to review the funding position and make every effort to find an alternative way to support the Enler project.

I was pleased to note in November 2007 that Minister Ritchie declared Ballybeen an area at risk. That declaration recognised that although it was not a neighbourhood renewal area, it was nonetheless deserving of additional support to address significant needs. I was, therefore, surprised that my Department and other stakeholders involved in the project, such as the Department for Social Development, were subject to criticism in the press in early December. Through a partnership approach, many people — including my Department and the Department for Social Development — had been quietly working behind the scenes to try and resolve outstanding difficulties. Therefore, the comments were naive and unhelpful.

I am in no doubt that the development of the Enler project will bring numerous benefits to a marginalised

community. I am familiar with the Ballybeen estate; I know the community and the problems that it faces in relation to deprivation and unemployment, and I will continue to work with the local community groups to develop services in their areas.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGimpsey: No. Now is a time for the Member to listen.

This is about delivering services on the ground where they are most needed. That is the key to the reform of health services in Northern Ireland, and I am committed to making that happen. I have, therefore, been working hard to resolve the situation, and I am pleased that the IFI has extended to June 2008 the deadline by which a funding package for the project must be in place. However, the business case for the health component and Department for Social Development's economic appraisal are awaiting approval from the Department of Finance and Personnel. Until the Department of Finance and Personnel has completed its deliberations, I cannot move forward. However, I am hopeful that there will be a favourable outcome and that I will be able to make a positive announcement about the project soon. Of course, that is subject to a satisfactory outcome to the comprehensive spending review next week.

Members all agree that initiatives such as the Enler project sit at the heart of local communities — bringing together vital services for the young and the old. There is an onus on all stakeholders and interested parties to work together and move forward swiftly. I will continue to make every effort to deliver the project for the community in Ballybeen. I hope that I will soon be in a position to bring them good news.

Adjourned at 5.35 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 15 January 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr S Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The material that I have before me is not an alternative to the newspaper that the Member for West Tyrone Mr McElduff accused me of reading in the Chamber yesterday. Rather, it represents the amount of written material that I received from the Assembly in the two weeks before the Christmas recess. The material stands 1 ft 8 in high — I have a ruler with me should I need to prove that. It follows that, if a full month's material, multiplied by 108 MLAs, were stood end to end, we would need a bookshelf that stretched from one side of this Building to the other — 365 ft — to facilitate it all.

I want you, Mr Deputy Speaker, to raise with the Assembly Commission what we can —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Wilson.

Mr S Wilson: — do to avoid that waste of paper, because I understand that all this material is available online.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We have now gone metric, Mr Wilson. *[Laughter.]* I shall make two points: first, Members are not permitted to use visual aids in the Chamber; and, secondly, you are probably embarrassing the Minister of the Environment. I shall continue.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I raised a point of order yesterday, but, unfortunately, the Speaker had just left the Chair. It related to an important issue, however, not only for me but for the entire Assembly.

During questions to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development after her statement on the December Fisheries Council meeting, I asked a question that contained not one, not two, not three but four separate questions. I have the Hansard report in front of me, and it is very clear that I asked four questions. The Minister's response was that she did not hear a question, and, therefore, she refused to respond to any

of the points that I had made. She did not fail to hear; rather, she did not want to hear, because she was embarrassed by the questions that I had asked.

However, what was even more worrying was the Speaker's response that he did not hear any questions either. If Ministers are able to hide behind awkward, difficult questions simply by saying that they do not hear them, that is a very dangerous precedent for the Assembly to set. Ministers must be held to account; they must answer questions, even those that they do not want to answer.

It is unfortunate, Mr Deputy Speaker, that the Speaker does not appear to have ruled on that issue, so I ask that you convey my sentiments to him and ask him to rule on this important matter as quickly as possible.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will certainly do that. The good news is that the Speaker is aware of your point of order and will be in touch with you, so it is happy days.

Mr Wells: I am delighted.

Miss McIlveen: I wish to raise a point of order in relation to yesterday's Question Time. I asked a valid question of the Minister of Education regarding how she prioritises her budget. Is it in order for her to label my comments as sectarian, when they clearly related to the budget?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will certainly pass your comments to the Speaker, who will, no doubt, be in touch with you, as with Mr Wells.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council — Institutional Format

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister that the deputy First Minister wishes to make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in institutional format.

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In compliance with section 52C(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make a statement on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in institutional format that was held in Stormont Castle, Belfast on 17 December 2007.

Junior Minister Paisley and junior Minister Kelly, who attended the meeting, have approved this report and I make it on their behalf.

The Executive were represented by junior Minister Paisley, junior Minister Kelly and myself. The Irish Government were represented by Dermot Ahern TD, Minister for Foreign Affairs.

At the meeting, the Council approved the appointment of members to the management boards of the Trade and Business Development Body, the North/South Language Body, the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission, and to the advisory board to the Food Safety Promotion Board, including chairpersons and vice-chairpersons, with effect from 13 December 2007, and the appointment of a board member of Foras na Gaeilge to serve as vice-chairperson of that body.

The Council also approved the appointment of the board members, including the chairperson and vice-chairperson of Tourism Ireland Ltd, with effect from 19 December 2007.

The joint communiqué from the NSMC institutional format meeting, with a list of new boards, including chairpersons and vice-chairpersons, was placed in the Assembly Library on 17 December 2007.

The remuneration of chairpersons, vice-chairpersons and members was also agreed.

The Council thanked outgoing board members and recognised the key role that they played in developing the North/South bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd. They also congratulated the new board members on their appointments and wished them well in their work. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. Although brief, its content is important, and

I request on behalf of my Committee that full details of the list of appointees to the various boards and bodies be provided.

Moreover, I ask the deputy First Minister and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide detail on the background to the appointment process, perhaps indicating how appointments were arrived at and made. Was any interview process undertaken for any of the appointments? Were any of them subject to what might be termed “political patronage”? I also ask the deputy First Minister to indicate how long each individual is expected to serve on each body.

The deputy First Minister: The full membership lists of the boards are available. If any Member does not have a copy to hand, we can furnish him or her with the information.

The term of service is four years, and it is important to say that the work to establish those bodies has continued over almost eight years. Under the Implementation Bodies Agreement of March 1999, the North/South Ministerial Council appoints management boards to the Trade and Business Development Body, which operates as InterTradeIreland, the North/South Language Body, which consists of Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency, the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission, and to the advisory board to the Food Safety Promotion Board.

Overall, the boards of those bodies comprise some 60 members. The Special EU Programmes Body and Waterways Ireland, which is the inland waterways body, do not have boards. Tourism Ireland Ltd, which was established as a company that is limited by guarantee, has a board that comprises 12 directors, who were appointed by the NSMC.

Effectively, the terms of office of the current members of all the boards, including the chairpersons and vice-chairpersons, ended in December 2007. Given that most of them had served two terms, they could not be reappointed. Many of the outgoing chairpersons, vice-chairpersons and members served on the boards for almost seven years, and I should add that the members of the outgoing boards made a sustained commitment to the work of the bodies.

The Executive and the Irish Government made the appointments to the new boards on a 50:50 basis, and the full list of membership of all the boards has been placed in the Assembly Library for Members to access at their own convenience. Those who were appointed to the boards come from a range of backgrounds and bring with them extensive experience and knowledge of the business and voluntary sectors.

Essentially, the appointments were made in accordance with the rules, and we used exactly the same process that David Trimble and Séamus Mallon

used when they occupied the roles of First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Mr Moutray: Members will have noted Tourism Ireland Ltd's recent announcement that it will change the way in which it markets Northern Ireland so that it reflects aspects of Ulster-Scots heritage and culture, including the Loyal Orders. Does the deputy First Minister agree that that change will benefit Northern Ireland in that more visitors will be attracted here? Was that matter discussed at the meeting on 17 December 2007?

The deputy First Minister: That specific issue was not discussed at the meeting. I appreciate that Tourism Ireland Ltd's responsibilities include a clear duty to reflect culture and tourism opportunities for the benefit of those in the international community who are considering whether to holiday in this part of the world.

For example, during the Smithsonian event in Washington, DC, which Ministers from different parties and I attended, individual members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) objected to the presence of Orange Order representatives who were explaining the background to their organisation to the Irish-American community. I came out very strongly against the attitude of those members of the AOH who were trying to prevent the Orange Order representatives from describing the Order. I think that I won the argument, given that I received all sorts of letters of support from other members of the AOH in the United States of America who believed that I was absolutely correct. Therefore, it is a good thing, and it is something that is well worth promoting.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire agus roimh an tuairisc. Rinneadh obair thábhachtach i rith an chruinnithe seo i mí na Nollag.

I welcome the Minister's statement. Mr Kennedy, in his capacity as Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, has already asked several of the questions that I intended to ask. However, will the deputy First Minister tell me whether the meeting in December concerned itself in any way with developing further the roles of the North/South implementation bodies and expanding areas of co-operation?

The deputy First Minister: All Members know that a review is ongoing to examine objectively the efficiency and value for money of the existing implementation bodies. That review will also consider the case for creating additional bodies and areas of co-operation within the NSMC framework in matters where mutual benefit would be derived.

The first meeting of the review group took place on 31 October 2007. In addition to senior officials from the Executive and the Irish Government, the group

comprises an advisory panel of four expert advisers, two of whom were nominated by the Executive and two by the Irish Government.

The group undertook intensive work in November and December, and a progress report will be made at the NSMC plenary meeting in February.

10.45 am

Mr Attwood: I join the deputy First Minister in welcoming the appointment of the new board members and thanking the outgoing members for their years of service. The deputy First Minister rightly said that these people have been appointed for four years. Of course, the elephant in the Chamber is the review to which the deputy First Minister has just referred. We have learnt from one unionist party this week that its intention is that North/South developments should not expand and deepen in the next phase of politics on this island.

Can the deputy First Minister, arising from what Mr McElduff said, confirm that the review will complete its work by the spring, as originally intended? When will the Assembly have the opportunity to discuss fully the review's report and, I hope, endorse recommendations for a broad extension of areas of co-operation and implementation on the island of Ireland?

The deputy First Minister: It is not my place, with the review ongoing, to pre-empt its outcome, except to say that it is the very firm intention of the North/South Ministerial Council that this work should be completed in time for its next plenary meeting. At this stage, the sensible thing is for all of us to bide our time. There will be a plenary meeting on 7 February, at which the report will be considered. Until then, we should allow the review body to get on with its work.

Mr Ford: The reconstitution of the five boards is a step forward in the normalisation of politics. However, even by the standards that we have come to expect from NSMC statements, this one was remarkably thin. While there was a lot about membership, there was nothing about achievements or future challenges, even in the context of the review that is under way. Does the Minister agree that if we are to have these statements on a regular basis — and we are obliged to do so under the agreement — it would be a more productive use of his time and that of the House to have a bit more substance in them, rather than a mere list of facts that have already been placed in the Library?

The deputy First Minister: The Member has made his point, and no doubt the powers that be in the NSMC will consider what he has said. I agree with him: there are many achievements that we could boast about regarding the effectiveness of the bodies, which have clearly been beneficial to both the Irish Government and to us. The Member's point will be taken on board.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. An estimated 9·1 million visitors came to the island of Ireland in 2007, generating a forecasted £3·1 billion — equivalent to €4·6 billion. That represents a 7·5% increase in tourism revenue. Does the deputy First Minister believe, as I do, that Tourism Ireland Ltd is delivering sufficiently sustained revenue and visitor growth in the tourism industry on the island of Ireland? I hope that the new chairperson and vice-chairperson will be able to enhance those figures.

The deputy First Minister: Tourism Ireland Ltd has been a huge success. The figures from the tourist boards suggest that last year — sorry, the year before last; I keep thinking that this is 2007 — there was a huge increase in the number of visitors from North America. That is very encouraging, and is primarily because of the changed political circumstances here and the promotional work done by Tourism Ireland Ltd in North America. Tourism Ireland Ltd also has a responsibility to ensure that that progress continues. All the indicators from the powers that be in tourism suggest that we are on an upward trend.

Mr Wells: Following on from what Mr Ford said, and given the standard of previous reports to the Assembly about such meetings, today's report is extremely brief. I must ask a question — and it is a question, Mr Deputy Speaker: is today's report a full report of what happened at the meeting? If it is, the meeting lasted around five minutes. I notice that it was held just before the Christmas recess: was it a case of having a five-minute meeting followed by a two-hour Christmas lunch at the taxpayers' expense, or did more business take place that has not been reported? If today's report represents all the business that was carried out at that particular event, then it was not really worth having the meeting.

The deputy First Minister: Well, LeasCheann Comhairle, it will not be surprising that I do not agree with the Member. The meeting was very important as the purpose was to appoint important boards under the auspices of the North/South Ministerial Council. The purpose was not to deal with the work of the boards. The meeting did take a very short time.

Mr Wells: How long did it take?

The deputy First Minister: It lasted an hour at the most. The cost to the Executive was approximately £250, and there was no Christmas lunch.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is very sad indeed.

Mrs D Kelly: I am sure that I will be forgiven for being naive but when the deputy First Minister refers to the "powers that be", I would have thought that he would be included in that phrase when it comes to directing work programmes for the Executive and the Assembly.

Were there any discussions about the Executive's failure to establish the Civic Forum, and were any concerns raised by the Irish Government about the future of the all-Ireland consultative forum?

The deputy First Minister: The Republic of Ireland's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dermot Ahern, did not raise any issue regarding the consultative forum. I stress again that the sole purpose of the meeting was to appoint the boards of the NSMC; it was not held for any other purpose.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas.

Will the deputy First Minister outline whether there will be proper resources for the boards — and perhaps enough money for the odd Christmas lunch?

Mr Deputy Speaker: We are in danger again.

The deputy First Minister: The NSMC is satisfied that there are enough resources for the boards. We can be well satisfied that huge progress has been made given the new political circumstances. We can expect the boards to go from strength to strength; and as they do, the Irish Government and the Executive will have to consider whether to put further funding into them. That decision will be taken jointly by the Irish Government and us.

Mr Shannon: In his statement, the deputy First Minister referred to the North/South Language Body. In Northern Ireland, promotion of Irish and Ulster Scots has been completed: what is being done in the South to promote the Ulster-Scots language? As an Ulster-Scots language enthusiast, I am quite keen to know that something is being done by the South to promote it.

In addition, there has been great disquiet in the unionist community concerning Tourism Ireland Ltd's ability to deliver for tourism in Northern Ireland. With the introduction of the new board, my party and the people whom I represent wish to be assured that Tourism Ireland Ltd can deliver on tourism for the entire Province. Confidence needs to be restored to the unionist community on that matter.

The deputy First Minister: During the course of my contribution today, I stated that we, as an Executive and as members of the NSMC, are satisfied that the work of Tourism Ireland Ltd is benefiting every section of the community, and that those appointed to the board will endeavour to continue to ensure that the upward trend in tourism continues, which is to the benefit of everyone.

During Executive visits to the United States, we talk constantly about what the North has to offer and the spectacular scenery in places such as north Antrim, the Sperrins, County Down, the lakes of Fermanagh, the

streets of the Bogside and the Shankill Road. Tourists from all over the world visit the North to see those sights.

I listen attentively to radio programmes about Ulster-Scots issues, and often people from County Donegal and County Monaghan contribute to those debates. The Ulster-Scots Agency has an office in County Donegal. Everyone takes Ulster-Scots issues seriously, not least members of the Executive.

Mr Molloy: Will the deputy First Minister inform the House how many North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meetings have been held during this mandate? When is the next sectoral meeting due to be held?

The deputy First Minister: The following meetings were held in sectoral format in 2007: transport on 14 September; inland waterways on 17 October; language on 26 October; environment on 26 October; Special EU Programmes Body on 7 November; tourism on 8 November; agriculture on 9 November; education on 14 November; Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission on 21 November; and health and food safety on 28 November. It is anticipated that the meeting in the trade and business development sectoral format will take place as soon as possible. The next NSMC plenary meeting is scheduled for 7 February 2008 in Dundalk.

Mr Durkan: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement and his ministerial colleagues for their work on the NSMC meeting in its institutional format.

The deputy First Minister stated that the meeting focused on appointments to boards. Was the creation of boards for, for example, the Special EU Programmes Body or Waterways Ireland discussed, or is that issue being left to the review? If the opportunity did not arise in this instance to discuss cross-sectoral meetings, for which there is provision, will the deputy First Minister and his colleagues use February's plenary meeting to set up such meetings? We have an agenda for innovation and competitiveness, and the South has established its ambitions in the national development plan, and cross-sectoral meetings would be useful in progressing that work.

The deputy First Minister: The appointment of boards for the Special EU Programmes Body or Waterways Ireland was not discussed at the meeting. In my opinion, that issue is best left to the review. We should consider the establishment of future cross-sectoral meetings.

North/South Ministerial Council — Health and Food Safety Sectoral Format

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that he wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in its health and food safety sectoral format.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I wish to make the following statement on the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in its health and food safety sectoral format. It took place in Dublin Castle on Wednesday 28 November 2007. This was the first such meeting since the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly.

11.00 am

The Executive were represented by myself, as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and by Michelle Gildernew MP MLA, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. This statement has been endorsed by Minister Gildernew.

The Irish Government were represented by Mary Harney TD, Minister for Health and Children. Minister Harney chaired the meeting, which opened with a progress report on the five formal areas of co-operation in health, highlighting some of the key developments since the previous meeting in 2002. Those matters included co-operation on cancer research; planning for major emergencies; pandemic flu planning; health promotion; and co-operation on a number of localised cross-border projects.

We also referred to a joint feasibility study, established by my Department and the Department of Health and Children, which has been tasked with identifying the potential for a more strategic approach to co-operation in health and social well-being. That is particularly relevant in view of the recent and ongoing reorganisation and reform programmes in both jurisdictions.

I turn to the current and planned activities in the aforementioned five areas of co-operation. The Council received a report on the continuing co-operation on accident and emergency services. We noted and welcomed two pilot projects, commissioned by Cooperation and Working Together (CAWT) for a cross-border GP out-of-hours service.

Ministers also welcomed ongoing work involving co-operation on paediatric and congenital cardiac services between the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast, and Our Lady's Hospital for Sick Children in Dublin. We requested that officials report on the further development of those services at the next sectoral meeting.

The Council welcomed co-operation on training and planning for major emergencies. We were briefed on a

major cross-border emergency-planning exercise, which took place in April 2007, and a further emergency-incident exercise, which is planned for 2008. The close co-operation among the two Departments and the Health Service Executive on infectious-disease emergency planning was also welcomed. We noted plans for a possible cross-border exercise on pandemic flu planning, as part of an EU-wide exercise.

The Council noted the high level of co-operation between the respective fire and rescue services in dealing with emergencies and road accidents in the border areas. We also agreed that first-responder schemes, which have been piloted, should be managed by the ambulance services in both jurisdictions.

The Council considered a report on high-technology equipment, which focused on the provision of improved access to radiotherapy services. We were pleased to note the implementation of an agreement among Belfast City Hospital, Altnagelvin Hospital and the Health Service Executive in the Republic to provide cancer patients from County Donegal with radiotherapy treatment at Belfast City Hospital. It was also agreed that the development of additional radiotherapy capacity should be progressed in parallel with work on the aforementioned joint feasibility study, taking into account the scope for further co-operation.

In the area of cancer research, we received a presentation from the two Chief Medical Officers — Dr Jim Kiely of the Department of Health and Children, and Dr Michael McBride of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) — on the work of the Ireland-Northern Ireland-National Cancer Institute Cancer Consortium. The Council recognised the successful implementation of programmes on cancer research, as well as the continuing expanding activity under the auspices of the consortium. Such activity includes the development of common protocols, definitions and datasets by cancer registries; the running of a cancer prevention programme and training workshops for cancer researchers, doctors, nurses and scientists throughout the island of Ireland and in the USA; the use of Telesynergy teleconferencing and diagnostic links with the US to aid the diagnosis of rare conditions and for research collaborations; and the operation of a cancer clinical trials co-operation group.

The Council welcomed the broad range of co-operation on health promotion in key areas, such as tackling obesity, research, health-promoting hospitals, training, smoking, workplace health promotion, men's health, mental health and breast feeding. We also noted the work of the All-Ireland Institute of Public Health, particularly in relation to tackling health inequalities. We also noted joint working in regard to the promotion of mental health and, in particular that an all-island suicide prevention action plan has been developed and agreed.

In discussions, we also agreed that aspects of the Internet played a significant negative role in relation to suicide, and we confirmed that we would work together to influence change in that area.

In the second part of the meeting, we addressed the work of the Food Safety Promotion Board, which trades under the name SafeFood. The Council received and noted a progress report from Martin Higgins, the CEO of SafeFood. We welcomed the wide range of promotional activities that it had undertaken and the support given to the food laboratory sector over the past five years.

The Council noted the plans for SafeFood for 2008-10. The plans included the rolling out of five major consumer information campaigns; the delivery of a joined-up approach to food safety and healthy eating in partnership with sponsor Departments, other food safety bodies and other responsible agencies; the establishment of a collaborative forum to tackle obesity; and the development and maintenance of in-house knowledge and expertise to reliably interpret the scientific evidence to inform its activities.

We approved the SafeFood corporate plan for 2008-10 and business plan for 2008, subject to the agreement of the respective finance Departments, as well as the budgetary considerations by the Executive and the Irish Government. The Council noted SafeFood's annual report and accounts for 2006, which will be laid before the Assembly soon.

We also considered a proposal from SafeFood on enteric reference services — expert analysis, interpretation, advice and samples related to diseases affecting the gastrointestinal tract — for the island of Ireland. The proposal summarises possible options regarding the provision of enteric reference laboratory services to meet the needs of service users in both jurisdictions and to further enhance public health. Following consideration of the paper by experts and the two sponsor Departments, a report will be brought to a future sectoral meeting. The Council agreed to meet in the health and food safety sectoral format in spring 2008.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): I thank the Minister for his statement. As he knows, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety is undertaking an inquiry into the prevention of suicide and self-harm in Northern Ireland, and I note that the Minister referred to the development of an all-island suicide prevention action plan. Can the Minister provide any further update on the action plan, and inform us of whether it includes any specific targets?

Mr McGimpsey: Members are aware that there is a strategy to counter suicide in Northern Ireland. The Republic of Ireland also has a strategy to deal with suicide in the Twenty-six Counties. The all-island

action plan looks at ways that the two plans can work together; for example, by keeping each jurisdiction informed of the other's strategy, as well as sharing information and good practice.

No specific action has been devised that can prevent suicide, and, therefore, each jurisdiction is developing menus and sharing good practice. As part of this joint strategy, a representative from the Irish Republic attends the meetings of the strategic implementation body in Northern Ireland and shares this information with our counterparts in the South.

We also have an all-island public information campaign known as "It's Me" and "the Box". This involves adverts running in the North and the South as part of a campaign to promote good mental health and to counter suicide. As part of this, we also have the five nations working group, which involves the sharing of good practice as well as discussing the harm being done by the Internet in this area.

Therefore, although there are action plans in both Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, the all-island action plan is about seeing how the two can complement each other.

Mr McElduff: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis.

The Minister may know that I take a particular interest in the two pilot projects, commissioned by Cooperation and Working Together, for cross-border GP out-of-hours services. I understand that those projects are in the Derry/Inishowen and Keady/Crossmaglen/Castleblayney areas. Will the Minister tell the House whether any consideration is being given to further expanding that necessary cross-border service? There is a perfectly good out-of-hours health centre in Strabane, for example, that can benefit people living one mile away in Lifford and who instead are being encouraged to go to Letterkenny, 15 miles away. That would be a practical outworking of a necessary project, and I would like to see it expanded into the Lifford/Strabane area and, indeed, to other areas along the border. It makes sense to have a seamless provision of health services.

Will the Minister also comment on the implementation of the agreement between Belfast City Hospital, Altnagelvin Hospital and the Health Service Executive to provide cancer patients from Donegal with radiotherapy treatment at Belfast City Hospital? Is there a move to provide services either at Altnagelvin or Letterkenny for the benefit of people in the north-west?

Mr McGimpsey: Cooperation and Working Together — an organisation that, through funding from the EU, examines marginalisation in border areas — is looking at GP out-of-hours services. A pilot project has just been completed in the Londonderry/Letterkenny area and is being evaluated. Another pilot has been launched

in the Keady/Castleblayney area. Once those pilots have been completed and the evaluations carried out, we will be in a position to determine how we should respond. If there is good practice and the need is there, that will inform our response.

With regard to the arrangements for radiotherapy treatment, cancer patients from Donegal can access the service at the cancer centre in Belfast City Hospital. That has been agreed between my Department and the Department of Health and Children in the Republic. Approximately 50 patients a year from Donegal use that service. As Members will be aware, the cancer centre in Belfast will have reached capacity by 2015. There are eight radiotherapy machines at present, and the facility can take two more before it reaches capacity. The question then is how do we expand after that — and that is looking purely at Northern Ireland.

One of the suggested options is to develop a subregional centre at Altnagelvin, which would work closely with, and be integrated with, Belfast City Hospital. That raises the question, which the Dublin Government have asked, of whether the capacity could be built in to allow patients from Donegal to access the service. The Republic would pay for the capacity and for its patients to access it. It is an ongoing programme, and I am discussing the matter with Mary Harney. The planning has to start now because it will take from now to 2015 to get everything in place.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I welcome the Minister's statement, particularly the reference to the activities of the Food Safety Promotion Board. Will the Minister give Members some enlightenment on the work of the board in connection with the use of pesticides in food that is grown in both sections of our country? Will he also tell us whether any tribute was paid to Mr Bertie Kerr, who for eight years was chairman of the Food Safety Promotion Board? There should be some recognition of the excellent work that he did in leading the board from its inception to the present time.

11.15 am

Mr McGimpsey: We paid tribute to Bertie Kerr at the meeting. He has been in post for nine years, and he did not expect to be doing the job for that long when he took up office. He has worked very hard and diligently and has been a strong promoter of the work of the Food Safety Promotion Board.

Pesticides and food form part of the remit of the Food Safety Promotion Board, which aims to ensure that food safety is promoted and that food is not polluted by pesticides, for example. The board is keeping a very close watch on that issue, and it keeps up to date on best practice in other areas of the UK and Europe. That is why the Food Safety Promotion Board is an important body that does important work, and why it has been one of the most non-contentious areas of cross-border

co-operation from its inception. I believe that it will go from strength to strength.

Mrs Hanna: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the number of areas on which work is being undertaken. Although I have my own contact with our opposite numbers on the Committee on Health and Children in the Republic, I would welcome more detail and feedback on those matters.

The Minister's statement addressed the challenge of lifestyles. Will the Minister inform the House whether alcohol abuse, binge drinking and the associated problems, such as family breakdown and attacks on health staff, were mentioned during discussions?

Mr McGimpsey: I take Mrs Hanna's point about information, and, of course, I am happy to undertake to provide whatever information that I can.

This was our first meeting since restoration, but health promotion and alcohol abuse will certainly form part of our discussions — as will suicide prevention, which was raised by Mrs Robinson, and the other lifestyle issues with which we are familiar, such as obesity and family breakdown, which were discussed, although only in general terms, at the meeting. I have no doubt that we will rise to the task ahead.

Dr Deeny: I thank the Minister for his statement. I am pleased to hear that the first health and food safety sectoral meeting has taken place. That is important for all of us, particularly those of us who live in the border counties.

I concur with my West Tyrone colleague Barry McElduff, and I encourage the Minister and his counterpart in the South to continue with the GP out-of-hours centres on either side of the border so that it will not matter where one falls sick, because a patient will be seen in the most convenient GP centre.

One of the five areas that the Minister mentioned is emergency care, which I have been talking about for some time. Do the Minister and his counterpart recognise that when planning for major emergencies, the roads that offer access to accident and emergency departments play a major role? On the north-west road from Dublin, there is not one accident and emergency department. Since the closure of the Omagh and Monaghan hospitals, there is also no accident and emergency department on the N2 from Dublin, which becomes the A5 at Aughnacloy. There is no provision until one reaches Derry, where there is an accident and emergency department at Altnagelvin. There is another at Letterkenny.

That is a major road of about 175 miles that is increasingly used by many people on the island of Ireland to travel between Dublin and the north-west —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Dr Deeny, please ask your question.

Dr Deeny: Is the Minister, or his counterpart in the South, Mary Harney, not aware of the glaring absence of an accident and emergency department on a major route from Dublin to the north west of the island of Ireland? What happens if a major incident occurs on that road? That is a glaring deficiency in emergency medical care. Has no one, North or South, been made aware of that?

Mr McGimpsey: Dr Deeny will be aware that the one-hour rule operates in Northern Ireland. Therefore, everyone living in Northern Ireland is within one hour of an accident and emergency department, and it is my responsibility to deliver on that rule.

Discussions have taken place and operations are under way on cross-border planning for major emergencies. For example, last year "Exercise Medical Bridge" required ambulance services, military personnel and police from both jurisdictions to work together in response to a supposed major medical incident. We are also examining co-operation on a possible pandemic flu outbreak in the UK, on the island of Ireland and in Europe, as such outbreaks are not only regional: they can be on a national and international scale.

We are reviewing fire and ambulance services in border areas, in particular the first responder scheme. We are also looking at road traffic accident hot spots and how emergency services can respond and deliver support and medical assistance as and when it is necessary.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Twelve Members are still on the list to ask questions. I ask Members to be brief when asking their questions.

Mr Buchanan: Although the matter has already been referred to, will the Minister tell me who will be responsible for funding radiotherapy treatment for patients from County Donegal? Will he confirm that cancer patients in Northern Ireland will neither lose out nor be placed on longer waiting lists as a result of the agreement? Will he inform the House of the current waiting times for patients in Northern Ireland requiring that treatment?

Mr McGimpsey: There are no waiting times for radiotherapy treatment: patients are seen immediately. As Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, my responsibility is to deliver services for the people of Northern Ireland. As capacity in the radiotherapy centre in Belfast City Hospital will be outgrown by 2015, I, as Minister, through the Department and with support from the House and the Executive, will plan for the delivery of an increase in services. My preference is for services at Altnagelvin Hospital, which will also benefit cross-border patients in County Donegal. The Dublin Government are also making that point and will pay for any extra capacity required and

any usage by people in the Irish Republic. However, my first responsibility is to patients in Northern Ireland, and my planning for 2015 will take that on board.

Mr McCartney: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas.

With regard to the Minister's response to the previous question, is there any possibility that a new centre could be up and running before full capacity is reached in 2015, and that it would be at Altnagelvin Hospital, as the Minister has already indicated?

Mr McGimpsey: That is clearly a possibility. We are looking at that as well as expanding services in Belfast. There are problems with people having to travel from areas such as Londonderry and Coleraine to Belfast for radiotherapy treatment. The question is whether capacity should be placed outside Belfast City Hospital while continuing to work closely with the hospital? Altnagelvin Hospital, as a sub-regional hospital, is one of the preferred options. The decision must be made and the capacity must be in place by 2015, and Altnagelvin Hospital is a possibility.

Mr Easton: Will the Minister outline the possible cost for Northern Ireland of the safefood corporate plan?

Mr McGimpsey: There will be a 2:5 split in the cost. The cost of running the body was around £7 million per annum, which will translate to £2 million for Northern Ireland and £5 million for the Irish Republic, approximately.

The new budget for that body has not been agreed. Our share must first be agreed by the Executive, followed by the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Department of Finance and Personnel; however, it will be of that order of magnitude.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the Minister's statement, and I also wish to be associated with the remarks about Bertie Kerr and his excellent work over the eight or nine years that he has been involved with the Food Safety Promotion Board.

I particularly welcome cross-border co-operation in emergency planning, and the Minister's earlier response about new developments at Altnagelvin will be welcomed by residents in that area. What developments in such co-operation does the Minister envisage, particularly for the new Erne Hospital and — closer to home for me — Daisy Hill Hospital? Does the Minister consider the North/South co-operation between Daisy Hill and County Louth in the treatment of patients to be a way forward in the delivery of good quality services in rural areas in Northern Ireland?

Mr McGimpsey: The decision to provide acute services in the new Erne Hospital was based purely on the needs of people in Northern Ireland — specifically, in the south-west. That was the limit of my responsibility; however, there are possibilities for cross-border

co-operation in instances of mutual benefit to the people of Northern Ireland and those in the Irish Republic, which are the responsibility of the Republic's Minister for Health and Children, Mary Harney. The same principle also applies to Daisy Hill Hospital.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his statement and his ministerial colleagues for their work in the sectoral meeting. In the short time available, it is difficult to do justice to such an extensive agenda. Therefore, I hope that the Minister will be sufficiently encouraged by Members' interest in these matters to hold the next sectoral meeting in early, rather than late, spring in order that we might hear more about progress.

I want the Minister to address two areas. He has covered the first in his answers to other questions, and he will not be surprised to hear that that concerns the provision of cancer services. The development of radiotherapy services at Altnagelvin should not be considered merely as an issue for the north-west, any more than other investment in the cancer strategy should be considered as a geographical issue — including the previous Executive's investment in the cancer centre at Belfast City Hospital. I hope that the Minister will work with Mary Harney to secure funding to make that a reality sooner rather than later, possibly utilising some of the unallocated reserves in the South's national development plan.

Secondly, the Minister spoke of possible cross-border plans to tackle pandemic flu as part of an EU-wide exercise. Will he tell us more about that, and do such plans depend on close-to-home or EU issues?

Mr McGimpsey: I have nothing further to add to what I have said about cancer services and the need to plan for increased capacity.

We are discussing the possibility of holding regular meetings about pandemic flu to address issues relating to communication, vaccination, and so on. As Northern Ireland is the only area of the UK with a land border with a country outside the UK, those meetings will be relevant to the UK and the island of Ireland. In addition, such plans must also be integrated with EU policies. Questions will arise about the various governmental responses during such an outbreak, the importance of a common message to our respective populations and common planning for air travel, and so on. Those are the areas that we are discussing, and we are part of the UK-wide response strategy, into which the Government in the Irish Republic will feed — all of which will feed into the EU as a whole.

11.30 am

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá ceist agam don Aire. I have a question for the Minister. I welcome his statement, and thank him especially for information on the GP out-of-hours service in the Keady, Castleblayney and Crossmaglen

areas. Sadly, the Minister made no mention of the proposed North/South interconnector and the 400-kilovolt overhead cable that will pass through County Armagh. What consultation has he had with other Ministers here and with his counterpart in the South about allaying people's fears and public perceptions about the health implications of the interconnector? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McGimpsey: The provision of the interconnector is out of my hands. It is not the responsibility of Health Departments, North or South; the responsibility is wider. When a decision is made, and when I know what that decision is, I will examine the health implications. However, evidence of such implications is varied.

Mr Shannon: In his statement, the Minister referred to:

“continuing co-operation on accident and emergency services.”

A helicopter service is one method of response to accident and emergency situations. Has consideration been given to providing a helicopter service on a North/South basis? I ask that question, because I am aware of a group called Alpha 5, which is very keen that the emergency services in Northern Ireland should have a helicopter. Bearing in mind that a helicopter can respond more quickly than an ambulance to emergencies on land or at sea, and that road congestion was mentioned earlier, it is vitally important for responding to emergencies, and I ask the Minister to consider it.

Mr McGimpsey: There have been preliminary discussions about an accident-and-emergency helicopter service. The provision of a helicopter is one issue; the provision of its crew is another. Providing a skilled, trained crew would have revenue consequences. I do not have resources for that in my budget, nor have I bid for them. The idea has been raised, and I have had preliminary discussions about it. I agree that an emergency helicopter would add greatly to response times and would be a major help to the Ambulance Service in dealing with accident and emergency situations.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Fáiltím roimh ráiteas an Aire faoi chúrsaí sláinte agus chúrsaí comhoibrithe Thuaidh/Theas.

I welcome the Minister's statement on co-operation in various North/South health matters. I am sure that he is aware of the recent report from the Centre for Cross Border Studies entitled 'Removing the Barriers: An Initial Report on the Potential for Greater Cross-Border Co-operation in Hospital Services in Ireland'. One of the proposals in the report refers to a previous report — the Teamwork Report — and the possibility of a major hospital being sited north of Dublin that would also serve south Down and south Armagh. The Centre for Cross Border Studies report also refers to the potential of such a project and its implications for Daisy Hill Hospital in Newry.

Will the Minister assure the House that, in any future discussion that he might have on the issue, he will ensure that the status of Daisy Hill Hospital in Newry and its range of services will be defended and maintained in the context of future North/South co-operation?

Mr McGimpsey: I have not discussed the Dublin Government's provision of a new hospital in Louth; that is Mary Harney's responsibility. As Minister for Health and Children, she must provide for the people who live within her jurisdiction. My responsibility lies north of the border, and Daisy Hill Hospital plays a key role in the provision of services in Newry and south Down.

Therefore, it is not a matter for me; it is a matter for the Dublin Government, which will make their decisions known in due course. It is no secret that Dundalk and Drogheda are being discussed as possible venues for the new hospital.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the work that is being carried out by the Food Safety Promotion Board. Does the Minister agree that the procurement of local produce is essential to the health and well-being of patients in our hospitals, particularly seasonal foods, local meat, chicken and organic produce? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McGimpsey: I wholeheartedly agree with the remarks on the procurement of local produce; that is important. Too often, people buy what appears to be the cheapest option, but, in the long run, as we are now aware, it ends up being more expensive. That is particularly the case when taking into account the carbon footprint that results from buying some foods from supermarkets. Local produce is available, and it is every bit as good and nutritious as supermarket products. Moreover, in the long term, local produce is not as harmful as far as the planet is concerned.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister and commend him on many of the practical steps that he has outlined. My question is about the promotion of good mental health and suicide prevention. I noted the answer that was given to the Chairperson of the Health Committee when she asked about targets. The answer did not make it clear what those targets are. The Minister stated that:

“an all-island suicide prevention action plan has been developed and agreed.”

Is it possible for Members to see the details of that plan?

Mr McGimpsey: There is a close working relationship between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic on the issue of suicide prevention. The Member is aware that we have a suicide prevention action plan in Northern Ireland. The action plan is managed by an implemen-

tation body, which is chaired by Colm Donaghy. That body includes interested parties, including bereaved families.

We share best practice and are holding ongoing discussions with the Irish Republic, which is facing similar challenges. Discussions are also ongoing with our counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales. I am happy to share any detail that I have because it is important that we get the message out as best we can. Therefore, I am happy to write to the Member.

December Monitoring Outcome

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement on the December monitoring outcome.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): The following statement regarding spending in 2007-08 after the conclusion of the December monitoring round is made on behalf of the Executive. The December round is the third of the 2007-08 financial year. Members will by now be well aware of the role and purpose of the in-year process. It is, in simple terms, intended to help the Executive to make the most of the resources at their disposal. The first stage in that process is the identification by Departments of resources allocated in previous Budget processes, which, for a variety of reasons, will not be spent in the financial year.

In overview, reduced requirements declared by Departments in the monitoring round amount to £107.4 million in respect of current expenditure, and £132.3 million in respect of capital investment. The level of reduced requirements declared in the round is much greater than the levels that were identified at the corresponding time in previous years, and the amount declared to date for this financial year is some 12% greater than the totality of all reduced requirements that were declared last year.

That position firmly indicates that Departments have robustly reviewed their in-year financial position and have sought to declare reduced requirements at a time when the Executive can make best use of those resources, rather than simply allowing the amounts to fall as year-end underspend, as has often been the case in the past.

That robust assessment of in-year requirements also indicates that my Executive colleagues are working to improve the level and quality of financial management in Departments. I commend them and encourage them to build on that.

I cannot overstate the importance of embedding the highest standards of financial management in the public sector. In that context, I am grateful to the Committee for Finance and Personnel for the valuable and positive contribution it made to the issue last week, as part of its response to the draft Budget. I look forward to working closely with the Committee on that issue.

However, although acknowledging the improving position on reduced requirements, I must also register a note of caution regarding another aspect of financial management — particularly in the context of the parallel Budget process. It must be recognised that the amounts identified as reduced requirements in this monitoring round represent allocations that were made to Departments in previous Budget processes in

response to bids from those Departments. Although I recognise that some of that reduced need may have arisen as a consequence of greater-than-planned efficiency in Departments, the more significant factors are that Departments overstated their original resource needs or have not delivered the planned level of public services underpinning those Budget bids.

Members, and my colleagues in the Executive, will agree that neither of the above situations is acceptable, and I must bear that in mind as we consider the final Budget proposals for the next three years. It will take the form of a robust challenge to, and scrutiny of, departmental spending proposals while seeking to develop further a culture of delivery, with appropriate mechanisms to monitor and drive performance. Details of all of the reduced requirements declared by Departments are set out in Table 1 of my statement. Against that level of reduced requirements, Departments have submitted current expenditure bids of £82 million and capital investment bids amounting to £134.5 million.

I now turn to the position regarding current expenditure. The Executive are in a position, uniquely, to address all of the bids that have been submitted by Departments. I do not propose to explain each bid in detail; however, this monitoring round has allowed significant resources to be allocated to priority services such as education, health and regional development, while addressing other important issues raised by Departments.

For the Department of Education, the main component of its £15.3 million allocation will allow it to meet the additional costs, some £12 million, arising from the classroom assistants' dispute. The allocation of £17 million to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will allow it to allocate £14 million towards addressing costs associated with the review of public administration, which would otherwise fall to be met during the Budget period. That allocation will remove the need for the Department, over the Budget period, to divert resources away from other areas to address the RPA pressure.

For the Department for Regional Development, additional resources of £28.5 million will allow it to address a number of issues, most notably, the ongoing costs of the water Go-co and investment in roads structural maintenance.

With respect to capital investment, the Executive have agreed to allocate £74.1 million to Departments. That sum includes £22.7 million to the Department for Regional Development to meet the increased land costs associated with the A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue road scheme and to enable completion of the Newry to Dundalk road scheme.

Almost £50 million has been allocated to the Department for Social Development for a range of social housing initiatives, including the co-ownership scheme, the warm homes scheme and the social housing development programme. That money will enable the Department to achieve its target of starting 1,500 new social houses this year, and, under the co-ownership scheme, assist 525 applicants into home ownership.

The consequence of the level of reduced requirements and bids met is that, for current expenditure, the level of planned over-commitment is now £63.5 million.

That is in line with the Department's target of £50 million at the conclusion of the February 2008 monitoring round and represents satisfactory progress in the management of that key issue.

11.45 am

With regard to capital investment, there are now unallocated resources of some £57 million. That reflects the fact that many Departments have identified slippage in planned projects and the simple reality that it is difficult to accelerate other capitals projects in order to consume those resources at a relatively late stage in the financial year. That position emphasises the point that I have made about the need for continued improvements in financial and, indeed, project management. All unspent resources will continue to be available for carry forward for the Executive's use in the future. The final opportunity to review the in-year position will be February 2008. However, the February monitoring round offers limited opportunity to address issues due to the timing of the round and the constraints imposed by the spring Supplementary Estimates position.

In conclusion, therefore, I reiterate the good work that Departments have done to robustly assess their in-year requirements. I am confident that through that — aligned with my Department's ongoing work to improve the level and quality of financial management across all Departments — we will see better financial performance at all levels in those Departments. I commend the December monitoring position to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. It is a positive outcome. I extend my congratulations to all concerned.

The fact that the Minister is in a position to meet all bids shows that Ministers have responded to the general encouragement, supported by their respective scrutiny Committees, to ensure that capital and resource bids are realistically maxed to capacity and the ability to deploy and use those financial resources. Locally elected Ministers have clearly demonstrated that they have taken a sustainable and robust approach

to the matter. I support the Minister's comments on that improvement and the need for it to continue.

On Monday 25 June 2007, during his statement on the June monitoring round, the Minister stated that:

"The optimum would be to reduce the underspend to close to 1%." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 23, p 4, col 1*].

The Committee for Finance and Personnel has made recommendations on that as part of its recent report on the draft Budget. How confident is the Minister that that can be achieved for 2007-08? What actions are his officials taking towards that?

Mr P Robinson: I welcome the Committee Chairperson's remarks. Although one swallow does not make a summer, the evidence shows that the devolved Ministers have been more focused and have kept their eye on the ball. They have recognised that for the money to be of value to the whole of Northern Ireland, it is necessary to identify any reduced requirements as early as possible. The fact that that is the highest level that there has been at this point in the year, and that all the bids have been met, indicates that Ministers have done the job that the Assembly, during previous debates, quite rightly directed their attention towards.

With regard to the goal of an underspend that is close to 1%, all that my departmental officials can do is examine the evidence that they receive from officials in other Departments, which they monitor regularly. If the information that my Department has received from other Departments is accurate, that target should be realised. Of course, that will require Ministers and their officials to continue to monitor closely any prospective reduced requirement so that it can be used in February 2008, so that we do not end up with a massive underspend at the end of the year and will not have to go through the ordeal of having to bid it back from Treasury.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Storey): I welcome the Minister's statement. In particular, I welcome his comments about the Committee's work, which he said was helpful, valuable and positive. The Committee's report on the draft Budget emphasised the importance of regular Statutory Committee scrutiny of the monitoring process and, in particular, the need for Departments to provide Committees with the necessary information in a timely and accessible manner.

Will the Minister confirm that there is a standard format for departmental monitoring submissions to the Department of Finance and Personnel? Moreover, will the Minister comment on the possibility of his officials working with all Departments to agree a standard format for providing Committees with financial information to meet their needs?

Mr P Robinson: I thank the Deputy Chairman of the Committee for Finance and Personnel for his

comments. There has consistently been, in the early stage of each financial year, a process whereby my officials have issued guidance to each Department on setting out the timetable for the in-year monitoring process and required inputs from each of those Departments. I, of course, would be happy for my officials to work with Departments — and, indeed, the Committee for Finance and Personnel — to develop a standard approach to facilitate Committee considerations and scrutiny of those inputs into that important process. Therefore, I support the comments of the Deputy Chairman of the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the Minister's assessment that his colleagues are working to improve the level and quality of financial management in their Departments. It is important that the block grant is not returned to the Treasury at the end of the year and that it is put to good use in Northern Ireland. Is the Minister confident that no moneys will be returned to the Treasury at the end of the year and that moneys will have been usefully allocated and accounted for?

I notice that, in respect of the review of non-cash requirements, the largest single item — that of £17.9 million — was returned by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. As the term "non-cash requirements" does not provide much information, will the Minister provide some additional information about that matter? Is the Minister confident that the areas of increased expenditure that were included in the draft Budget can be effectively managed to indicate confidence in its future management?

Mr P Robinson: If I heard the Member correctly, he asked — in the early part of his question — whether I could offer some type of guarantee that no money would be handed back to the Treasury. There will never be a year when no money will be held back, unless a disaster occurs and we overspend. The sanctions for overspending are much greater than those for underspending. If we underspend, we can bid to have those moneys returned to us. We must ensure that as little money as possible is returned to the Treasury as a result of underspending and make certain that we get that money back by ensuring that we have EYF from the Treasury on a planned basis. We have managed to do that for the next three years as part of the Budget process.

The Member for East Antrim made particular reference to the £17.9 million that was returned by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. My Department has carried out a review of non-cash requirements that resulted in reduced requirements with regard to provisions, impairments and cost of capital in a number of business areas. There is a sum of £5.5 million of non-cash easement from Invest Northern Ireland; £5.9 million from central administration; £6.4 million from Harland and Wolff's asbestosis provision; and £300,000 from depreciation reduction.

Mr A Maginness: I too welcome the Minister's statement. I particularly note the £49·7 million that has been allocated to the Department for Social Development, which will permit the completion of 1,500 homes. I particularly welcome that allocation because extra money was given to that Department in the October monitoring round. That should enable the Department to reach its target, and that is to be welcomed.

As the Minister will probably be aware, the warm homes scheme is oversubscribed, and the allocation will help to ease the pressure. Furthermore, it will also be of great assistance to the co-ownership scheme. In effect, the co-ownership scheme pays for itself in that receipts go back to the Department of Finance and Personnel. The statement is good news.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Maginness, will you come to the question, please?

Mr A Maginness: I hope that the Minister will be equally generous to the Department in the forthcoming Budget by increasing the funding to areas where it is most needed — in particular, social housing, so that the target of starting to build at least 1,500 social houses can be met.

Mr P Robinson: I do not mind the Member going on at length if he is making supportive comments.

I hope that the allocations that have been made, in the October monitoring round and in this monitoring round, confirm the priority that the Executive have, as a whole, given to social housing. We are all aware of the growing waiting lists and the need for social housing. The Executive have made this issue a priority in the draft Programme for Government, the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland and the draft Budget. The targets are there, and they are there to be met. I am glad that this allocation will allow the Minister for Social Development to achieve the kind of figures that Mr Maginness has outlined. In addition to the figure allocated for social housing, there is also the benefit from co-ownership for affordable housing.

I hope that Mr Maginness will recognise that the priorities that have been set in the monitoring rounds indicate the kind of priorities that the Executive will set in the Budget. He will have to wait for only a very short period for that, and I hope that he will find that this monitoring round is a harbinger of the Budget.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to be brief. I know that all Ministers love to hear flattering comments, but 11 Members still have to speak, and I have no guarantee that all their remarks will be flattering. I call Mr Ford from the long list of Members in front of me.

Mr S Wilson: He is never flattering.

Mr Ford: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I take that endorsement from the Chair with enthusiasm.

I thank the Minister for the statement, and, in purely financial terms, it recognises significant achievement this year. However, the Minister has outlined three possible reasons for the release of funding: greater than planned efficiency in Departments — which he appears to think is the least important factor; the overstating of resource needs by Departments; and the fact that Departments have not delivered the planned level of public services. Given that every other debate in the Chamber concerns the need for an increased level of public services, will the Minister give Members an assessment of what he thinks the balance is between the two key factors? Is it more a case of the overstatement of requirements or of failure to meet planned needs? In particular, does he recognise that it is clear from Committee reports that a significant increase in the level of public services is required across a range of services?

Mr P Robinson: The Member should firstly recognise that the role of an opposition politician — and he very much tries to mould himself as the Leader of the Opposition — is not always to oppose; at times, it is to support. He should perhaps take a lesson out of the playbook of David Cameron, who recognises that, at times, he has to support the Government in their plans. He does not always have to introduce “however” into his remarks.

My statement is a good-news statement. We must recognise that Ministers have been operating under a direct rule Budget. The expenditure that Ministers have been given is not what they determined to be the appropriate expenditure. They are working off the figures produced under direct rule, which obviously will change when we have our own Budget.

12.00 noon

We do look for greater efficiency, and it is obvious that we want the highest level of public services that our resources allow — I made that point in my statement. Indeed, there are indications that there was too much fat in certain areas of that Budget. However, the Member will note that with regard to the allocations that I have made, in virtually every case in which Ministers gave money back to the centre, I gave it back to them for another purpose, so that they could use it for their own departmental priorities.

Mr Weir: I wonder whether the leader of the Alliance Party models himself more on Ming Campbell than David Cameron.

Mr McCallister: Look what happened to him.

Mr Weir: I will not waste time by lavishing praise on the Minister's excellent statement. He has made a significant announcement on capital allocation of more than £49 million to the Department for Social Development. Will he tell the House what the total allocation for social housing has been in this year's

monitoring rounds and what signal that sends out about the priority he attaches to that area of expenditure?

Mr P Robinson: My best recollection is that approximately £23 million was allocated in the October monitoring round. The Member can quickly do the mathematics for himself by adding on the amount allocated in the December monitoring round. As a rule of thumb, £100,000 is usually equivalent to one new housing start — and the Member can do the maths again.

In considering social housing, or many other areas of need, it is clear that what cannot be achieved through the Budget process can often be augmented by the in-year monitoring process — and while that cannot be factored in at the initial stage, it is always of assistance to us in meeting the targets that we have set. However, as far as social housing is concerned, I repeat the commitment that I made to the House when I told the leader of the SDLP that I was a signed-up member of Margaret Ritchie's club as regards obtaining the funds for the Department for Social Development. I also said that we would examine the work of the capital realisation task force in order to augment the draft Budget statement by the time the Budget is presented.

Mr F McCann: A LeasCheann Comhairle, I welcome the Minister's allocation of an additional £73 million to the Department for Social Development for social housing, the warm homes scheme and co-ownership in the October and December monitoring rounds. Considerable additional investment will be required over many years if we are to deal effectively with the shortage of affordable social housing and the mess that was left by direct rule Ministers.

The Department for Social Development and the Housing Executive have said that no new houses will be built next year. Given that dire prediction, will the Minister comment on the impact that the Department for Social Development's £18.6 million underspend will have on the social housing newbuild programme?

Mr P Robinson: Let me be clear. I would be very disappointed if having allocated tens of millions to a Department it could not build new houses with that money. I had a discussion with the Minister for Social Development yesterday on whether to calculate the number of houses built on the basis of starts or completions. That is an issue that the Executive must consider also.

The man or woman in the street would prefer that houses are built and that people move in, rather than being told that allocations have been made or that tender agreements have been signed. To me, completions are much more important overall. The targets that were set in the draft Programme for Government, the investment strategy and the draft Budget were based on completions: perhaps we can move in that direction.

The target of 2,000 affordable social houses each year has been set. I believe that it is a minimum target, which, if possible, I would like to exceed. Although some "cranking-up" may need to be done to get to that level, the target has been set by the Executive, and that is what the Executive will be judged by.

Therefore, it will be up to the Executive as a whole to ensure that the resources are there. It will be up to the Minister to deliver on the ground. We will all be judged on the basis of whether we meet those targets.

Mr Hamilton: There has been much concentration on, and concern expressed about, the legacy of the level of overcommitment that has been inherited from direct rule. Will the Minister explain what consequence the improving financial management that he spoke of in his statement has for the setting of the level of overcommitment in the Budget?

Mr P Robinson: In response to the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I said that one swallow does not necessarily mean that we are entering summer, and the current situation does not indicate that we are. If that trend were to continue, there would be a lower level of underspend at the end of the year. Therefore, in the draft Budget, we have been prudent in reducing the degree of overcommitment. We have taken the right steps, and we must be cautious. We will know more clearly at the February monitoring round and at the end of the financial year whether that trend has continued. I predict that the reason that the Executive have managed to achieve a larger level of underspend in the early part of the financial year is because the devolved Ministers have focused on the issue.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the Minister's statement, and I welcome the money for the investment in roads structural maintenance. Maintenance of our roads has been underfunded, so the investment is welcome. I also welcome the money for the Beech Hill to Cloghogue part of the A1 scheme. The Minister will, of course, be aware that the rising costs of that scheme are the consequence of increased land values. In the need to improve the project management, what measures has he taken to ensure that that does not happen again?

Mr P Robinson: It will be a matter for the Minister for Regional Development to make the appropriate judgement on the likely costs, and his officials will do that. No Minister could be blamed for the variable land costs, which have increased significantly over the past few years. Particularly over the past year, land and property prices have increased significantly and neither the Minister nor his officials could have predicted that level of increase. However, it is not the current Minister who is responsible because the figures were set much earlier, during the period of direct rule. The trends in the land and property markets must be taken into account and the best possible judgement must be

made, but no one can predict whether the market will rise or fall at a particular level. One must make one's best judgement at the time. At least we have been able to address that issue in the in-year monitoring round, so, happily, it will not hold back the scheme, and we can proceed as planned.

Mr Durkan: First, I ask the Minister to take the flattery as read. Has the Minister identified any pattern and form in capital slippage, not only in particular Departments, but in areas that have been tested for PFI consideration? Has there been greater delivery and less slippage in projects that are being assisted by the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) than in those that are being taken forward by the Departments without SIB involvement?

On a number of points, the tables indicate that there have been allocations as contributions to pension funds. Has the Minister carried out an overall health check on the state of public-sector pension funds to ensure that they are not faced with serial difficulties?

Will the Minister also explain for what purpose the subsidy of Northern Ireland Water is being used? The Executive have said that they will not privatise the water service, but Northern Ireland Water is increasingly using private contractors. Does that money go to Northern Ireland Water, or through Northern Ireland Water to the contractors?

Mr P Robinson: It would be more appropriate to put some of those questions to the Ministers who have direct ministerial responsibility for the subjects concerned.

The Member asked me whether there are any patterns to capital slippage. To some extent, when a Finance Minister receives money from Departments, few questions are asked. However, perhaps my Department should examine the patterns more closely. When capital schemes have not proceeded, it has always been the standard practice of Government to recoup the money.

It is not simply a matter of whether the Strategic Investment Board or PFI schemes have been at fault, although I will try to judge to what extent any slippage is tied up with those. However, the Member knows that legal and planning issues and regulations — particularly for roads — can cause schemes to slip. Indeed, priorities often change when one Minister replaces another. Therefore, there is a variety of reasons behind that level of slippage.

The 2007-08 Budget allocations were set prior to the agreement of Northern Ireland Water's strategic business plan in March 2007, when it was agreed that the residual subsidy requirement of £29.9 million would be considered at the in-year monitoring stage. My Department's action is consistent with that agreement. The bid of £9.4 million is to meet the remaining subsidy

required by Northern Ireland Water for the full delivery of its strategic business plan.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My question relates specifically to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and I refer the Minister to the table on page 4 of his statement. Members of the Committee — not least Mr Shannon, who is in the Chamber today — have expressed their disappointment at the amount of money intended for the establishment of an Ulster-Scots academy that has been returned. Can the Minister offer any guarantee or assurance to Members that the money can be recovered when the project is at a greater state of readiness?

Mr P Robinson: The Chairperson of the Committee may be in a better position than me to deal with several of those issues. I share his disappointment that the scheme has not proceeded. However, the Minister has done the right thing by identifying as early as possible that the project is not ready so that the money can be used elsewhere.

The scheme will not become any less beneficial simply because it cannot begin now. Undoubtedly, the Minister will make a new bid for the scheme when he considers that it is ready to go ahead. However, it is up to the Minister and his Committee to examine why the scheme has not been able to proceed at this time.

Mr McQuillan: Will the Minister indicate how his allocation to DSD will allow it to provide more social housing this year? He has touched on that subject, but I am interested in his response.

Mr P Robinson: The figures in my statement indicate that the additional amount will enable 1,500 social houses to be built this year. That money will also allow the number of houses in the co-ownership scheme to increase to 525. Together, that achieves the target of providing over 2,000 social and affordable houses in the year. Even at this stage, that exceeds the target that the Executive set in the draft Budget, draft investment strategy and draft Programme for Government. It will be up to the Executive, when they examine the final versions of those documents, to assess whether that trend can be sustained.

12.15 pm

Mrs I Robinson: For fear of being accused of flattery, I will simply welcome the statement as a whole. The Minister will be aware that the Enler project in Ballybeen was the subject of yesterday's Adjournment debate. Will he indicate whether in-year bids were made for the project, and, if so, what are his views on it?

Mr P Robinson: I confirm that neither of the Departments involved made a bid in respect of the

Enler project during the December monitoring round. Given the position that I have outlined, the likelihood is that resources would have been allocated to the relevant Department if such a bid had been made.

On 12 December 2007, my Department received a business case from the Department for Social Development — the lead Department on the project — which was also on behalf of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. On 20 December 2007, my officials raised some queries about the business case, and both Departments have now responded to those queries. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety responded on 9 January 2008, and the Department for Social Development responded on 14 January 2008. My officials will continue to examine the business case, and it will be up to those Departments to make any bids.

Perhaps it is worth pointing out that we are in a unique position in that some capital is still available — Ministers can still make bids with the hope of having them met, provided that the business cases for their projects meet the necessary criteria. Therefore, both Ministers may wish to consider their position in the light of where we now stand as regards capital allocations.

Mr Ross: I note from the Minister's statement that there are reduced requirements of £132.3 million in respect of capital investment, and that total bids allocated for capital investment amount to £74.1 million. That may cause confusion, particularly among the public. Will the Minister elaborate on why bids were not met if the money was available?

Mr P Robinson: The bids that were not met fell into three categories. There was a bid from the Department for Regional Development relating to funding for Northern Ireland Water. The issue was simply whether the organisation needed that funding during this financial year. Our view was that it did not need the funding, although we nodded quietly in the direction of the Minister for Regional Development to indicate that if the funding were required during this financial year, we could address it in the February monitoring round. We do not think that the funding will be needed during this financial year, therefore, the allocation was not met.

Bids from the Department for Social Development related to redevelopment land. Those issues are being dealt with in the wider sense by the capital realisation task force. Our view was that the issues should be resolved by the task force before we get involved.

The final bid was from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in relation to Forkhill army barracks. The issue was that we had not agreed a business case for the project, and there are still some policy issues arising from it. Until those issues are resolved, we will not agree to the bid. If the matters are

agreed, funding could be addressed in the February monitoring round.

Mr S Wilson: It is always important to flatter one's deputy leader, so I will begin by saying that I welcome the fact that he has provided enough money for 700 new social houses, taking into account the previous monitoring round and this one. I hope that the Minister for Social Development and the housing associations will follow through with quick delivery of those projects.

I am surprised that, despite his regular pleas of poverty in the Chamber, the Minister of Health is returning £17 million of his budget at this stage of the year. Perhaps the Minister will comment on that. Furthermore, despite the Department of Education's failing to deliver the schools that were promised across Northern Ireland — including one in Island Magee in my constituency — the Minister of Education has returned nearly 10% of her capital budget, which amounts to £30 million. That is a regular occurrence with the Department of Education.

How rigorously is the Minister of Finance and Personnel testing capital bids from Departments that regularly hand back substantial amounts of money — not just once but nearly every year — to ensure that they are not overbidding, which deprives other Departments of the money, as a safeguard in case they get round to spending the money?

Mr P Robinson: I take the unusual position of defending some of my ministerial colleagues. The Member must not forget that the allocations were made on the basis of budgets which were settled by direct rule Ministers. Although money was handed back, the Member will see that, in return, I agreed to provide money for other schemes put forward by the Ministers concerned. However, there has traditionally been underspend in all those Departments during the course of financial years. Ministers are responsible for ensuring that, if money is allocated for public programmes — which are very important — they are delivered on time.

As far as education is concerned, during the process of bilaterals — I should not be turning my back on you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I was reluctant to mention it.

Mr P Robinson: During the period of bilaterals that Ministers engaged in, we robustly questioned — I am hesitant to say “cross-examined” — all the Ministers on their ability to spend the money being allocated to their Departments. That was done particularly in light of the type of evidence that the Chairperson of the Committee of Education has produced, which shows that there has been a history of underspend in some Departments — particularly in capital schemes. That is an important factor, and in time we will learn whether devolved Ministers are different from their direct rule counterparts, which I hope they are, and are able to

deliver projects as planned. It is important to emphasise that if resources are allocated to one Department but not used, another Department that could use those resources is being denied them.

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 12.23 pm.

*On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —
2.00 pm*

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Charities Bill

Second Stage

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

That the Second Stage of the Charities Bill [NIA 9/07] be agreed.

The provisions of the Bill include a series of measures that will create a new regulatory framework for the charity sector in Northern Ireland. I acknowledge the valuable and significant work carried out by charitable organisations — large and small, regional and local — operating in Northern Ireland. Their contribution to a diverse range of social, cultural, sporting and religious activities is important. It is vital that we seek to provide a structure and framework that protects and supports the charitable sector, encourages good governance and, most importantly, provides public confidence in charitable giving.

As Members will be aware, the charity sector in Northern Ireland has not, to date, been overly regulated, and it could be said that our approach has been characterised by a light touch. We have not had a register of charities or a charity commission — as exists in England and Wales. However, the environment in Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland and internationally has changed. The Department for Social Development (DSD) has carried out extensive public consultation on a range of proposals, which fed into the Charities Bill. We received numerous responses to the proposals — most of which were favourable. The Department has sought to take on board issues about which people expressed concerns.

The Bill provides for a new, more detailed definition of charities for Northern Ireland — based on that which operates in England and Wales, but with added emphasis on the promotion of peace and good community relations. That will provide clarity and reflect a more modern view of the work in which charities are engaged. It is proposed to put in place a strong public-benefit test that states that no purpose will be presumed to be for the public benefit. It will not be enough that an organisation can be considered charitable by nature of their activities; they will be required to demonstrate that in terms of public benefit. It is felt that a strong public-interest test is important to maintaining public confidence in charities.

The Bill also establishes a new regulatory body, known as the charity commission for Northern Ireland.

That organisation will have a chief charity commissioner, a deputy and three to five commissioners. It will increase public trust and confidence in charities and promote compliance by the charity sector.

The Bill will establish a compulsory Northern Ireland register of charities, which will include all charities that operate in Northern Ireland. The register will include details of charities, and it will be available for public inspection. The new charity commission for Northern Ireland will work with other regulators on a form of information sharing for those charities working across the islands and on an all-island basis.

All charities will be required to produce annual financial statements in a specified form relative to their income levels and supply those to the charity commission for Northern Ireland. They will also be required to submit a report on their activities during the year, demonstrating their ongoing benefit. That is most important. The commission will seek to ensure that the process of producing the returns and submitting them will be as practical as possible, without diluting the regulatory requirements.

In respect of the regulation of public charitable collections, the Bill does away with the artificial distinction between street and house-to-house collections. It brings all public charitable collections under a common umbrella and deals with all collections for charitable, philanthropic or benevolent purposes. It will establish a process whereby any organisation, whether a registered charity or not, that wishes to conduct public collections will first be required to seek a licence from the charity commission, which will entitle it to carry out collections as a fit organisation.

For each actual collection, a permit will also be required. Initially, that permit will also be sought from the commission, but, in future, it may be obtained from local authorities. That will ensure accountability and give an assurance to the public, who will be able to check with the commission whether a collection has been authorised.

The Bill will also introduce changes to the cy-pres scheme, which is a legal process that winds up charities or changes their purpose. That scheme is currently dealt with through the court system, and it is proposed that that responsibility will become that of the new charity commission, thus saving considerable expense for charitable organisations.

Finally, the Bill will introduce a new legal entity for charities, to be called charitable incorporated organisations. Its purpose is to avoid the need for charities that wish to benefit from incorporation to register as companies, thus avoiding the need for them to undergo dual regulation with the charity commission and Companies House.

The Bill contains many positives, both for the charitable sector and the general public, and I trust that the legislation will have the support of all parties. It is worth noting that the legislation has the support of all my Executive colleagues.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): The most overwhelming reason for progressing the Charities Bill is our need for legislation to modernise charity law. The Government need to create a modern legal framework that will support and encourage a vibrant and diverse third sector — a sector that plays such an important role in the lives of people in Northern Ireland. It provides vital services, strengthens communities and is often an advocate for the marginalised in our society.

The third sector has, for some considerable time, been calling for the reform of charity law. It wants registration, regulation, supervision and support. It is to be hoped that this Bill will provide all those things. The Bill also presents an opportunity for the Assembly to give legislative recognition to the important role that charities play in Northern Ireland. It is estimated that the Province's third sector has an annual turnover of £614 million and that it employs almost 4.5% of Northern Ireland's workforce. That should give Members some idea of the extent of the voluntary and community sector's contribution to society in Northern Ireland, and, indeed, to its economy.

I do not wish to go into too much detail on the Bill's specific provisions. As Members will be aware, the Committee for Social Development will conduct its own detailed scrutiny. It will form a view on the Bill's specifics in due course. However, the Committee believes that the Bill confirms the Government's commitment to the growing importance of charities in our society. I hope that the legislation will allow charities to keep pace with the modern social landscape, while ensuring that they are accountable to the public.

The Bill provides a framework within which charities can thrive and continue to provide an excellent service to society by: providing statutory definitions of "charity" and "charitable purpose"; establishing a charity commission for Northern Ireland and a charity tribunal for Northern Ireland; creating a register of charities for Northern Ireland; introducing the charitable incorporated organisations, which is a new form of charitable body; and setting out new rules on fund-raising and collections.

To put the definition of "charity" and "charitable purpose" on a statutory footing is of utmost importance. At present, there is no statutory definition of a charity — the legal concept has been developed through case law. The public must be confident that all charities have been able to demonstrate that they provide public benefit. The results of the Department for Social Development's consultation on the draft legislation in

2006 included suggestions for what any definition of a charity should include. That is something that the Committee will want to consider.

The establishment of a charity commission and a charity tribunal for Northern Ireland is most welcome. The commission will operate a register of charities, and it will perform regulatory and advisory functions. It will also allow charities to demonstrate their legitimacy and effectiveness and assure the public that, administratively, those organisations are sound.

The charity tribunal will hear appeals against some types of decisions that the commission will make. I imagine that the Committee will want to consider the cost and length of the appeals process when looking at clause 14, because we do not want the process to be onerous and inflexible for smaller charities.

There is currently no legislation for charities in Northern Ireland. However, the Bill provides for the establishment of a publicly accessible register of charities. The process of registration will require charities to provide specific documents and information to the commission. In considering that process, the Committee will wish to ensure an adequate balance between the need for accountability and transparency, and the need to reduce the regulatory burden about which charities sometimes complain.

It must be remembered that the legislation will apply to organisations of varying sizes. Some of the smaller organisations have no paid staff, and proportionality is essential.

The Bill provides a replacement for the current licensing system for street and house-to-house collections. The proposed new system to govern the collection of money for charity will ensure strict regulation so that the public, as well as the charity and the collectors, are protected.

At present, the activities of professional fund-raisers are not closely regulated in Northern Ireland. The Bill makes provision for the introduction of controls on fund-raising for charities that use professional fund-raisers and commercial concerns. Professional fund-raisers must be more accountable to the charities on whose behalf they collect.

The Committee is grateful to officials from the Department for Social Development for their briefing on the principles and detail of the Bill, and thanks them. The Committee looks forward to scrutinising the Bill in detail and, as I said earlier, I do not wish to talk about the specifics of each provision in advance of that scrutiny. It is a large and highly complex Bill, and scrutiny will require much time and effort, not only from the Committee but from the Department and from those organisations and individuals who wish to provide evidence, whether oral or written.

Looking ahead, the success of the proposed legislation, which provides only a broad framework, will depend on the introduction of further regulations and guidance. That, too, will be given careful consideration by the Committee.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for outlining the principles of the Bill, which is welcome. However, it is a complex and technical piece of legislation, with approximately 184 clauses, and it will have an impact across the community. I am sure that any difficulties will be dealt with as the Bill comes before the Committee for Social Development.

I understand that the consultation process will begin in the coming week, with advertisements in the local press. Moreover, organisations such as NICVA (Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action) will wish to consult their members. The consultation process normally lasts approximately 30 days, and I ask the Minister whether that period could, if necessary, be extended to encompass all of the groups that may wish to respond. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCallister: I declare an interest as a member of the Young Farmers Clubs of Ulster, which is a registered charity.

I pay tribute, as did Mr Hilditch, to the work of charities, large and small; they give so much to society. Everyone, whether they are making a financial contribution to a charity or working with it, must have confidence in that charity, and confidence that money is seen to be properly and appropriately used, with every penny accounted for. That is why the Bill is important and why it has gained so much support. It is, therefore, important that all Members support the Bill. The Ulster Unionist Party is more than pleased to support the Minister and the proposed legislation.

Mr A Maginness: I congratulate the Minister on bringing the Bill to the House, and I welcome the opportunity to speak on its basic principles.

The measure to regulate charities in Northern Ireland is long overdue. In many respects, charities have never been properly regulated. Therefore, we welcome the introduction of the new regulatory context in which charities will operate.

2.15 pm

Genuine charities have nothing to fear from the legislation. I call on the Minister to reassure any bona fide charities that they should welcome, rather than fear, the Bill. They should see it as a support for their good work, and it should reassure members of the public who donate to genuine charities.

Many people fear change because they are used to the old way of doing things. In the new context that the Bill will create, it will be important to support those

charities that have done so much good and valuable work for people throughout Northern Ireland.

As Mr Hilditch said, charities raise some £600 million a year, which is an enormous amount of money for this part of Ireland. That represents a huge challenge for people who raise funds for individual charities.

The establishment of a charity commission is an important element of the Bill. Such commissions have, of course, been established in other parts of these islands. It is therefore crucial that we examine those models to ascertain whether we can use some aspects in our own commission.

It is important that the Bill establishes a compulsory register that will comprise all charities that operate throughout Northern Ireland. That register must be open to public scrutiny.

It is imperative to harmonise our charity laws with those of the rest of this island, given that we work on an interconnected basis. Therefore, one set of laws regulating charities must support the other and not be contradictory. We should try to harmonise the charity laws of the various jurisdictions of these islands.

The regulation of public charitable collections is another crucial — and welcome — aspect of the Bill. The distinction between street and household collections should be abolished in order that both are regarded simply as public charitable collections. Such a move will reassure the ordinary person in the street or in the home that they are contributing to a properly regulated body.

I welcome the changes that will be made to the cy-pres scheme, and it is important that we consider those carefully. Cy-pres refers to the point at which a charity has reached the end of its current registered purpose. I particularly welcome the fact that responsibility for cy-pres will move to the new charity commission and that the matter will not be dealt with in the courts. The courts have served us well, but cy-pres is an expensive process, and it is important that charities be given that facility so that they can achieve less expensively and more easily their aims as a charity after their current formation is no longer relevant to the special circumstances in which we live today.

I welcome the Bill, and I offer my support and that of my party.

Ms Lo: In common with the other Members who have spoken, I welcome the Bill. However, I have a major concern about the provision on the designation of religious charities. Clause 166 states that the charity commission:

“may, on receiving an application from the charity trustees of a charity, make a designation under this section in relation to the charity.”

It appears that, following the raising of some concerns, DSD officials met representatives of the main Churches

and, as a result, the Minister agreed to amend the Bill to include provision for “designated religious charity” status. The Bill stipulates that the charity commission must not make such a designation unless certain conditions are satisfied. Two of those conditions are that the charity:

— “has been established in Northern Ireland for at least 10 years

and —

“has a membership of at least 1000 persons who are...resident in Northern Ireland”.

I am afraid that that provision will have a detrimental effect on small rural churches and on faiths other than the main Christian denominations. The long period of establishment required by the Bill will bar many new faith communities from obtaining designated religious charity status in Northern Ireland for many years. For example, the Belfast Chinese Christian Church in south Belfast has been in existence for less than 10 years, so it will not be granted religious charity status. The Jewish, Muslim and Baha’i communities may have established their places of worship for longer than the required 10 years, but their membership will not be as many as 1,000; again, they will not be granted designated religious charity status by the Bill.

I understand that DSD has conducted a screening exercise on the proposals of the Bill, in accordance with section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. As the public consultation on the Bill did not identify any issues affecting any section 75 groups, DSD did not consider it necessary to prepare a full equality impact assessment. I also understand that the Department’s legal advisers did not believe that the Bill would be discriminatory against any section of the community. I cannot agree with that view.

The criteria for designated religious charity status will have a negative impact on all the newer and smaller faith communities in Northern Ireland. That must be a concern for the Assembly in being fair to those small communities, which may already be suffering from social isolation and find that their faith offers them emotional and practical support at a time when they most need it. I urge the Minister to amend the conditions of clause 166 and to reduce both the duration and membership requirements, so as not to discriminate against particular sections of society.

Mr Craig: As a member of the Social Development Committee, I broadly welcome the Charities Bill, which will introduce an integrated system of registration and regulation, including control of charitable fund-raising and supervision and support for registered charities. The changing nature of charities gives rise to concern about the lack of effective regulation.

There is no statutory definition of “charity” in Northern Ireland, and there is no legislation specifically governing the administrative framework of charities. That is unlike the rest of the UK, and so I can see the need to introduce the Charities Bill, which will provide definitions of “charity” and “charitable purpose”, establish a charity commission, create a register of charities, provide for a new form of charitable body and deal with regulation of charities and public charitable contributions.

However, we must ensure that the operational costs and the number of staff involved are kept to an absolute minimum, because it is vital that the Charities Bill does not give birth to another over-bureaucratic quango that will cost the public purse an absolute fortune.

I agree with Anna Lo in that I am alarmed by some of the criteria that the Bill contains on “designated religious charity” status. The issue of how long a church or religious organisation has to have been established in Northern Ireland needs to be investigated by the Committee, because the length of time proposed in the Bill is much too long.

More alarming is the membership criterion of 1,000. That will certainly suit most of the main denominations in Northern Ireland, but, unfortunately, it discriminates against what can be called independent, or congregation-based, faiths or Churches. One was referred to earlier, but there are hundreds, if not thousands, of those little churches dotted all across the Province. We need to take that concern on board.

I was pleased to receive support from both the Chairman and a lot of the members when I raised those issues in the Committee, and I was also pleased that they agreed that, where possible, the views of the independent and congregational churches will be sought during the public consultation process. It is vital that we have their views, and I hope that we will be able to change those clauses.

I am sure that the Minister will take those concerns on board, and I fully support the Bill.

Mrs I Robinson: I am not on the Committee, and I missed some of the Minister’s statement, but I would like the Minister to clarify whether the charity commission will have the power to look at charities that claim that the bulk of their public donations, such as those for health-related issues, go mainly to research, only for the balancing of the books to reveal that most of it goes on administration? Will the commission have the teeth either to pull those charities in and sort the issue out, or to withdraw their charitable status?

Mr Speaker: Mr Brady raised a point earlier about the extension of the Committee Stage of the Bill. That can easily be resolved by a motion from the Committee coming before the Assembly. That is the procedure of the House.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Members who have contributed to the debate for their remarks.

The Charities Bill will introduce a framework for the regulation of charities that is, as far as possible, consistent with developments across Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland, and which meets the particular needs of Northern Ireland and will promote best practice in the governance of the charitable sector.

The Bill will bring Northern Ireland broadly in line with charity regulations in Great Britain and Ireland. No one wants our standards for charitable regulation to be weaker than those which are in place in GB; that would make Northern Ireland a soft option open to possible abuse by criminal elements. I want to assure the House that that will not happen.

2.30 pm

The public, who continue to give so generously, need to be assured that they will be giving to a genuine charity when they make a donation in cash or in kind. I ask the House to support the Bill and send it to the Committee for Social Development for scrutiny.

I now turn to some of the issues that were raised during the debate. I thank the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, Mr Hilditch, for his comments. I welcome his positive comments and I look forward to working with the Committee as it scrutinises the Bill. I emphasise that it is at Committee Stage that Committee members will have the opportunity to go through the Bill line by line, provide their comments and deal with any amendments and issues that they may have. My officials will be present at those meetings to take Committee members through the Bill. The Committee Stage is the right democratic format for scrutinising the Bill.

Mr Hilditch made a number of valid points about the need for proportionality when applying regulations, particularly in relation to smaller charities. As regards the cost of tribunals, the first stage will involve a process review by the proposed charity commission for Northern Ireland. Individuals, or charities, may seek to appeal through the proposed charity tribunal for Northern Ireland, which will be operated through the Northern Ireland Court Service. I assure Members that there will be no cost involved to charities unless they decide to invoke legal representation.

Mr Brady asked for the Committee Stage of the Bill to be extended. As Minister with responsibility for the Bill, I am anxious to get it passed. However, the length of the Committee Stage is a matter for the Committee and the facility offered by you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Maginness rightly highlighted the need to work with other regulators in taking forward the legislation. A regulators’ forum has been established involving other UK regulators and the Irish regulator. I am anxious to ensure that there is a consistent approach across these

islands while recognising the unique circumstances in each jurisdiction. I am meeting Minister Ó Cuív, the Minister with responsibility for charities legislation in Dáil Éireann, next month, and I want to discuss with him how we will deal with cross-border charities and how we will work together as legislation is implemented across the island of Ireland.

Anna Lo and Jonathan Craig referred to major concerns about designated religious status that were raised at last week's Committee meeting. It is important to highlight that that designation will only be considered subsequent to an organisation's recognition as a charity. It will have no bearing on the recognition, in the first place, of a religious body as a charity, and I assure the House that I will consider all views on the issue.

Ms Lo and Mr Craig also asked why all faith-based organisations cannot be granted designated religious status. I advise the House that there would be a significant risk involved in opening the exemption to all religious organisations. It is important that religious organisations are established bodies with proper governance arrangements in place. For that reason, one criterion is that an organisation must be established in Northern Ireland for at least 10 years, which is a reasonable period of time in which to judge whether it has effective governance and accountability arrangements in place. Religious organisations must also have a membership of at least 1,000 at the denominational level. The threshold was set at 3,000 in Scotland, but it was felt that in the Northern Ireland context a lower figure was more appropriate, taking into account our population size and the number of smaller, independent churches in operation.

My Department sought legal advice, and I am sure that article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights was applied in that instance, because that deals with the limiting nature of displacement in pursuit of a legitimate aim for the regulation of charities.

The Committee Stage of the Bill is the occasion on which to address and discuss such matters. At that time it is possible, if members of the Committee so choose, to suggest amendments, and my officials are able to discuss the background to particular issues.

Mrs Robinson spoke about the proposed charity commission's power and teeth. The charity commission will have the power to identify and investigate apparent misconduct or mismanagement in the administration of charities and to take remedial or protective action. It will liaise closely with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, HM Revenue and Customs and other regulators; however, the real power will be with the public. It must always be remembered that it is the public who give money to charities, and the reporting mechanism lies there because it is the public that will be in a position to tell what is actually happening on the ground.

Charities will be obliged to submit annual financial statements, which, importantly, will be available for public scrutiny. In that way, the public will have the facility and capacity to consider how and to whom to donate. Therefore, the decision to donate will always lie with individuals or collectively with members of the public.

If I have not addressed all of the issues, I will provide written replies to Member's questions. I am grateful to all the Members who have contributed to a helpful debate on this important piece of legislation, I commend the Bill to the House, and I look forward to discussions in the Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Charities Bill [NIA 9/07] be agreed.

Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill

Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: Members will have a copy of the Marshalled List of Amendments detailing the order for consideration. The amendments have been grouped for debate in my provisional grouping of amendments selected list.

There is only one group of amendments, and we will debate all the amendments in the group together. The debate will be on the opposition of the Minister and the Chairperson of the Health Committee to clause 15 of the Bill, and two consequential amendments that are needed if clause 15 is removed. I will therefore only call amendment No 1 and amendment No 2 if clause 15 is removed.

I remind Members intending to speak that, during the debate on the amendments, they should address all the amendments in the group on which they wish to comment.

Once the initial debate on the group is completed, any subsequent amendments in the group will be moved formally as we go through the Bill, and the Question on each will be put without further debate. The Questions on stand part will be taken at the appropriate points in the Bill. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 (Provision of dental services)

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Dr Deeny: I am seeking clarification from the Minister and his Department. I understand that clause 2 relates to the suspension of practitioners — not just GPs.

Last year, at a meeting of the Health Committee, I raised the issue of the suspension of practitioners by health boards, and I was told that the procedures would become clearer over time — or words to that effect. Although I am particularly interested in the suspension of GPs, the suspension of any practitioner before the evidence had been viewed by a tribunal would be grossly unfair and could destroy an innocent doctor's career due to a breakdown of the doctor-patient relationship or trust. Suspension would have a very serious impact on a GP.

In agreement with the BMA, I contend that suspension is not a neutral act. That was the opinion in law in the recent case of *Mezey vs South West London and St George's Mental Health NHS Trust*. The judgement of Lord Justice Sedley was that, in relation to the employment of a qualified professional in a function which was as much a vocation as a job:

“Suspension changes the status quo from work to no work, and it inevitably casts a shadow over the employee's competence. Of course this does not mean that it cannot be done, but it is not a neutral act.”

Therefore, on behalf of my fellow practitioners, I am asking the Minister for reassurance that suspension will not be taken lightly, and that the removal of practitioners, including GPs, from the performers list will not be done at the stroke of a pen. Will the Minister and his senior officials make it clear to me, and to all other practitioners, that the Bill contains strict, rigid and robust criteria and arrangements that must be complied with before a practitioner can be suspended?

I have one final question, which may or may not be relevant. The Bill mentions “boards”. As the Minister knows, and as he has announced, the boards will be abolished around April 2009. If the Bill goes through, suspension is to be undertaken by “boards”. Who will have this responsibility after April 2009? Will it be the local commissioning groups or a central authority?

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Minister to respond, does any Member wish to speak on that clause? If not, I call the Minister.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I wish to reassure Dr Deeny that suspension cannot be carried out at the stroke of a pen. It will not be done lightly; there will be robust procedures in place. The Bill provides enabling powers. The details surrounding suspension, for example the length of suspension, will be set out in regulations and in detailed guidance for the boards. Those regulations will be subject to consultation and scrutiny by the Health Committee, if necessary. The Bill merely provides an enabling power; the detail has still to be determined. That can be determined in consultation.

The power is deemed to be essential to ensure that the care of patients is not compromised. Members will be aware that the legislation was prompted by the inquiry into the Shipman affair. Shipman was a notorious doctor who is thought to have murdered more than 250 patients over his lifetime in medical practice. This legislation is the response to that event.

I can give the Member the assurances that he asked for, and I can tell him that the regulations must be put to consultation and scrutiny. The Bill merely provides an enabling power.

The boards are mentioned in the Bill because they are in place at present. I am happy to meet the Member, or write to him, to discuss the details. He is correct to say that the boards will disappear in the next year. I will write to him about what that term “the boards” means.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 3 to 14 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 15 (Smoking: exemption for performers)

Mr Speaker: We now come to the debate on opposition to clause 15 and the proposed consequential amendments.

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

Mr McGimpsey: This clause contains an amendment to the Smoking (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 that will enable regulations to be made allowing smoking by a performer where:

“the artistic integrity of the performance makes it appropriate for them to smoke”.

Members may recall that during the Second Stage of the Bill on 19 June 2007, I informed the Assembly that I no longer supported clause 15.

2.45 pm

Clause 15 was inserted in the original Order in Council at Westminster at the behest of the previous Administration. The Order was subsequently translated into the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, which is now before the House.

The theatrical profession argued for an exemption on the grounds that to outlaw actual smoking would severely compromise the artistic integrity of some productions. It further argued that should no such exemption be provided, it was opposed to the definition of tobacco covering “any other lit substance”. That definition, which is contained in the Smoking (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, prohibits the use of non-tobacco products, such as herbal cigarettes, which are not covered by smoke-free legislation in the Republic of Ireland. Such cigarettes are one method by which performers may smoke during a performance in the Republic.

On the other hand, representations that were made to me by health professionals and others focused largely on the availability of alternative methods of smoking and on concerns that such an exemption would undermine the rationale behind the introduction of smoke-free legislation, namely, the protection of public health.

I considered carefully the various arguments that were made both for and against an exemption. I too believe that actual smoking is not essential to protect the integrity of a particular performance and that suitable alternatives, including unlit cigarettes, can be used. In addition, even if I accepted the argument that was made by the theatrical profession, I do not believe that it outweighs public-health considerations. Employees who work in the entertainment industry are entitled to the same level of protection from tobacco smoke as everyone else.

With regard to herbal cigarettes, I fully accept the argument that to amend the definition in the Smoking (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 would place an unreason-

able burden on enforcement officers by requiring them to establish the constituent parts of the lit substance before deciding whether an offence had been committed. That view is consistent with the approach that has been taken in England, Scotland and Wales, and it also reflects concerns about the definition of herbal cigarettes and the health risks that are associated with them.

Therefore, I seek Members’ support to oppose the Question that clause 15 stand part of the Bill. If clause 15 is removed, two minor consequential amendments will be required. The commencement of clause 15 will need to be removed from clause 19, which sets out commencement provisions for all clauses in the Bill. Reference to the smoking amendment in the long title will also need to be removed.

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

Before I speak about clause 15, I will say a few words about the Committee Stage of the Bill. The Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill was referred to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety on 20 June 2007. The Committee considered the Bill at eight separate meetings. A total of 24 organisations responded to the Committee’s request for written evidence. The Committee took oral evidence regarding the main provisions in the Bill from departmental officials and six organisations before commencing the detailed clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill.

I thank all those individuals and organisations that provided written evidence, those who gave oral evidence, and particularly the officials who helped the Committee go through the detailed provisions of the Bill over a number of meetings. I also commend all the members of the Committee for their work in considering the detail of the Bill, which was the first Committee Stage of a Bill that the Committee has undertaken. Furthermore, I thank staff for their assistance.

During the Committee Stage, the Committee considered the provisions of the Bill in detail. The Committee concluded that it was content to support all the provisions of the Bill, apart from clause 15, which it agreed to oppose.

Clause 15, if enacted, would provide power to exempt performers from the smoking ban.

As the Minister has indicated, the proposed exemption had been inserted into article 17 of the original draft Order in Council by the then direct rule Minister. The Order in Council had not concluded its passage through Westminster before the restoration of devolution, so the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety had the option of removing that provision from the Bill before it was laid in the Assembly, but he decided that it should remain in the legislation.

However, during the debate on Second Stage, the Minister indicated that he had changed his mind and

intended to table an amendment at Consideration Stage to remove the clause. I welcomed that move. I believe that the Minister's change of heart was influenced largely by the strong opposition that was voiced in Committee during an initial departmental briefing and in view of the opinion of the Chief Medical Officer, who told the Committee that he could not support the introduction of such an exemption.

In undertaking its detailed consideration, the Committee recognised that the Bill, as laid before it, still included provision for the exemption. Therefore, it needed to listen to the arguments for and against the proposal. Eleven of the organisations that made written submissions to the Committee had commented on clause 15, and all were opposed to the exemption of performers from the smoking ban. The Committee received no written submissions in support of the exemption; however, it was aware that, during the earlier consultation that the Department had conducted, both the Theatrical Management Association and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland had argued for the exemption.

The Committee felt it appropriate to give those organisations the opportunity to put their case. They argued strongly in Committee that, because of what they considered the unique circumstances of theatre, film and television, smoking was sometimes required to establish character, period, historical accuracy or setting. They concluded that, if the exemption was not granted:

“smoking would become one of the few human behaviours that could not be simulated on stage.”

They also pointed to the fact that the exemption applies in England and suggested that, if it were not possible to grant similar exemption in Northern Ireland, consideration should be given to permitting the use of herbal cigarettes during performances, as is permitted in the Republic of Ireland.

The Committee also heard oral evidence from the Smokefree Northern Ireland Coalition, which represents the public, private, community and voluntary sectors and statutory bodies. The coalition had been set up to lobby for smoke-free legislation. It was successful in lobbying for the introduction of the smoking ban in workplaces, which came into effect in April last year. In evidence to the Committee, the coalition pointed to the conclusion that the World Health Organization reached:

“there is no safe level of exposure to second-hand tobacco smoke.”

The coalition also advised the Committee that it regarded performers, as defined in the Bill, as:

“another workforce, who must be protected from the effects of passive smoking.”

Its representatives pointed out that the proposed exemption was not limited to performances in theatres but was loosely defined and could cover a performance in any venue, including a public house, a hall or a even a school. The coalition also opposed the use of herbal

cigarettes, because of the absence of evidence as to whether such cigarettes pose a danger to health, and the difficulties that their use could cause for enforcement of the smoking ban. The coalition's representatives stated that their belief was:

“when substances such as herbal cigarettes are burned, similar cocktails of lethal chemicals are produced. There is no safe level, and we should not be exposing ourselves to them.”

The coalition pointed out that tobacco is a lethal cocktail of 4,000 chemicals, including ammonia, arsenic and cyanide, and, in its opinion, herbal cigarettes could be described as cigarettes minus the nicotine, and could therefore contain the other 3,999 chemicals.

Smoking is still the major preventable cause of death and disease. It is associated with more than 50 different diseases and disorders, many of them fatal. In his most recent annual report, the Chief Medical Officer pointed out that smoking kills 2,300 people in Northern Ireland each year.

The introduction of the smoking ban in workplaces in 2007 was a major step forward that will, ultimately, save lives and protect the health of the workforce. I am totally opposed to any dilution of the smoking ban and, therefore, to clause 15.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the removal of clause 15 of the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. As the Chairperson said, the removal of clause 15 is supported by all members of the Committee, having carried out rigorous examination and scrutiny of the Bill. The Committee heard from several organisations that were mainly opposed to clause 15; with that information, and on the advice of the Chief Medical Officer, Sinn Féin chose to support the removal of the clause. The right of the entire workforce to work in a smoke-free environment must be protected. I am totally opposed to any move away from that. Therefore I support the removal of clause 15 and thank the Minister for his intention to oppose that it stand part of the Bill. It is a good example of how Committee scrutiny can affect ministerial decisions. I thank the Minister for taking that on board. Go raibh maith agat.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I support the Minister's proposition. I, too, am against any dilution of the Bill that would create a loophole to allow people to smoke in any context. As the Chairperson said, it became clear to the Committee when it took evidence that it would be wrong for the House to support the inclusion in the Bill of any means by which smoking could be permitted in enclosed spaces, particularly one where large numbers of people meet for entertainment. Therefore I support the removal of clause 15.

Dr Deeny: I support the Health Minister and commend the Health Committee for its consistent and unanimous opposition to clause 15. I do so as a member of the

Health Committee and, indeed, as a doctor. I agree with the Minister that there are other ways in which smoking can be realistically simulated on stage. The smoke-free environment that exists throughout the home countries has already shown positive health benefits. Therefore I want to put on record that I support the removal of clause 15.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank Members who have contributed to the debate and reiterate that, as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I, like the rest of the House, have a responsibility to promote public health and the interests of all the people of Northern Ireland. Therefore I encourage Members to support my decision to oppose that clause 15 stand part of the Bill; in other words, to vote against the clause.

3.00 pm

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question, I remind Members that a no vote on clause 15 will ensure that there is no smoking exemption for performers. I want to clarify that for the House.

Question put and negatived.

Clauses 16 to 18 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 19 (Commencement)

Mr Speaker: Amendment No 1 has already been debated. I call the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr Michael McGimpsey, to move amendment No 1 formally.

Amendment No 1 made: In page 16, line 16, leave out “, 14(4) and 15;”

and insert

“and 14(4);” — [*The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey).*]

Clause 19, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 20, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 and 2 agreed to.

Long title

Mr Speaker: Amendment No 2 has already been debated. I call the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr Michael McGimpsey to move formally amendment No 2.

Amendment No 2 made: In the long title, leave out from “to amend” to “performers;”. — [*The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey).*]

Long title, as amended, agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Agency Workers

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

Mr McLaughlin: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to take the necessary measures to protect agency workers, and to ensure that such workers are provided with the same statutory protections, regarding pay and conditions of employment, as the directly employed workforce.

Mr Speaker: I forgot to say that 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 for the winding-up speech.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's attendance at the debate, and I accept the amendment that has been tabled by Mr Basil McCrea and Mr David McClarty. The two main pieces of legislation relating to employment agencies are the Employment (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 and the Conduct of Employment Agencies and Employment Businesses Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005. A proposal for an EU directive on working conditions for temporary workers is at an advanced stage in Brussels.

Employment agencies are sprouting up all over the country. By any definition, it is a growth industry. However, if we are to protect workers against erosion of their rights then we must be wary of the introduction of that particular approach into our recruitment and employment practices.

There are almost 600 employment agencies on the island of Ireland, where there is a workforce of approximately three million workers. When those figures are compared to those of other countries, such as Poland — from where so many migrant workers come — where there are more than 770 agencies catering for 40 million workers, it becomes clear that we have a disproportionate number of recruitment and employment agencies and workers who are employed through such agencies.

Temporary or short-term contract workers are unable to access equal terms and working conditions when compared to those of directly-recruited workers. Recent research in Britain has established that agency workers are paid, on average, only 68% of the directly-paid workforce's earnings, had fewer entitlements, are younger than their directly-employed counterparts and have less control over the work that they are tasked to do. Members may not be aware that more than 100 of

the Assembly's support staff, or more than 30% of the entire support staff complement are agency workers.

I understand that that is not unusual in many other public-sector organisations, and that the ratio in the private sector is higher and growing.

It is important to record that those workers have no pension rights entitlements, no sickness benefits, no statutory holiday entitlements, and no flexitime allowances — the list goes on. For those workers, there is no employment security or certainty and, consequently, those individuals and their families have particular difficulty in raising bank loans, and so on. They must think very carefully about long-term spending commitments, such as mortgages. For many, moving home is simply not an option because of the financial risks involved.

Agency workers are, in effect, working for two employers, and they are in the invidious position of seeing many new starts in the permanent workforce take up employment at the going rate, often earning more than agency staff, whose incomes are effectively fixed at the contract start date. In some instances, those contract workers are employed for a number of years.

Examples of abuse of the system of employing agency workers abound. Indeed, many European Governments, including those in Westminster and Dublin, have moved to counter some of the activities of those who have become known to all of us as gangmasters.

Following the recent announcement of the loss of more than 900 jobs at Seagate Technology in Limavady, it transpired that a number of the workers at that plant were contracted through employment agencies and were not entitled — nor were they offered — the same redundancy packages as the directly employed staff. It is bad enough that, while in employment, those workers do not receive the same rates of pay and conditions as permanent staff, but when they face the same trauma of redundancy as their fellow workers, they are once again disadvantaged by exclusion or by reductions in severance packages.

We should not allow that method of worker recruitment to become prevalent in our society, as it serves only to diminish workers' rights and rates of remuneration, while absolving employers, including multinational conglomerates, of their obligations to provide statutory and other benefits to their agency workers.

It is incumbent on us as legislators to ensure that we provide equal opportunity and treatment for all workers. There is a growing concern — and a well-founded one — that the growth in the employment agency sector creates the conditions for exploitation and abuse of those workers.

It is important to state that not all agencies are involved in such practices. In fact, many of them provide profess-

ional support and a professional service. However, we must ask why we need such growth in the number of agencies on this small island and who is benefiting from them. We must, in co-operation with the trade union movement, commit to implementing measures that will protect the rights of agency workers to equal pay, pensions and other benefits that are awarded to those who are directly employed by companies.

The Assembly should assert that it is a basic principle that workers be employed on the basis of equal pay for equal work. I strongly urge the Minister to introduce legislation that would provide pay parity for agency workers from an initial date of employment. The Assembly should lead by example and by endorsing efforts in Europe to reach political agreement on the draft EU directive on temporary agency workers. We should support proposals in that directive to allow temporary workers full pay and conditions on completion of a minimum of six weeks' employment.

The argument that is put forward by those who oppose efforts to address the gross inadequacy in social and employment legislation is that extending equal rights to agency workers will harm economic competitiveness. We have all heard that argument, but it does not stand up to examination. Every state in Europe that ranks ahead of Ireland and Britain in competitiveness tables already has such legislation in place. Therefore, the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

Failure to implement protective measures that would provide equality in the workplace for agency workers is an open invitation to abuse unorganised labour, such as temporary and migrant workers. That will inevitably result in conflict in the workplace.

The Assembly already recognises and promotes the need for economic sustainability. We advocate and support job-creation strategies and the upskilling and retraining of workers. We place a particular emphasis on the small and medium-sized enterprises in our economic policy, and all of that is to the good. However, none of those political, social and economic goals need be at the cost of workers' basic rights — equal terms and conditions. I am convinced that there is an urgent requirement for legislation that will recognise and enforce the rights of agency workers to equal pay and conditions after the initial six-week period following commencement of employment.

We should reject the notion that economic viability can be achieved only on the back of our most vulnerable workers, who are left in a cycle of no rights, low pay and job insecurity.

Bearing in mind the mobility of workers across the island, I encourage the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to work with his Twenty-six County counterpart, Micheál Martin, Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, to explore the possibility of

further co-operation between the two Departments to develop an all-Ireland agency workers' rights framework and protocol. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McClarty: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "agency workers".

I thank Mitchel McLaughlin for proposing the motion and for accepting the amendment in my name and that of Mr Basil McCrea. I do not speak out of turn when I contend that everyone in the Assembly wants the best possible protection and conditions for all workers in Northern Ireland, whether agency workers or regular employees. However, the original motion, if passed, would have sent a message from the Assembly to businesses in Northern Ireland and Europe that we are uncompetitive and closed to investment. At a time of economic challenges, that message could be considered self-defeating, and one that would undermine Northern Ireland's economic competitiveness.

Currently, agency workers in the UK have good employment rights. They are entitled to the national minimum wage, and are covered by health and safety and working-time legislation. Under the new working-time regulations approved by the Assembly yesterday, agency workers are now entitled to the same generous paid holidays as long-term employees. I welcome the motion, however, because no Member of the Assembly wants agency workers to be exploited by rogue or irresponsible employers. That is a serious matter, and, wherever possible, the working conditions offered by such employers should be improved on.

It is a fact that agency workers help business and the economy in Northern Ireland. They allow firms to meet peaks in demand and deal with seasonal fluctuations. They help firms to meet skills shortages and cover absences in the regular workforce. Northern Ireland is trying to encourage investment and economic growth, and one of our strongest selling points is a flexible and fair employment regime. To support the motion in its original form would have sent a message that threatens that position.

It should also be noted that registering with an agency is of benefit to workers too. Agency work is often a crucial first step for young people into employment, and it facilitates those who need flexibility. Figures show that 40% of first-time agency workers are labour market outsiders, and 40% of agency workers are in longer-term employment within one year of starting their first agency assignment.

The issue of equality of pay also requires further examination. The most recent data provided by the Recruitment and Employment Confederation — in 2007 — shows that 67% of employers reported that temporary agency workers in their businesses receive equal or more pay than their colleagues on permanent contracts. A much smaller percentage of agency workers

are employed in the lower-paid, lower-skilled sectors than is often imagined. For example, agency workers make up just 1% of the retail workforce. Many skilled temporary workers in IT and accountancy earn significantly more than their permanent counterparts.

Members will know that this issue is the subject of continued discussion at EU level. If the motion had been passed in its original form, it would have sent a message that the Northern Ireland Assembly is out of step with the UK Government's position on the EU directive on temporary agency workers. The UK Government broadly support securing extra rights and improved conditions for temporary workers throughout the EU, providing that the benefits to the employer and the temporary worker alike are not lost due to a complete loss of flexibility.

3.15 pm

A significant qualifying period before comparative benefits come into effect, in line with other time-related employment rights, is reasonable. It should be noted that that position is also strongly supported by the Government of the Republic of Ireland.

There is no gain for the UK economy in general, or for this part of the UK economy in particular, in creating local legislation or provisions concerning this issue. We would hand further competitive economic advantage to our neighbours and European counterparts, and we would fail all of the people of Northern Ireland and those EU citizens who benefit from our flexible working conditions and who seek a vibrant and buoyant economic future.

For all those reasons, I urge all parties on all sides of the House to support the amendment. More work must be done to improve the conditions of temporary workers in Northern Ireland. However, we should heed the statistics of the Governments of both the UK and the Republic of Ireland regarding the need to secure flexible labour markets and economic competitiveness.

Mr Spratt: I support the amendment and the general thrust of what the proposers of the motion and the amendment have sought to achieve. Some rights should be extended, and those that are in place should be enforced. The whole issue of agency workers' rights has been ignored for far too long, to the detriment of thousands of workers. Although they make up only a small proportion of our overall workforce, agency workers are an important part of our labour market and are currently protected by a range of employment laws. However, the current protection mechanisms fall short of what is required.

Employers across Northern Ireland benefit greatly from agency workers, who provide a measure of flexibility that enables our economy to perform competitively against competing forces across Europe. As they provide such a benefit to our economy, agency

workers deserve parity on a range of factors regarding their employment. However, while supporting the general aim of parity, caution must be exercised in determining when an agency worker should become eligible for parity. The proposed six-week period is too short and would be of detriment to our economic competitiveness. The Assembly has supported a draft Programme for Government that has economic development at its core. Therefore, we should exercise caution and give serious consideration to the implications of the proposal. At the same time as protecting the worker, we must ensure that we do not encourage practices that fly in the face of economic development.

There are examples of extreme cases of abuse of agency staff. I am sad to say that Departments have been at least as guilty as private enterprise in that. I know of a case in which an agency employee has worked from 9.00 am to 3.00 pm for 12 years in the same Department. That employee has carried out the full duties, similar to those of permanent staff, without being afforded the same pension rights, for example, as her permanent colleagues. If she is sick, she receives only statutory sick pay, and not the other benefits afforded to her colleagues. Furthermore, she receives a lower rate of pay, and she does not receive yearly increments, as do other workers. Her conditions in many other areas, including annual leave and bank holidays, are worse than those of her colleagues.

In that same Department, another member of agency staff has worked for eight years, and another for six years.

I suggest that people who have worked in that Department for 12, eight and six years are in full-time employment, and their positions should have been made permanent. Their situation is an absolute disgrace, and the Minister and the Department must seriously examine the issue.

With regard to the more short-term employment of agency staff, the matter comes to a head.

Short-term employment provides many people with an opportunity to work flexible hours to suit their circumstances. Many are mothers who are returning to the workplace as an essential first step back into the labour market. The ability to balance work and life is important to such groups, and care must be taken not to discourage employers from using them.

In the light of the warning from 58% of employers that the requirement for agency staff to work for six weeks before achieving equality would lead to a significant reduction in the use of temporary staff, I urge the Minister to consider carefully how such a directive could be rolled out.

I urge him also to examine all Departments that are attached to the Executive. I could name the Department

to which I referred earlier, but I will not do so now because there is an ongoing tribunal. The practice is not specific to one Department: it is widespread across Departments and must, along with other matters, be given serious attention. I support the amendment.

Mr Attwood: I want to comment on the speech by the proposer of the motion, whose arguments I fully understand. I also understand the issues that have informed the amendment, but I expected to hear more convincing arguments in its support. The following are, as I understand them, the arguments put forward by the Member who moved the amendment.

The first argument was that, if the Assembly supported the original motion, it would be out of step with the UK Government. That may be the case, but not to support it would mean that the Assembly would be out of step with 14 of the 20 member states of the European Union. All 14 countries have introduced equal pay for agency workers. I acknowledge the variations in the guarantees that are given to workers on other working conditions. Nonetheless, I suggest that the Assembly try to follow the lead of those 14 countries that are ahead of the UK Government on the single issue of equal pay.

Secondly, Members were told that, if agreed, the original motion would be a block to competitiveness. The same argument was used in 2002 — and before that — when legislation was introduced to provide guarantees to part-time workers. Many of the employers' organisations said that the guarantees should not be provided as they would be a block to competitiveness. Now, five and six years later, the number of part-time workers is increasing. Some of those who were hostile to giving part-time workers the same guarantees as permanent workers now recruit more part-timers — despite their having the same conditions of employment.

If the Assembly is serious about increasing the North's competitiveness, I am sure that the Minister will concur with me that it will come from the skills base, the number of students achieving PhDs, research and development, and innovation. That, rather than by according agency workers fewer entitlements than their permanent colleagues, is how the North should position itself in the global market.

We must acknowledge the potential scale of the problem. A TUC survey, which may not be definitive as it involved only 85 workplaces and 100,000 employees, found that 18% of staff were agency workers. The survey questioned staff on some of the problems that agency workers were experiencing. Despite the regulations that set out guarantees for temporary agency workers, the survey found that they were allowed fewer holidays, given little or no access to training, were not entitled to contractual sick pay and received no employers' contributions to their pension schemes.

Admittedly, the TUC did not gather its evidence in the North.

Mr S Wilson: The Member has highlighted an important point and given an accurate description of the situation in which many agency workers find themselves.

Is the answer not that those who are responsible for enforcing the regulations ought to be more diligent and that those who employ agency workers ought to ensure that the agencies that they use live up to their legal obligations?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his intervention. The best way to deal with this is to use the approach adopted in Northern Ireland to fair employment legislation. The North began to change its legacy of disadvantage and discrimination by creating a body with sufficient powers to force all employers to comply with the law. A legislative base was created that guaranteed that people would not be discriminated against on the basis of their religious or political views. A resource base was also created to ensure that offending employers were taken before a fair employment tribunal and exposed, and employees who suffered discrimination received reparation.

Why can that approach not be used with agency workers? Why can we not have laws that guarantee agency workers their entitlements? Why can we not give powers to an enforcement agency to guarantee agency workers their entitlements? Why can we not put resources into guaranteeing agency workers their entitlements? That is what I wanted to be included in the amendment.

It seems that Members are not prepared to support the original motion, which calls for agency workers to be provided with the same pay, conditions and statutory entitlements as the directly employed workforce. However, the Assembly should go further than calling for just the necessary measures.

The history of this part of Ireland has taught us that the necessary measures include firm laws, firm enforcement, firm guarantees, and sufficient funds to make employers behave themselves. The amendment does not mention those and I find that disappointing, because that might have created some consensus in the Chamber today.

Ms Lo: The Alliance Party welcomes the issue being raised in the Assembly, as it provides an opportunity to discuss the balance between employees' and employers' rights.

However, the original motion goes too far; therefore we welcome Sinn Féin's decision to accept the amendment. The original motion would create legislation to tackle an issue that could be tackled by applying existing legislation properly.

Most Members will have received representations from agency staff who are being treated unfairly, as Mr Spratt highlighted. That is not because they do not have rights; it is because their rights are not properly enforced. The motion renders the use of temporary agency staff pointless; it would remove a recruitment tool that is important not just for local businesses but also for public sector bodies, particularly health and social services.

On the other hand, the amendment is a little weak, as it fails to clarify what the necessary measures are. Having listened to the debate, the Alliance Party intends to support the amendment, but we will keep the issue under review. I look forward to hearing the Minister's view on what the necessary measures are; however, we want to hear that they involve more than simply working with other organisations.

While stressing that the Alliance Party welcomes the issue being brought to the Floor of the Assembly, such motions do not look at the overall recruitment difficulties in Northern Ireland. No discussion of employment is complete without reference to the severe restrictions on labour mobility that exist in Northern Ireland due to sectarianism and segregation, as noted by all businesses.

3.30 pm

Too many areas of Northern Ireland — not only urban areas, but suburban and rural areas as well — are, in practice, only accessible to certain sections of the workforce. We cannot continue to tolerate a situation whereby a hidden Berlin Wall means that people who live only a few miles away from a certain locality feel that they cannot work in it. Until we tackle that issue, the potential for indigenous businesses and outside investors will be severely limited.

We cannot further restrict public- or private-sector recruiters by limiting their flexibility in appointing staff. The Confederation of British Industry estimates that as many as 2,000 positions could be at risk if this motion is passed.

Agency staff have an important role, often in more high-end jobs than people think, offering specific skills, often at short notice, not just to businesses but to public services. I have commented on the severe restrictions imposed by segregation; we cannot afford to put our businesses and public services at a further disadvantage to those in neighbouring regions.

Some parts of the health and social services sector are almost completely dependent on agency staff, and that must be reviewed. Although we support the availability of flexible expertise to the public sector, in most cases, agency staff are more costly. There is an efficiency issue to be addressed there, as it is unclear whether agency workers offer value for money in all cases. The issue from the employees' point of view is

enforcement of the existing rights of agency workers, which may include better information for those entering employment.

Mr S Wilson: First, I echo some of the points that have been made. The use of agency staff in our economy is essential to the flexible and smooth working of many private firms and public bodies. Secondly, agencies cater for the needs of specific groups of workers, some of whom want to return to the workplace, but require flexibility, etc. However, that should not lead to a diminution of the protection available to them.

I am pleased that the motion has been tabled, but it probably goes further than many Members would have wished. As I pointed out in my earlier intervention, there are legal safeguards for agency staff, but we must ensure that proper procedures and measures are in place to ensure that those safeguards are adhered to. For many agency staff, it is their first time in the workplace, and they may be unsure of their rights or not sure of their way around the system that guarantees those rights. Therefore, we must ensure that a body or service is established that they can contact if they have any complaints.

I wanted to take part in this debate so that I could address the fact that many of those who are employed by agencies in Northern Ireland — and I suspect that this is also true of other parts of the United Kingdom — do not even come from here in the first place. That has not been mentioned today. It is very difficult for them to find out about the safeguards and their rights and whom they can contact to seek help on such issues.

Only last week, a group of Polish workers came into my constituency office. They are employed by a company based in England called People Resource, which they find difficult to contact. I have not been able to contact the company either. It specifically targets Poland, and supplies Polish workers to companies in Northern Ireland. One such business to which it supplies workers is a distribution company based in Larne called Wincanton plc, which services many of the major companies that operate here and distributes goods on their behalf.

Those workers are paid £7 an hour, which is above the minimum wage, and they get overtime earnings. However, there is an aspect of agency work that has not been addressed: the agency, which undoubtedly makes a good profit out of the workers whom they supply, provides accommodation that the workers must sign up to before they come here. The workers who came to me are paying £1,200 a month in Larne to rent accommodation — a palace or an hotel in Larne could be rented for that amount of money. The property is an ordinary Housing Executive house, which — even if it were in the private sector — should have a rental value

of £300 a month, yet those workers are paying four times that amount.

They must also use their wages to pay for electricity, which comes to £62 a month. I do not know how many light bulbs one would have to turn on in order to spend that amount of money on electricity, but they have to pay that amount. One of the workers broke his arm in work and was told that he is not entitled to any sick pay, although deductions continue to be made from his wages for rent, lighting, heating, and so on.

Here are figures from two of the best payslips that those workers received: for a 40-hour week, one of them brought home £132, which amounts to just over £3 an hour; and for a 42-hour week, another worker received £188, which comes to just over £4 an hour. That is something that the Assembly should be concerned about. It is important —

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

Mr S Wilson: The gangmaster legislation that applies to production should also apply to distribution so that workers, such as the ones to whom I referred, are safeguarded.

Mr Ross: I, too, congratulate the proposer of the motion for bringing this important issue to the Assembly. Although I am broadly supportive of the gist of the motion, I sound a few notes of caution.

It is, of course, important that workers be treated fairly and be afforded protection in their jobs, whether they are employed by an agency or directly by an employer. As has been stated, agency staff play an incredibly important role in our economy, and they should be treated fairly. However, a key point is that agency workers are employed by an agency and not the company for which they work. Although I want legislation that covers agency workers to be strengthened, which has been the gist of the debate so far, I anticipate difficulties if every agency worker were afforded the same benefits and advantages that are enjoyed by permanent staff. The result would be a significant additional administrative burden on businesses, particularly small businesses. We must avoid creating circumstances in which so many additional burdens are put on businesses that they no longer want to hire agency workers, and, as a result, jobs are lost.

However, it is important that agency workers are not exploited by unscrupulous employers. As Mr Sammy Wilson said, exploitation is particularly prevalent in cases that involve migrant workers. I know the case to which the Member referred, having spoken to the young Polish man in Larne who gained employment through an English agency with questionable motives. That man told me about other people whom he knew who had gone to agencies that proceeded to confiscate their passports, which is against the law. When agencies break the law like that, the necessary steps

must be taken to close them down. However, I am not sure that an additional raft of legislation from Europe would stop such behaviour, because unscrupulous agencies will disregard the law, irrespective of the legislation that exists. Mr Spratt mentioned a specific case, and the employment practices of the firm in question must be looked at very carefully.

Mr Attwood talked about the position of the Government, and the UK is among several economically developed states, such as the Irish Republic, Germany and Denmark, to name a few, which resist the proposed EU legislation. It is interesting to hear what the agencies say, and the chairman of Grafton Recruitment, James Kilbane, has said that the proposed EU legislation would severely affect temporary workers in Northern Ireland. He also said that those calling for such a change lacked the necessary understanding of temporary work places, and the lifestyle choice that it represents for millions of people. His point was that temporary workers already enjoy equal rights with permanent workers in those countries where the principle of temporary working is understood and practised by workers and businesses alike.

I looked at the Department for Employment and Learning website, and I listened to Mr McClarty going over some of the rights that exist. Those include race and gender equality; fair employment; disability discrimination; health and safety laws, and rights regarding working time. Others are protected disclosure; the right for part-time workers not to be treated less favourably than full-time workers; the minimum wage; and rights concerning deductions from wages. It is important that the measures that are already in legislation are enforced, and that we ensure that agencies enforce them.

Mr Spratt spoke about the economy being a central point of our draft Programme for Government and our draft Budget. It is important that we examine what the CBI says about this proposed legislation. It, too, resists the EU legislation, saying that it is important that the Government stand firm against pressure from trade unions and the European Union, and that 250,000 placements across the UK could be jeopardised if the EU directive were implemented. We heard that 58% of employers here have warned that that law could lead to a significant reduction in the use of temporary staff — staff who are paramount in managing surges in demand.

Many people choose agency work as a way back into employment, or because it offers them more flexibility. It is the case that many of these agency workers can receive equal pay, or, indeed, better pay, than some of their colleagues on permanent contracts, particularly in IT, accounting and in some nursing jobs. In the context of today's speeches, it is important to point that out. The CBI has figures that show that 67%

of agency workers earn as much as, or more than, colleagues on permanent contracts.

In conclusion, I am happy to support the Ulster Unionist amendment. Much of the protection that Members have spoken about today exists; it is simply a matter of ensuring that it is enforced. Nonetheless, the issue must be investigated because, as has been highlighted, there are incidents of behaviour that is not acceptable, in which workers are treated unfairly.

Mr Speaker: Your time is almost up.

Mr Ross: I look forward to the Minister's response, and to hearing of measures that he may introduce to stamp out such incidents.

Mr Dallat: I say at the outset that I hope that, at the end of this debate, agency workers are better off, and I shall certainly listen with interest to the summings-up, and to what the Minister has to say. That does not mean that I am against job agencies per se. Historically, those organisations were used to give what were called 'temps' an opportunity to put their foot on the first step of the employment ladder, an opportunity to undergo skills training and the like. That is fine, and the majority of those workers went on to permanent jobs, where they were entitled to superannuation, pensions and all the rest.

The difficulty is that, in recent times, with the springing-up of many more agencies, and — as already mentioned — some of them with doubtful intentions, the whole emphasis has changed. That is wrong, and it is shameful. Among those involved in that exploitation are health trusts, local councils — my own included, to my shame — and others, setting a very bad example to the private sector. Saving money should never be the justification for using agencies. It is wrong to circumvent the law by employing agencies that have little legal responsibility for the people whom they put forward for what is termed "casual" or "seasonal" employment, only to find that nurses have been in temporary employment for eight, 10, and, in one case, 12 years.

Several references have been made to migrant workers, and all Members know case studies of such workers. Mitchel McLaughlin mentioned Seagate Technology. That firm recently released a press statement announcing redundancies — only a week after 150 workers arrived in Limavady.

3.45 pm

I am sure that all Members remember the young girl from Ukraine who lost her lower limbs in one of the most shameful examples of exploitation. She must live with her injuries and with the consequences of that event for the rest of her life.

There are more recent examples similar to that described by Sammy Wilson. Recently, I had a visit

from a young Polish girl — let me call her Anna — who got injured in a factory. Her rights have expired and she has no money: it could be years before a compensation claim is successful. She is surviving and is being looked after by a Polish family who are receiving only the minimum amount of money. It occurred to me that she could suffer a repeat of what happened to the Ukrainian girl. I hope that I will be able to go home this evening with the knowledge that I have contributed to a debate that will improve the lives of migrant workers and our own people.

While the opportunity exists to discriminate against people, unfortunately, there will be those who will make a living out of it. The solution is to give all workers the same rights. In such circumstances, the agencies that do a good job will survive — as they have done for many years — and the others will go to the wall. In general terms, everyone will benefit, because if employers treat their workers fairly and equally, they will get the best service from them.

I do not want to see a return to the hiring fairs of the last century. I want that to remain in the history books; it is a bad dream that must never be repeated. I want to see all workers respected as equals and benefiting under the law.

Mr G Robinson: As someone who has not had to seek employment through an agency, I consider myself fortunate. Almost weekly, I hear about the problems and difficulties faced by agency workers in my constituency. They are not entitled to holiday pay or paid sick leave and they are not entitled to redundancy payments if the firms for which they are working close down. Furthermore, they may even receive a lower level of pay than permanent workers who are employed by the same firm.

Not all employers and agencies are guilty of unfair treatment towards their agency workers. However, when I hear about situations in which workers are being treated unfairly, it makes me wonder how much we value our workforce. We are living in the twenty-first century, and we are supposed to be a modern and civilised society. However, if agency workers are treated differently from full-time employees, it is a sign that we do not value the contribution that they make to our economy. Instead, we penalise them because they have been proactive in their search for employment.

Employment agencies can be a useful tool for the employee and the employer as they can match skills with opportunities — an arrangement of benefit to both parties. However, that should not result in any agency worker being treated differently in any respect. The Assembly is trying to encourage and promote Northern Ireland plc globally. One way of doing that would be to demonstrate to prospective investors that

we value our greatest asset — our workforce — and it means that agency workers must have the same rights and responsibilities as other employees.

Perhaps equality is a term that is used and abused by some people in Northern Ireland, but for agency workers it will mean a substantial step towards addressing some of the areas that I mentioned: holiday pay entitlement; sick leave; redundancy payments; and equality of wages. I support the amendment.

Mr Shannon: A'hm shair Ah'm no the onie representative i the chammer the day at he shed a constituent oan tae him wha bes distraught accause they hae bein pit ootae thair waark wie nae pey, nae noatice an' nae raison. I hae haird yairns aboot fowk wha hae wrocht fer ap tae twa yeirs i a business onie tae fin' thaimselfs ootae waark. Hoo can this bae? Surely thair bes laa i place at protects employees efter they hae waarked thair probationary tim'? Weel, this bes true bit no gif ye waark through an agency. If thon bes the caase then nae matter the overtim' ye hae wrocht, ir hoo guid yer waark bes, ye can bae pit ootae waark wi'oot noatice ir redundancy. This cannae bae fair pley.

I am sure that I am not the only representative in the Chamber who has been approached by a constituent who is distraught because their employment has been terminated with no pay, no notice and no reason. I have heard tales of people who worked for up to two years in a business — my colleague Mr Spratt has heard of people who worked for up to nine years — only to find themselves out of work. How can that be?

Surely there is legislation that protects employees after they have worked a probationary period. Although that is the case to a certain extent, it is not so for people who are employed through an agency. No matter what overtime those people put in, the quality of their work or their time in a job, their employment can be terminated without any notice or redundancy pay. That does not seem fair to me, and I suspect that it does not seem fair to other Members.

The Department for Employment and Learning estimates that over 300 businesses in the Province use agencies that supply temporary workers. There are almost 15,500 people in that bracket, who either supply workers or undertake temporary work themselves. That is a high percentage of people who are not protected in the workplace, and the Minister for Employment and Learning and his Department must examine the issue urgently.

I have read the consultation document on temporary workers, and I agree with many of the issues on which the Department for Employment and Learning is focusing. However, a section of workers has been overlooked — the people who are working long term in a temporary position, yet have the same rights as people who have worked for a week. That is clearly unfair.

I know of girls who have worked in offices for over two years, doing a job exceptionally well and even training new starts, only to find that, at budget time, they are the first to go. It is ludicrous that someone who has been in a position for 18 months should have to go before someone who has been there only for a few weeks. That matter must be addressed, because it is wrong.

I understand that the idea behind using temporary workers, in some cases, is to allow for temporary expansion while the business is assessed on how it will cope with extra expenditure. However, to retain someone for two years with no rights is not in keeping with the principle of a temporary worker.

I suggest that the Minister for Employment and Learning and his Department consider the imposition of an upper time limit on how long a worker can remain with a company without gaining some rights. Those people who have worked for two, five or nine years have mortgages, families, children, responsibilities and financial commitments. Why should they not have the same rights and considerations? My colleagues have already addressed other issues, so I will not dwell on them. I thank all Members for their comments.

Although these workers are hired on a temporary basis, they should have a reasonable expectation that their job is secure if they work long term. That expectation must be enshrined in future legislation, and I urge the Minister to include provisions for that when the consultation period closes.

I support the amendment, and I thank the proposer of the motion for accepting it.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I welcome the opportunity to thank the many Members who have contributed to the debate. Many Members spoke with great sincerity, which indicates that consideration is being given to agency workers and their rights, and the contribution that they make to the economy.

The debate has been useful. Over the years, employment agencies and businesses have made a significant and positive contribution to the local economy.

As has been mentioned, we estimate that about 300 employment agencies and businesses in the Province provide many permanent and temporary job opportunities. Some of those organisations specialise in certain areas, so it is not the case that we are dealing with 300 businesses and agencies that do exactly the same thing.

Let us be clear that there are benefits to agency work. It is an important factor in creating a flexible labour market, and many businesses consider it essential to better meet the demands of local and international markets. It also allows companies to

increase production on a temporary basis before making a permanent commitment to expansion.

Many workers choose agency work because of the circumstances and the flexibility that it provides. Agency workers are also important in meeting the seasonal needs of some employers — that point was mentioned by Members across the Chamber. For some people, getting a job through an agency is a gateway to permanent work. Others choose temporary work because it allows them to better balance their work with other commitments. Agency work can also appeal to some work seekers as it can offer them the opportunity to learn new skills or try new jobs before permanently changing career.

A CBI survey in 2004 showed that 52% of agency workers choose temping for positive reasons, such as increased flexibility, better pay, or the fact that it allows them to gain work experience. The GB Labour Force Survey 2006 showed that 26% of temporary agency workers do not want a permanent position. In 2005, BMG Research showed that 77% of agency workers felt at least as valued as permanent employees, and 2005 statistics from the Recruitment and Employment Confederation have shown that 56% of temporary agency workers are satisfied with their work.

We can argue about those statistics and take or leave them as we please, but my point is that it is not all a black picture. As Anna Lo said, many people are quite comfortable with what they are doing.

Statutory protection is a matter of concern for Members. I recognise that agency workers are not provided with the same statutory protections as directly recruited employees. However, to provide agency workers with similar rights would undermine the flexibility that agency work brings. The effect of introducing such rights would be that businesses would find it harder to take advantage of opportunities. Such a move is potentially damaging to the economy and to jobs.

Flexibility for both the worker and the employer is one of the features of agency work. Just as agency workers have the flexibility to take up and leave jobs at short notice, employers also have the flexibility to finish temporary work without being liable for unfair dismissal or redundancy pay.

I am aware that several Seagate Technology Ltd workers were contracted through employment agencies; indeed, the Member who moved the motion referred to that. In those circumstances, the workers are not entitled to redundancy payments, as their contractual relationships are with the employment agency and not with Seagate Technology Ltd. Most workers were on temporary contracts lasting less than one year and would not have been entitled to redundancy payments in any event, given that there is a two-year cut-off

point that would have applied equally had they been directly employed.

Agency workers currently receive many of the same statutory rights as permanent employees, including the national minimum wage, holiday entitlement and statutory sick pay. The private recruitment sector in Northern Ireland is also regulated by the Conduct of Employment Agencies and Employment Businesses Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005. Those regulations put in place the minimum standards that work seekers and hirers can expect.

I am, however, not complacent about the regulation of the agency part of the labour market. I will shortly introduce proposals to the Assembly to amend the regulations in order to provide additional protections for vulnerable work seekers. Before listing those protections, I will deal with a couple of points that were made during the debate.

4.00 pm

Mr Spratt drew Members' attention to several examples of the abuse of agency working in the Civil Service. I intend to write to the Minister of Finance and Personnel in order to draw those matters to his attention. Clearly, we do not want to upset those individuals; however, I was somewhat surprised by the length of time taken. From my experience in local councils, I know that the same principles were beginning to feed into some departments there; it was easy to fill places and not to follow up. I recollect that time limits were applied in order to ensure that that could not happen. Equally, we do not wish to put people out of work, but the matter must be examined, and I will write to the Minister of Finance in order to follow up on that point.

Mr Dallat referred to the sad case of the young Ukrainian woman. At the time, my party lobbied for her to be given extraordinary leave to stay in the United Kingdom. That case was a dark day in Northern Ireland's history on these matters, and it shocked the whole community. The Member asked whether we can be certain that that could not happen again; it would be a brave person who would stand up and say that it could not.

However, following the recent events at Reid Transport, in which several workers' classifications were rather confused or uncertain, we went out of our way to take steps concerning their welfare in order to ensure, at least, that accommodation was available and that the authorities were warned. We had the case of the Ukrainian woman in mind when that issue arose, because if some of the employment practices had not been right, there might have been — and probably were — people whose eligibility to work and rights in this country were questionable, and who might have ended up on the street with no money. I can assure Mr Dallat that, should there be any further unfortunate

developments in the field of employment, that will be one of the issues that we will always address.

I propose to bring measures to the Assembly, including giving workers the right to withdraw from additional services provided by an agency, such as transport or accommodation, without suffering any detriment; providing that workers must receive a written statement of their right to withdraw from such services; and banning entertainment and modelling agencies from taking any fees on the day of, or during, a casting session or offer to include a work-seeker's details in a publication. In those circumstances, I intend that workers will be given a seven-day cooling-off period in which to change their minds. Obviously, that example is very specialised; however, it does cover a surprisingly large number of workers.

Mr S Wilson: I am pleased with what the Minister has said. Will he give us a timetable for implementing those new protections?

Sir Reg Empey: I do not have a specific indicative timetable; however, it is fair to say that we could proceed without too much difficulty in the course of this year. I do not wish to be held to that — people are nodding in the Officials' Box — but we will probably be able to effect legislation this year.

Further to those legislative changes, which will provide additional protections for agency workers, officials will produce targeted guidance for drivers, driver agencies and companies that use such agencies, making it clear that agencies that employ drivers will breach legislation if they fail to abide by any other applicable Northern Ireland legislation governing drivers' working excessive hours. That is a concern that people have had, and it arose in the recent case of that company that went into liquidation. There were concerns that people were driving for longer than they were supposed to under national regulations.

Again, the restriction of driving time is a Europe-wide issue, so the regulations must be written down and made specific.

I will also be producing guidance on the cost of living in the UK for migrant workers to read before they leave their home countries. The example that the Member for East Antrim Mr S Wilson gave us was shocking. For the sum that he mentioned, a person could rent a house in Malone Park, let alone in Larne. That was a case of exploitation at its worst.

My Department has the power to prosecute agencies in the Magistrate's Court for breaches of the regulations. In the most severe cases, the Department can apply to an industrial tribunal to prohibit an individual from operating an agency for up to 10 years. Furthermore, the Department will shortly issue a public consultation on proposed primary legislation to allow serious cases to be tried either in the Magistrate's

Court or in the Crown Court. That would also allow for unlimited fines and the creation of attempted offences.

Members may be aware that, since 2002, there has been a draft directive on temporary agency workers. As currently drafted, it would provide agency workers with the same rights as directly recruited employees. Member states continue to disagree about the best approach. The UK Government support the underlying principles of the directive, but they are pushing for a qualifying period before agency workers would achieve the rights. I will continue to monitor developments on that directive, and I am happy to review Northern Ireland's position when member states reach agreement on the way forward.

As I have said, I am very conscious that Members feel very strongly about the issue. However, the situation is not all doom and gloom. Many people are very comfortable doing agency work. In many cases, it is better paid work. Individuals might have commitments that require them to take time off — perhaps they are carers — and specific work, such as that in IT or forensic accountancy, might suit them better.

We must be careful that, in trying to protect a particularly vulnerable group, we do not use a sledgehammer to crack a nut. In the proposals that I hope to bring forward next year, I will try to outline more precision pieces of regulation and legislation that can weed out the miscreants and the people who are genuinely exploiting workers without destroying opportunities and making it difficult for those who want to work for agencies and for those companies who benefit from them.

In conclusion, my Department is very aware of the issues, and it is taking measures. I will come back to the Assembly with proposals, and the Assembly will have an opportunity to deal with the detail of the legislation. In the meantime, the Department has powers, and it is exercising them. It inspects agencies and will take them to court if necessary. One particularly bad case has been taken to a tribunal, and that is ongoing.

The Department is not sitting back and doing nothing; it is working on the issues. As Mr Ross mentioned, there is material on the Department's website, and it is publishing material to try to inform people of their rights before they come here, so that they can avoid some of the difficulties that have been mentioned.

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

Mr B McCrea: The Ulster Unionist Party brought the amendment because the original motion, if it were to be carried, would put us in line with the draft proposals from the EU. However, that would put us out of step with the law in the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain.

It would also send a message to potential inward investors and local investors that Northern Ireland is not a very flexible place in which to do business.

My party is not, in any way, suggesting that there is no requirement to protect agency workers from the situations that other Members have described, but it is a question of getting the balance right.

There are, indeed, a number of positive reasons why many people enjoy working for agencies, some of which have been highlighted by the Minister and other Members. One of the most compelling reasons is that it can be a stepping stone to something better. During other debates, Members have discussed almost the opposite of that: we have argued about the need to provide work for teachers and to enable them to get one year of training which gives them experience to help them to progress. There is a corollary in that. I accept that, as has been said before, there may be dangers in that because it is no good being a new teacher for seven years; sooner or later that experience has to be transferred to real long-term employment.

Other issues that affect the whole of society have to be dealt with — for example, how companies forward-manage their workforce with planned redundancies and so on. One of the biggest issues is the suggestion of increased civilianisation of the police, which brings in different skills. I say that having registered my interest as a member of the Policing Board. How can such issues be managed sensitively and properly? Agency staff have their part to play in that process.

I note that a number of colleagues from the SDLP were worried about their consciences and about whether they would be able to leave the Chamber feeling that they had done the right thing. It is important that we, in the Assembly, get our house in order. Maybe someone can check how many agency workers have been working for seven years as Doorkeepers in this fine establishment. It is definitely more than one. That is an issue that we can consider and lead by example on.

I was struck by Mr Sammy Wilson's contribution on migrant workers. There is a danger that they could be exploited. Such issues need to be properly investigated. That is one of the reasons for the Ulster Unionist Party's amendment: the current entitlements need to be properly enforced. We think, along with the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom, that we should have significant qualifying periods for agency workers to ensure that the economy is not damaged. It is important to get a balance when it comes to economic competitiveness.

This is a bit like the argument that we had about the minimum wage. Do we put it up because it is the right thing to do, or would it be too high? Everything is finely balanced, like a cocktail. It is important to

ensure that no one aspect dominates the others. The danger with using a sledgehammer to crack a nut — to borrow the simile that was used by the Minister — is that it unbalances the system. We need to show that we are a caring society, but that there is flexibility that enables us to run a competitive economy.

The final issue is that skills and training make a real difference. That is why I was pleased to hear the Minister say that he plans to produce proposals on this matter, which will be part of the Programme for Government and which will tackle the real issues.

I have listened to worthy contributions from all sides of the House, and the Minister has taken a reasonable and proactive position. It would send a good and powerful signal if the House could unite behind the Ulster Unionist Party's amendment.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank my colleague Mitchel McLaughlin for tabling the motion. This has been a useful debate, and I thank the Minister for attending and for responding to the contributions. I also thank all the Members who took part; they all had a contribution to make.

In his opening address, Mitchel said that Sinn Féin would accept the amendment put forward by the Ulster Unionist Party.

4.15 pm

At the outset of the debate, Mitchel McLaughlin highlighted that there are almost 600 employment agencies on this island; therefore it is important that we take all necessary measures to protect agency workers. With that in mind, I am sure that the Committee for Employment and Learning will support any measure that strengthens the position of agency workers. On behalf of the Committee, I will make two points; then I will speak as a private Member.

The Committee recently agreed several work streams that it will concentrate on in its programme of work. One is vulnerable persons in the learning and employment environment. That group includes migrant workers, who are more likely to be employed by agencies. The Committee wishes to see only the highest standards of employment practices upheld and looks forward to the Department's strategy on that group of workers. The Department is to bring a strategy for migrant workers to the Committee at the end of February.

The Minister mentioned several issues but highlighted that, at its meeting last week, the Committee considered legislation concerned with agency workers, namely the Conduct of Employment Agencies and Employment Businesses (Amendment) Regulations 2007. The Committee unanimously supported those regulations, which are designed primarily to protect workers in the entertainment and modelling industries. The Minister

said that he will submit them to the Assembly for affirmative resolution soon. I thank him for that.

As several Members pointed out, agency work enables people to work across a range of areas in various European countries; it can offer flexibility and a way back into the labour market. It can also provide businesses with a flexible response to their need for staff, which is often the case for small and medium-sized businesses. We recognise and support that need, but it cannot be met at the cost of the rights and protection of workers. Temporary agency workers are often the most vulnerable and are usually found in lower-paid jobs, particularly in catering, call-centre and care sectors. Compared to those in permanent employment, agency workers lose out on pay, holidays and entitlement to family-friendly rights such as maternity and paternity leave. They can often be excluded from training.

Alex Attwood mentioned a recent TUC (Trades Union Congress) survey that found that agency workers can be in an organisation for long periods and yet be described as casual and viewed as not committed to the organisation. There has been a substantial growth in the number of agency workers, and although I recognise employers' need for flexibility, they should not be able to employ workers with lesser rights — particularly rights of redundancy and dismissal.

In his opening remarks, David McClarty said that the original motion would send out the wrong message; I disagree. However, as Sinn Féin seeks to send out a clear and positive message that the Assembly supports the rights of all workers, including agency workers, my party has agreed to accept the amendment. David went on to say that 67% of agency workers receive equal or higher pay than permanent staff: that might be correct, but what of the 33% that do not receive it? We have a duty to protect them. For the record, the trade union movement disputes that statistic.

In his contribution, the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning agreed with the original motion. I agree with him that Members will not leave today with all the answers. However, the motion calls on the Minister to take the necessary steps and I am sure that the Committee will have a positive role to play.

Anna Lo said that the original motion goes too far. In my view, however, legislation to protect the rights of workers — whether permanent or agency — cannot go far enough.

Sammy Wilson, as usual, brought clarity to the debate, and I thank him for the statistics that he provided. He is correct in asserting that agency staff are essential. Most agencies — as Mitchel McLaughlin pointed out in his opening remarks — provide

adequate protection for staff, but some do not. Mr Wilson pointed out that although agency workers have rights, some are unaware of them — we need to change that. There is no point in their having rights unless they know about them. The Minister pointed out that we need to ensure that the rights of agency staff are enforced by the relevant agencies. I look forward to the Minister introducing that proposal.

Alastair Ross made the point that agency workers are employed by an agency rather than a company. Mr Ross is absolutely correct. However, it would be remiss of me were I not to point out that companies should not be allowed to turn a blind eye to bad practice when they become aware of it. They have a duty to report such practices.

John Dallat, George Robinson and Jim Shannon made valid points about issues that have arisen in their constituencies. That highlights the fact to me that mistreatment of agency workers affects all of our constituencies; not just one or two. It happens right across the board, and Members are having to deal with those problems daily.

The Minister pointed out that there are benefits from agency work: no one would disagree. All Members who have spoken have highlighted and accepted that positive work is being done by agencies and by the individuals who wish to be involved with them.

Basil McCrea raised the issue of staff in this Building. I commend the Minister, and I will support him in his pledge to write to the Minister of Finance and Personnel on the matter. Members hear stories daily about staff who are directly, or indirectly, associated with the Building and who could be mistreated. Mr McCrea said that there could be exploitation. The fact is that exploitation has already occurred and changes must be made.

I agree with Mitchel McLaughlin that the Assembly must, in co-operation with the trade union movement, commit to the implementation of measures that will protect the rights of agency workers. The Assembly's aim is to support and encourage businesses while ensuring that workers are fully protected and have equal rights. I support 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 for Employment and Learning to take the necessary measures to protect agency workers.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Deputy Speaker.*]

ADJOURNMENT

Apprenticeships in Foyle

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the debate will have 10 minutes in which to speak. Depending on how many other Members wish to speak, they will each have approximately eight minutes. The Minister will speak for the last 10 minutes of the debate.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the important subject of apprenticeships. During a visit to FG Wilson in December 2007 the Minister for Employment and Learning, Sir Reg Empey, described apprentices as the lifeblood of the economy: I could not agree with him more. However, that lifeblood is being drained from my constituency, Foyle, because of the concentration of apprenticeship training that is being located away from the region.

In recent years, many of the major level 3 training programmes have been lost to Derry. For example, the contract to provide electrical training was awarded to a company in Ballymena; plumbing training was awarded to a company in Belfast; and mechanics and motor-vehicle training was awarded to a company that is now based at Mallusk.

When the contract for mechanics and motor-vehicle training was awarded, the successful company, Carter and Carter Group plc, did not even have premises in the North of Ireland. Does the Minister believe that Carter and Carter Group plc is in a better position to deliver mechanics and motor-vehicle training than the North West Regional College, which was unsuccessful in its bid? I appreciate that the decision was made during direct rule. However, the Minister has a responsibility to confront the ongoing legacy that such decisions have created.

In particular, he must deal with the deeply concerning issue of Carter and Carter Group plc. I draw his attention to an article that appeared in the 'Guardian' newspaper in December 2007, which reported that the company faces debts of more than £130 million and that an auditor is investigating the falsification of its records.

Is that really the type of company with which we should entrust the future of our young people? In order to prevent that from ever happening again, there must be a fundamental review of the procurement process that is used in the Department's Training for Success

scheme. Furthermore, I and my party colleague Raymond McCartney have already written to the Comptroller and Auditor General to ask him to investigate the procurement process which allowed that to happen.

Is the Minister in a position to publish the report that was commissioned by his Department into the impact on north-west school-leavers of the pilot scheme that is run by a Ballymena electrical training company? I am sure that if he has the report, he will publish it — Members would like to learn about it. That scheme informed much of current policy. However, we are still to see the details of that report, despite previous assurances that it would be available in April 2007. It would be welcome if the delivery of that report could be speeded up.

Action is needed now. Otherwise, ever more vital training programmes will be lost to areas such as Derry, while the future of ever more of our young people could be placed in the hands of companies such as Carter and Carter Group plc.

There is no doubt that the Department's Training for Success programme has the potential to deliver for the young people of the North. However, it must deliver for them all, and not just for the few. As part of the Stand Up for Derry campaign, I have argued for an end to the neglect that the north west has endured for so many decades. For too long, the young people of my city have been denied an equal right to employment. Are we now also to deny them the right to training?

The young people of my city desperately want to work. They want to learn and to secure apprenticeships as a means of securing a better future for themselves and their families. How can they do that if they are forced to travel to Belfast, Ballymena or anywhere else in the North on a trainee's wage? That is impossible.

The draft Programme for Government and investment strategy commits the Executive to creating 6,500 new jobs by 2011 and delivering £18 billion of investment during the next decade. Those are laudable aims. However, those jobs and that investment must be for the benefit of all of the people who reside in the North. That means that all young people should have equal access to apprenticeship training. After all, it is they who will build the better future that we want to see. We in the Chamber are merely laying down the foundations for that.

The Executive have also committed themselves to eradicating the scandal of fuel poverty and, in particular, child poverty, by 2012. Again, those are laudable aims. It is the responsibility of all Departments to play their part in achieving those aims. However, nowhere is the problem of child poverty more acute than in my constituency. In Derry, 36% of children are living in poverty, compared to the North's average of 24%. The

highest child mortality rate is also in the Western Health and Social Services Board area. Derry has the highest proportion of young people who leave school without any qualifications.

The people of my city, particularly the young, have been failed for generations. They must not be failed by the current Executive, or the Assembly, any longer. In this new dispensation, we have the opportunity to reverse the failures of the past. Unless we constructively address issues such as the provision of apprenticeships, we will continue to fail the people, particularly the young people, of Derry. We will also fail to achieve the goals that have been set out in the draft Programme for Government.

Therefore, I repeat my plea to the Minister to stand up for the young people of Derry and for all our young people. I urge him to give them a chance at the better future that each and every one of them deserves. Go raibh míle maith agat.

4.30 pm

Mr Durkan: I congratulate Martina Anderson on securing this debate on a very important issue. It is important to consider not just the Foyle constituency, because the platform on which the Training for Success policy has been pursued is giving rise to serious issues elsewhere. The problems are most acutely felt and demonstrated in the north-west, particularly because of the switch in the Electrical Training Trust (ETT) contract. Approaching private firms to provide training — supposedly in the name of producing employer-led apprenticeship schemes as opposed to the earlier models — will result in uneven access to apprenticeship opportunities. Uneven access means unequal opportunities.

The decline in numbers, not just in Derry but in other districts, is apparent from the figures — particularly the ETT figures. Since the introduction of the new format there has been a significant reduction in the numbers undertaking electrical training apprenticeships. A clustering effect is evident: apprenticeships doughnut around providers. There is a fireside effect: the closer people are to the fire, the more heat they feel; those further away feel the draught. That creates inequality. That is a problem, not just for the young people who are looking forward to apprenticeships, but also for training providers who have supplied effective and efficient high-performance training and apprenticeships in the past, not least, as Martina Anderson said, the North West Regional College, formerly the North West Institute.

It also creates problems for employers and firms. We must remember that electricians, electrical technicians, plumbers and mechanics have not only learnt their trade and become employees, they have often become self-employed. They in turn often form

their own companies and employ others. A significant drop in the numbers taking up apprenticeships — almost to the point of extinction — will have a knock-on effect. There will be a shortage of self-employed people and fewer companies being created in certain areas. Those areas will have fewer firms that can compete for subcontracts in public or private procurement projects, never mind the main contracts. Multiple inequality issues arise.

I accept that this policy began before devolution was restored, but if the Department's emphasis is supposed to be on employer-led schemes, what happens in areas that do not have significant numbers of employers or where firms are not large enough to meet the criteria for employer-led schemes? Firms in those areas cannot participate in apprenticeship schemes, and young people in those areas are denied the opportunity to join those schemes. In the name of employer-led schemes, the Department must take account of the scale and capacity of employers and where they are located; it must introduce schemes that meet their needs. That approach would be fairer to them, to their areas and to the young people who live in those areas.

The Department for Employment and Learning must move quickly on this matter. We have waited a long time while reviews and studies have been carried out. I do not blame the Minister; I understand that the work has not been completed. However, an appraisal of the impact of the switch in the Electrical Training Trust contract case has been a long time coming, as has an examination of the wider equality implications. The Department should not go any further down that road until it is able to say that it knows what has happened and why, and has corrective plans.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I congratulate and commend Martina Anderson for securing this debate. Although the Committee for Employment and Learning has been examining the general issue of apprenticeships, it has not specifically considered the situation in the Foyle constituency or the wider north-west area. The Minister will probably refer later to a report commissioned from PricewaterhouseCoopers, 'Modern Apprenticeships in the North West: Understanding Demographics/Trends to Date and Forecasting Future Scenarios'. That is a long title, but I wanted to read it into the record. The report has been finalised in the past few weeks, but, for the record, I and other Committee members received it only yesterday, and I have not had a chance to examine it.

There is enormous interest among Members in the subject of apprenticeships, as evidenced by this debate and a motion to be proposed next week by Jim Shannon on the broader issue of apprenticeships in

manufacturing. My Committee is considering the issue through the monitoring of the Department's Training for Success programme, which has replaced Jobskills. We are examining the early roll-out of the programme, and we will report our findings to the Assembly after the Easter recess.

To date, the Committee has focused on assessing departmental views on the roll-out of the programme. We are now moving to the critical phase of establishing sectoral feedback. Tomorrow, the Committee will take evidence from the engineering and utility sectors. Next week, we are due to hear from representatives of the construction sector. Their evidence will be crucial to our inquiry, because they have already been quite vocal about the problems that have arisen with the apprenticeships.

I urge Members who have an interest in this subject to keep an eye on the Committee's agenda. As I said, the Committee will make its formal report on the issue as soon as its monitoring of the Training for Success programme has been completed. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs M Bradley: My party is no stranger to the subject of this debate; our party leader has been working with the local victims since the beginning of this saga.

Employer-led schemes have had a primary role in the equation for many years. However, the current situation begs many questions. The North West Regional College has been synonymous with thousands of young men and women who took up vocational apprenticeships in order to equip themselves with a trade from which to make a living. Now, however, all that has been stripped away from the college, which is well-equipped and well-prepared to train young people, and which has a proven track record.

The college has made major investments in premises and equipment to allow it to deliver training of the highest standard. Nevertheless, a company that had not met any of the required criteria was awarded a contract by Departments headed by direct rule Ministers. That company has no staff or premises in Northern Ireland, let alone Derry. I understand that, at one stage, it had aspirations to buy Blackwater House, a training company based in Mallusk, so I can only assume that aspirations beat physical actualities when it comes to awarding the criteria points that ultimately win contracts. That situation must be reassessed; our city deserves better, and our young people deserve better opportunities.

When the shirt factories in Derry closed down, training programmes were introduced in order to help people to get on in life and learn another trade. That is not happening as it should, and the situation must be re-examined. We await the result.

Mr P Ramsey: Like Mark Durkan, I commend Martina Anderson for securing the debate, and I welcome the Minister for Employment and Learning.

Talking to young people in Derry who are around school-leaving age can be a tremendous boost. They have an uplifting wit, imagination and optimism. In most cases, our young people have enjoyed their schooling and have benefited from the hard work that people from the community sectors have done, such as providing local youth clubs. The city is bursting with a willingness to learn. Previous parliamentary questions show that self-funded night classes at Magee College are rapidly developing, particular in technology-related subjects. There is a thirst in the city for success and to get ahead.

However, for many school leavers, progress is very difficult, despite their optimism. Ideally, school leavers who do not want to go into academic study should have the opportunity to begin serving their time in comprehensive, internationally recognised apprenticeship schemes. Their disappointment, loss of place in society, and the barriers that prevent many of our young people from contributing can create terrible frustration, resentment and disillusionment. Every town and city in the North will witness young people who have no stake in society drifting towards drink and trouble. Many young people do not know how to become adults because they are disconnected from their role models.

Everyone should be able to excel in activities that allow them to earn a living. That is the natural way of things, and we must recreate the circumstances that allow that to happen. Traditionally, people were encouraged to learn skills; it was their duty to become the best that they could so that they could contribute to their community and earn a living. Since the industrial revolution, an apprenticeship-led scheme was the rite of passage from childhood to adulthood for many people. Not only could young people learn job skills, but they learned how to be an adult. We must get back to basics and build properly resourced Government training centres, where people can undertake one or two years of rigorous training. I am confident that, after such training, those people would be snapped up by employers who could put their skills to much more productive use.

The current apprenticeship training system has been of great concern to the SDLP. As Mary Bradley mentioned, our colleague Mark Durkan has asked questions on the subject in the House and, prior to devolution, in the House of Commons. The system is wasteful; it excludes those who are from areas of high unemployment and those who are over the age of 24.

Change should take place in three areas. First, the current practice of outsourcing training is a barrier. In some cases, training is outsourced from either first- or

third-year apprenticeships to suppliers that often are not even local companies. It is difficult to understand the point in giving business to a private company that is not from Northern Ireland, given that it will then subcontract our regional colleges to do the same work. Why are we throwing our money away? I reiterate Martina Anderson's point that the North West Regional College was overlooked in its bid to provide training schemes. Almost £1 million was invested in a mechanical engineering workshop at that college, but it is now lying dormant. It is a crying shame because that centre of excellence could be used in a much more productive way for young people. I ask the Minister to comment on what future use will be made of that workshop for our young people.

Secondly, the insistence that apprentices have an employer mitigates high levels of unemployment in regions that have a low economic activity base. However, that rule not only disadvantages individuals, but exacerbates the shortage of those skills that are necessary for new business and new product development. That is the reason that it is important to build a network of Government training centres. I declare an interest as I served my time in the 1970s as an apprentice in some of the training centres in Derry, which provided both excellent work and the opportunity for people to develop skills that they would not otherwise have had. Such centres can fast-track apprenticeship courses through intensive training schemes that are similar to the successful models of the 1970s and 1980s.

Thirdly, why is there an age limit of 24 to qualify for Training for Success? Why should an unemployed person of 25 or older not be facilitated in learning how to be a bricklayer or a plumber, or whatever he or she wants to be? There should be no artificial age limit.

Those three barriers are artificial, and, through our institutions, we should remove them. If we can get properly funded Government training schemes operating, allowing people of all ages to participate and without the prerequisite of needing to be employed — as is the case for school leavers and people who are long-term unemployed — we can make inroads into renewing economies and transforming lives and communities.

The Assembly can raise the heads of young people so that they retain their optimism after leaving school. By doing so, the Assembly can re-engage with an entire section of society that feels excluded.

4.45 pm

I call on the Minister for Employment and Learning to engage in a partnership approach with employers and unions to ensure that all young people, no matter where they are from, have an opportunity to take up proper apprenticeships. That will give them a chance to move from childhood to adulthood while still fully

engaged with society. I also ask the Minister to ensure that retraining through apprenticeships is available to people at any stage of their careers.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I thank Members who arranged and participated in today's Adjournment debate. I want to deal with a couple of matters before replying to the debate.

Mr Ramsey mentioned that the North West Regional College is not currently in use. I will look into that matter and write to the Member in due course. Mr Durkan raised the issue of the "doughnut" or clustering effect of apprenticeships. My Department will look out for evidence of that as it assesses how the Training for Success programme is being rolled out. I listened carefully to what he said on the subject.

The Member who tabled the subject for debate and all Members who spoke today are clearly concerned lest the area that they represent becomes disadvantaged. The background to, and context of, the current situation is that it is an inherited arrangement. It arose largely because of the report by the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs that severely criticised the Jobskills programme. Among the many criticisms was the fact that employers were exploiting the workers by using them for 12 months before dumping them.

The procurement process is run through the Department of Finance and Personnel's Central Procurement Directorate. People have asked whether it was necessary for the Carter and Carter Group plc to have premises before starting the training programmes. The answer, under the procurement rules, is no. I, and many others, asked the question. Everything was done in accordance with DFP rules, and the Carter and Carter Group plc was not the only company in that position.

As I recap on the debate, I hope to pick up most of the points that have been made. I will try to catch up later on anything that I miss.

My Department is totally committed to apprenticeships, which constitute the main vehicle that supports business, industry, employers and the economy. Every year, apprenticeships help many young people to move from education into the world of work. Pat Ramsey made a good point about adult apprenticeships. However, the financial dimension must be considered. The Department wants to provide many more apprenticeships and is currently considering what can be done, but the recent comprehensive spending review has had an impact on spending. However, the Department is aware of the issue of adult apprenticeships because many people have highlighted it.

Apprenticeships provide people with training to develop the technical skills and knowledge that they and their employers need. The type and number of apprentices who need to be trained each year will be

determined by the demand from business and industry. The responsibility is not exclusive to the Department: employers must also have a role. They must invest in apprentices, and they must understand that there is a link between helping young people to progress and enjoying long-term success as companies. Some companies tend to hope that an apprentice will turn up on a given day and that the Government will provide his or her training. I am sorry, but the employers must play their part.

In the past year, my Department spent £51 million on vocational training, £12 million of which was specifically dedicated to supporting young apprentices and their employers. The balance of the money was used to prepare young people for work and to help them progress to training as apprentices, because some required basic, essential skills before their apprenticeships could begin.

Health and safety is a major issue that must be dealt with before apprentices can work in certain sectors, particularly in construction.

Over the past few years, the Department's flagship training scheme — Jobskills — received a poor press, and I refer to that because of the Westminster Public Accounts Committee's report of 2005. The new training product responds largely to that report. We have our differences about the degree to which we might have responded, and the manner in which we would have responded, but we are where we are. Training for Success offers a new approach to skills training, ensuring that people are actually employed. Skills training is at the heart of what is on offer.

The apprenticeship programme remains virtually untouched. It was working well, and there was no need to change it. Indeed, we have built on its sound foundations and enhanced it with the introduction of level 2 apprenticeships.

The Department has set itself the challenging target of having 10,000 apprentices on the programme by 2010. Last year, more than 6,000 people joined the programme, and the indications are that this year's intake — although down a little on last year — will increase significantly, year on year, as the new provision beds in. However, the numbers that enter apprenticeships are entirely determined by employers. It is they who employ apprentices and offer them the opportunity to train. The introduction of training provision is required to renew contracts for the delivery of training by further education colleges and other training organisations. The Department is required to comply with Government accounting and procurement procedures, under strict guidance from the Department of Finance and Personnel's procurement directorate. The tendering process was completed in May 2007.

I am aware of the concerns that have been raised about the apparent decline in apprenticeships in the Foyle area. My officials have met with public representatives and council officials to discuss apprenticeships and to hear concerns about the contracts awarded to the Electrical Training Trust and, more recently, to Carter and Carter Group plc. The Electrical Training Trust is by far the most successful scheme. It has an 85% success rate, which is top of the line. Some Members are concerned that its headquarters are in Ballymena, but it is not necessary for the courses to be held there. The examinations are held there, and they take about three days. If there is sufficient demand in the city, and if at least 12 people wished to take the course, training could take place there.

There is a particular issue about the numbers of trainees at the moment, but, as the Member for Foyle Mr Durkan has said, in previous times the city was well ahead. Its figures are still above average, but in that particular discipline it is not doing so well. However, that can be remedied. The college could provide training on its premises in the city if there were enough trainees — probably more than 12 would be sufficient.

On a regional basis, the north-west has experienced some of the lowest levels of apprenticeships, but Foyle has one the highest levels. Up to 2002-03, the four-year funded route, that is, the achievement measurement 2 (AM2) skill test, has been running at double the Northern Ireland average. Although that figure has declined since 2003, it is still above the Northern Ireland average.

Reference has been made to a study that was carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers. A copy of that report will be placed in the Library today, so that Members can study it and make their own determinations. I am monitoring the Carter and Carter Group plc situation on almost a daily basis.

The Education and Training Inspectorate is in constant contact with providers in order to monitor the standards of the contracts as they are implemented, and that applies in this case. I can confirm that the Department has prepared contingency plans in the event of there being any specific difficulty with Carter and Carter Group plc. Although its shares have been suspended, it is still a legally trading company and is still honouring its contracts. The Department can act only if the company defaults on those contracts. The report is in the Assembly Library, and I ask Members to read it to see whether they feel that it contains sufficient information to make a judgement.

The Department is totally committed to the apprenticeship model, is looking closely at adult retraining and is fully aware of the concerns that exist in Foyle. I assure Members that my Department's task, and that of the

Education and Training Inspectorate in advising us, is to ensure that standards are high, and are maintained high, everywhere in Northern Ireland, which, of course, includes Foyle.

Adjourned at 4.56 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 21 January 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: During the sitting on Monday 14 January 2008, Mr Spratt raised a point of order, suggesting that there was something wrong with the microphones in the Chamber and that they should be checked. Mr Spratt is not in the Chamber, but I thank him for that point of order. Another Member had approached the Table earlier that day, also suggesting that there had been a problem with the sound.

Checks have now been conducted, and I am advised that the interference about which Members have complained is being caused by mobile phones being in active mode. If Members persist in leaving their mobile phones on — even in silent mode — while they are in the Chamber, those problems will continue.

Without looking at any specific Members, I understand why some are very attached to their mobile phones. However, I urge Members to manage without them when they are in the Chamber. The Whips have consistently raised this issue. We should try to reach a point where Members leave their mobile phones outside the Chamber, but, if that cannot be achieved, the Business Committee needs to consider the issue further to try to resolve it.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Statutory Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: The next item of business is the motion on Statutory Committee membership, which has been brought forward by the Business Committee. As with similar motions, this will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Mr P J Bradley: I beg to move

That Mr Pat Doherty replace Mr Gerry McHugh as a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development; that Mr Gerry McHugh replace Mr Francie Molloy as a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment; and that Mr Alastair Ross replace Mr Alex Maskey as a member of the Committee for the Environment.

Some Members may be wondering why I am proposing this motion. For those who are not familiar with the workings of the Business Committee, I should explain that if a Member from a particular party is named in such a motion, it is preferred that that party does not lend its name to the motion. That is why the motion stands in my name.

I am not involved in the internal politics of Sinn Féin — that is for sure. However, I wish to pay tribute to Gerry McHugh, who has been an active member of the Agriculture Committee since 1998. I have sat alongside him, and he was a well-informed member who kept a good attendance record.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That Mr Pat Doherty replace Mr Gerry McHugh as a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development; that Mr Gerry McHugh replace Mr Francie Molloy as a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment; and that Mr Alastair Ross replace Mr Alex Maskey as a member of the Committee for the Environment.

Standing Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: The next item of business concerns the membership of a Standing Committee. The motion has been proposed by the Business Committee — it is a business motion, and, therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Ian McCrea replace Mr Mickey Brady as a member of the Public Accounts Committee. — *[Mr P J Bradley.]*

Mr A Maginness: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I refer to today's first business motion. Is it in order for a long-standing member of a Committee to be forced off that Committee because of his leaving a party, rather than to consent to his removal? Is it in order for a Member to be pushed off a Committee in a rather brutal fashion?

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee was unanimously agreed on how to deal with that matter. Standing Orders state that all Members must be offered membership of one Statutory Committee.

Mr A Maginness: I do not wish to prolong proceedings, but a Member has an opportunity and a right to be a member of a Statutory Committee. If that person expresses the view that he or she is quite happy to stay on that Committee, can he or she not do so? Why must such a Member be forced off a Statutory Committee? Surely it should be a matter of consent to removal.

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order for the House. I am satisfied that the Business Committee has dealt with the issue.

Smoke Alarms in Homes

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 a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

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

That this Assembly recognises the positive work of voluntary and statutory organisations in installing smoke alarms in homes; expresses concern that many dwellings in both the private- and social-housing sectors still do not have adequate working smoke alarms; and calls on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department for Social Development and the Department of Finance and Personnel, to undertake a coordinated programme to ensure the provision of working smoke detectors in every home.

As Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I am pleased to propose the motion on this important public-safety issue. Concerns about this issue were raised by the Committee after the horrific deaths of seven members of the McElhill and McGovern family in a recent house fire in Omagh.

I appreciate fully that the circumstances of those tragic deaths are still under investigation and are the subject of an independent review that was announced by the Minister last week. I welcome that review.

Whatever the particular circumstances of that tragic case, it is a sad fact that, according to figures from the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, there were 833 accidental house fires in Northern Ireland last year, in which eight people lost their lives and more than 250 were injured.

The motion is about smoke alarms, and, without question, smoke alarms save lives. In a house fire, the real killer is often not the fire itself but smoke. It is well known that fires happen when people least expect them, often during the night. It is a shocking fact that if people are asleep when a fire starts and there is no smoke alarm to wake them, they are unlikely to survive. Smoke suffocates quickly, and people can die before the flames reach them. A smoke alarm gives vital minutes of warning that help people to get out safely. Surveys suggest that Northern Ireland has the highest number of smoke alarms in homes of any part of the United Kingdom. That is very good news and is due in no small measure to the ongoing work of our statutory and voluntary organisations. I pay tribute to the work that they do.

Three main factors have contributed to the high level of smoke alarms. First, the Fire and Rescue Service, in conjunction with a range of voluntary organisations, undertook a campaign a few years ago

entitled *Elderly at Risk*, during which approximately 65,000 free smoke alarms were fitted in the homes of elderly and vulnerable people. That made a significant impact. I cannot praise too highly the valuable work of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, which continues to undertake comprehensive fire-prevention work, including the provision of fire-safety advice. Members will be familiar with the hard-hitting advertisements that appear on our screens and remind us regularly of the terrible consequences of not having a working smoke alarm.

The second factor that has contributed to the high level of smoke alarms is changes in recent years to the building regulations, which mean that all new dwellings must now have a smoke alarm that is connected to the electricity supply. That removes the concern about batteries not working, being removed or not being replaced when they run out. The same requirement to fit a hard-wired smoke alarm applies where major renovations are carried out to existing buildings.

The third contributing factor is the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's programme, which has been in place for quite a number of years, of fitting smoke alarms to its properties. As a result, the level of death and injury in fires in private dwellings is lower in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the United Kingdom. However, there is no room for complacency, and a number of factors has caused the Committee to be concerned about the issue and to bring forward this motion for debate.

In relation to the number of homes with a smoke alarm, a Northern Ireland omnibus survey, carried out in 2004, found that 96% of respondents stated that they had an alarm. Of those, 72% reported that they checked their smoke alarms at least weekly or monthly. As a result, the Fire and Rescue Service estimated at that time that 19% of homes may not have a reliable, working smoke alarm. It is clear that a headline figure of 96% of homes having a smoke alarm can mask the true picture. A more recent study, based on interviews carried out in 1,000 homes, found that 94% reported having a smoke alarm.

The level of ownership of smoke alarms may be quite high, but the crucial factor is whether those have been maintained and whether they have a working battery. The Fire and Rescue Service has found many cases of the alarm being fitted but not maintained, or the batteries removed. The focus of the Fire and Rescue Service's media campaigns has, quite rightly, been on reminding people to check their smoke alarms regularly and warning of the consequences of removing batteries for other use.

12.15 pm

However, general statistics about the number of homes with smoke alarms can give a misleading impression

and, perhaps, lead to a false sense of security. In addition to the number of smoke alarms that have not been maintained, there are still many homes that do not have alarms. That is particularly worrying, and the Committee is calling for a co-ordinated programme to tackle the issue. For example, figures from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive show that just fewer than three-quarters of all social housing stock have smoke alarms fitted, which leaves nearly 23,000 homes in the social-housing sector with no smoke alarms. The situation must be addressed urgently, and I am sure that we will hear further views on that point from Members during the debate.

I will turn briefly to an analysis that was carried out by the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service on house fires in Northern Ireland over the past four years, which shows that there has been a gradual reduction in the overall number of fires during that period. The number has fallen from just over 1,000 in 2005 to 830 last year. When the type of dwelling is examined, over the same period, one finds that nearly 40% of all house fires were in terraced houses. That was followed by 16%, which were in flats, and 14%, which occurred in semi-detached houses. As well as over 1,000 casualties, there were 33 accidental deaths in fires during the past four years. When the smoke alarm status of the 33 dwellings in which those deaths took place is examined, one finds that 14 of them had no smoke alarms, and in eight other cases, the alarms were not working.

Ensuring that every home in Northern Ireland has a working smoke alarm is first and foremost down to individuals to take responsibility for their own safety. At departmental level, it is an issue that requires action by a number of Departments. Although the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) has primary responsibility for public safety, the Department for Social Development (DSD) has a role in relation to social housing in the public- or private-rental sectors and the Department of Finance and Personnel has a role in relation to building regulations. The Committee is, therefore, calling for concerted action from all three Departments to tackle the issue.

In conclusion, I will leave Members with a positive and encouraging statistic from the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. In 333 homes in which fires occurred last year, the occupants were alerted by a smoke alarm. That shows that smoke alarms can, and do, save lives, and I urge Members to support the motion.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. As a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I am happy to add my name and give my support and that of Sinn Féin to the motion. As the Chairperson has just said, I hope that we receive the support of the House today because the motion is proactive.

I commend the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and although part of the motion calls on him to do specific things, it is recognised that other Departments must play their parts, too. I look forward to hearing from the Minister the time frame in which the programme will be achieved.

I also take this opportunity to commend the Fire and Rescue Service for its ongoing work and those groups in the community and voluntary sector that have been working over past years to ensure that homes that are occupied by the most vulnerable in our society are fitted with smoke detectors. Without that work, the figures highlighted by the Chairperson would be greater.

The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety received a briefing paper on smoke alarms from Dr Janice Thompson, and I thank her for her report. She gave the Committee statistics and compared what is happening here with the work that is taking place in some local authority areas in England. The report informed us that a survey carried out by the Fire and Rescue Service shows that 96% of respondents said that they had smoke alarms in their homes. Of those, 72% said that they check their smoke alarms either weekly or monthly. The Fire and Rescue Service, based on those responses, estimated that 19% of homes may not have a reliable, working smoke alarm.

With that figure in mind, and in light of recent deaths, I support the motion.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety gave statistics, and, for some years, it has been Housing Executive policy to install smoke alarms in all its flats, maisonettes and bungalows. That is to be commended; however, the figures show that smoke alarms are not fitted in just over 23,000 properties. If that figure applies only to the public sector, how many private-sector homes are without reliable smoke detectors? That must be changed.

There were 830 house fires in 2007, resulting in the loss of eight lives. Many others were injured. I have no doubt that more would have died, had residents not been given early warning by smoke detectors.

I stress again that fitting a smoke detector is all well and good; however, it must be checked regularly. It is good that today is Monday: I close with the Fire and Rescue Service campaign slogan "Thumbs Up On Monday". Go raibh maith agat.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety for bringing the motion to the Assembly. Should it achieve nothing else, it will heighten public awareness of the smoke-alarm issue.

I congratulate the two Members who spoke previously on their presentation of the statistics. An increase of 98% in ownership of smoke alarms is welcome;

however, only 72% of those are checked regularly. Therefore, the question is not the problem of finance to supply smoke alarms, but the finance necessary to educate people to check their alarms regularly.

It seems that the real problem with inefficient smoke alarms is that, in many cases, the batteries have run down, and the householders have not renewed them. Would it not, therefore, be better if all smoke alarms were hard wired?

A further statistic that has, rightly, been quoted is the number of privately owned homes with either no smoke alarm, or whose alarm is inefficient. Should this Assembly not recommend that all private homes be statutorily bound to have smoke alarms fitted and hard wired? Furthermore, should it not be the case that smoke alarms are fitted all public-sector houses?

The statistics for deaths in house fires are alarming. Although we may congratulate ourselves that the number of deaths has gone down, even one fatality from a fire in a house with no working smoke alarm is one too many.

Rather than bore Members by going over the statistics again, suffice it to say that, in the draft Budget, the Fire and Rescue Service is almost at a standstill. If we are to ask that service to go a bit further, we must look again at supporting resources for its educational programme for householders with smoke alarms.

I support the motion, both personally and as a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and, again, I thank the Chairperson for bringing it to the Floor of the Assembly.

Mr McCarthy: On behalf of the United Community group of the Assembly, I support this important motion. Ninety-six per cent of our population have smoke alarms, and congratulations are due to those services who worked to achieve that figure. Compared to where we were not that long ago, that statistic is excellent.

One fire in a property is one too many, as is one fatality as a result of a fire. We must avoid those outcomes at all costs. It is to be hoped that by debating the matter in the Assembly, everyone will be encouraged to ensure that working smoke alarms are fitted in their properties. As representatives of our communities, the onus is on us to tell people as often as possible that they must ensure that their smoke alarms work. Even if we say as much to those who come into our offices, we will contribute to a further reduction of fire-related fatalities and fires in the home.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter said that if we want to ensure the adoption of a co-ordinated approach to the provision of working smoke alarms, we must make sure that the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service

has sufficient funding to encourage everyone in the community to fit their homes with smoke-detection devices.

It has been a pleasure for me to speak to the motion, which I support fully.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Campbell): The Committee for Social Development welcomes the motion tabled by the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, asking the Assembly to recognise the positive work of the voluntary and statutory organisations in installing smoke alarms in homes. The motion also calls on relevant Departments to implement a co-ordinated programme to ensure the provision of working smoke detectors in every home in Northern Ireland.

Smoke alarms save lives: there is no doubt about that. Fire strikes when it is least expected, and it can spread rapidly, damaging property, personal possessions and, of course, lives, for ever. The real killer, however, is smoke. Smoke suffocates people quickly, and lives are often lost before flames can even take hold.

Smoke alarms act as early warning systems and give some extra escape time, which can be precious. Many lives have been saved by smoke alarms that have wakened families before they were overcome by the smoke that was created by a fire. Sadly, some people have not been so fortunate. Smoke alarms save lives, but that is true only if the devices are working.

Apart from houses in multiple occupation (HMO), there is no requirement for smoke detectors to be fitted in private-rented dwellings. In this day and age, especially given our knowledge about the important role that smoke detectors play in saving lives, it is almost incomprehensible that there is no requirement to fit them in such dwellings. It would be interesting and, I must say, heartbreaking, to find out how many lives could have been saved had there been such a requirement.

The current fitness standard for homes as provided in The Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1992 does not refer to smoke detection. However, the Committee understands that that will be considered in the context of an imminent review of the private-rented sector strategy. The Committee members and, I am sure, other Members will expect the installation of smoke alarms in private-rented dwellings to become a requirement in the near future. Under the 'Housing Association Guide' and relevant building regulations, mains-powered smoke detectors must be installed in all new social housing or housing that is being altered significantly. An estimated 95% of housing association properties have had mains-powered smoke alarms installed. It is disturbing that no target to reach an installation rate of

100% has been set; the 'Housing Association Guide' simply states that associations:

"should take the first opportunity to have mains-powered smoke alarms fitted".

That is simply not good enough. A target of no less than 100% ought to be set.

Since the 1990s, the Housing Executive's policy has been to install mains-powered smoke alarms in all its flats, maisonettes and bungalows. If the electrics of a house are being upgraded, mains-powered smoke alarms are installed as standard.

Mr Speaker, considerable progress has been made, but let me dig a little deeper and provide you with some figures that the Chairperson of the Health Committee has already mentioned. She said that approximately 65,000 Housing Executive dwellings have had mains-powered smoke alarms fitted. That is significant progress, and it must be welcomed.

12.30 pm

However, given that the Housing Executive's total net tenanted stock stands at 87,500 properties, that means that almost 23,000 properties do not have such smoke alarms. How many people are at serious risk as a result? There may be over 50,000 people at risk in Housing Executive properties. These figures are absolutely shocking and extremely serious. The issue needs immediate and urgent attention.

Finally, I want to pay tribute to the statutory sector, particularly the Fire and Rescue Service, as well as all the voluntary agencies involved, for the sterling work that has been done over recent years to install smoke alarms in homes. As Mrs Robinson said, surveys suggest that Northern Ireland has the highest level of smoke alarms in homes of any part of the UK. I have no doubt that that can be attributed to the dedication and hard work of the Fire and Rescue Service and the voluntary agencies. There is much more hard work to be done.

In conclusion, the Committee for Social Development fully supports the motion and congratulates the Health Committee on its proposing of it.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I also commend the Member for bringing such an important motion to the Floor of the House. The matter of fire prevention and the necessity of smoke alarms in homes has been an issue for many years, yet we still hear of the terrible tragedies that occur as the result of house fires — loss of life, horrific injuries, and damage to the lives of entire families.

How many times have we heard the Fire and Rescue Service, the police and others on television appealing to people to install smoke alarms in their homes? However, in many instances, the appeals fall on deaf ears. How many people are living in homes with no

smoke alarms? According to statistics, the answer is thousands. The motion asks the Departments with shared responsibility for fire prevention resources and expertise to undertake a co-ordinated approach and develop a programme that will result in working smoke alarms being fitted in every home.

The motion also recognises the excellent work carried out by the voluntary and statutory sectors to educate people about fire prevention and to install smoke alarms in thousands of homes across the North of Ireland. There is no doubt that many people owe their lives to the fact that some people care enough to have highlighted the importance of having a smoke alarm in every dwelling and have taken the appropriate action to ensure that smoke alarms were installed.

I also commend the many community groups who work in partnership with the voluntary and statutory sectors. Often, the work that they do goes unrecognised, but we should remember the hours of work that such people carry out on a voluntary basis. They are the people who plod the streets, carrying out the surveys and providing the information to ensure that an effective programme is completed. The partnership between statutory agencies and the voluntary and community sector has proven invaluable in the battle to have smoke alarms installed. When one considers the cost of not accepting this motion in the sense of loss of life or injuries, full support is essential. If one considers the damage to property, then, again, we need to rally behind the motion.

The statistics paint a bleak picture. Over the past four years, an estimated 3,600 fires have taken place in various dwelling types, while in the past three years, the number of house fires has fallen by 175, from 1,005 in 2004 to 830 in 2007. In that period, we have seen a casualty list of 1,052 people. We must do all in our power to drive those figures down.

In my lifetime, I have seen the devastating and heartbreaking consequences of house fires and I have seen the impact that they leave on communities. I am sure that everyone in the House can tell similar stories. We have it in our power to ensure that at least one effective smoke alarm is installed in every home. In many countries, it is recommended that smoke alarms should be fitted in every room, while other countries ask that smoke alarms be strategically placed in several rooms.

In the June 2004 Northern Ireland omnibus survey, 96% of respondents stated that they had a smoke alarm in their home, and 72% stated that they checked their alarm on a weekly or monthly basis. In a leaflet published in 2006, the Fire and Rescue Service stated that 98% of people said that they had a smoke alarm in their house — that is a very high figure that needs some research. I would be interested in finding out how many people responded to each of those surveys, as

well as how widely and in which areas of Northern Ireland they were carried out.

That type of information is essential if an effective campaign is to be carried out. The figures provided by the Fire and Rescue Service do not correspond to other statistics that are available.

Take the private-rented sector: I have seen it reported that, although houses in multiple occupation are covered by the Housing (Management of Houses in Multiple Occupation) Regulations 1993, there is no requirement for smoke alarms to be fitted in private-rented dwellings. That has already been touched on. An increasing number of dwellings fall into that category. Also, many HMOs are older than the legislation that now guides them. How many of those are without smoke alarms?

I hope that, on the passing of this motion, Departments will start to tackle the serious problems that these figures show up in relation to the private-rented sector. This House supported a motion several months ago calling for mandatory registration in the private-rented sector. In light of crucial issues, such as the one that this motion highlights, it is all the more urgent that the motion passed all those months ago be implemented as soon as possible. Tenants in Housing Executive and housing association dwellings —

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

Mr F McCann: Thank you very much.

Mr Craig: As a member of the Social Development Committee, I agree that this motion is very relevant. No one should underestimate the danger of fire. We have heard some statistics already; in the UK each year, 60,000 fires occur in homes, killing almost 700 people and injuring over 7,000 more. Many of those deaths and injuries could be prevented if only those involved were alerted sooner. This is where smoke alarms can help. They do not stop fires, nor can they put fires out, but, if properly installed and looked after, they can give early warning of a fire and provide time to escape.

I welcome the good work that has been done by all the various stakeholders, such as housing associations, the Housing Executive and the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. However, there are still far too many homes in both the private- and public-housing sectors that do not have smoke alarms.

My colleague Mr Campbell has already mentioned the good work that has been done by the Housing Executive. However, it is alarming that 23,000 Housing Executive homes still do not have smoke alarms. Almost 74% of Housing Executive properties are covered, which is good, but a lot more work still needs to be done. The Housing Executive must take note of the need to put much more effort in there.

The housing associations are in a better position. When they started to build new homes, the Housing (Management of Houses in Multiple Occupation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1993 were already in place, so they were forced to put hard-wired smoke alarms in every home. A study that was published only last week estimated that 95% of all housing association properties are covered by such alarms. Housing associations look after 28,000 homes in Northern Ireland. A lot of good work has been done, but a lot more is required.

The Chairman of the Social Development Committee also mentioned the private sector, which has what might be the biggest problem of all. There is no real requirement for a smoke alarm to be put in any private-rented house. That is a major issue. It is good to see that there is going to be a review of the regulations around the rental of private properties. Perhaps at that stage, the House will be able to change the fact that there are no requirements for smoke alarms.

There have been frequent advertising campaigns, some of which have taken place in recent years, and DSD has contributed to them.

In fact, funding from the Department for Social Development enabled the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service to install smoke alarms in people's homes. That was almost 10 years ago, and many of those alarms are still in place today. The Fire and Rescue Service still runs a home fire-safety check scheme, where the public can request a safety check to be carried out. It can be booked either via the Internet or by calling the Fire and Rescue Service directly. Not only is a check carried out, the householder is given a free smoke alarm.

The Fire and Rescue Service actively seeks out and targets high-risk areas, and officers will carry out leaflet drops that detail the fire-safety scheme. Lessons have been learned from giving out smoke alarms in the past. The free smoke alarm has a 10-year life and — much more importantly — its battery will not fit any other device, so there is no risk of its being used for anything else.

A great deal of work has been carried out by many of the stakeholders, but much more needs to be done. I, therefore, commend the motion.

Mrs Hanna: I support the motion, as a member of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee. Figures for fire deaths and injuries in Northern Ireland have fallen in recent years, but they are still too high. Many domestic fires could have been prevented, had working smoke alarms been fitted in those homes. Every life lost in a fire is a tragedy, and, in some cases, the tragedy could have been prevented. It is important that the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service works in partnership with all Departments, statutory and

local, which have a part to play, especially council departments such as environmental health, and with voluntary organisations on a programme aimed at fire prevention in both private and social housing.

It is widely advertised by the Fire and Rescue Service that one is twice as likely to die in a fire at home if a smoke alarm has not been fitted. It is the simplest way of warning someone of a fire, giving precious time to escape. I am sure that we have all seen the “Thumbs Up On Monday” advertisement from the Fire and Rescue Service. It is a very good way of reminding people to test their alarms.

The Fire and Rescue Service has various multimedia campaigns that encourage people to take positive steps to protect themselves and their families; its constant aim being to reduce the number of deaths and injuries caused by house fires. Various messages include, for example, the need to check smoke alarm batteries; the need to ensure that candles are well extinguished; the need for householders to have an escape plan in case of fire; and the dangers of using a chip pan. That type of education must continue: people must be reminded of the dangers of fire, and warned that complacency and carelessness will increase the risk of fire in the home.

Regulation and inspection is important, and nowhere more so than in private-rented accommodation, and in houses in multiple occupation. Landlords have a legal responsibility to provide fire escapes and, depending on the size of the property, smoke alarms and fire extinguishers may also be provided. Furthermore, they must ensure that gas and electricity supplies are safe. However, it can be a mistake to leave all these matters to landlords. Equipment must be regulated and regularly examined.

In the previous Assembly, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, when he was Minister for Regional Development, introduced a regulation that made hard-wired smoke alarms mandatory in new houses and in houses where the electric supply was being updated. That should be the case for all newly installed smoke alarms, because research tells us that hard-wired smoke alarms save more lives.

People must take responsibility for their own safety, and it is important to be prepared, whether one lives in shared accommodation or a family house, to be responsible for fire safety at home. Voluntary and statutory organisations carry out very positive work in installing smoke alarms, and that can be built upon.

Mr Easton: I, too, support the motion as a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. From time to time, we are shocked and disturbed to hear of tragedies involving fire in the home.

The loss of innocent lives is always regrettable and depressing. It has a lasting impact on families and communities and gives dreadful pain long after the

reporting of the events has ceased to be in the news. Part of that impact comes from the realisation that death from fire or smoke inhalation is often the outcome of a momentary act of carelessness and might have been easily prevented. In that context, we must congratulate the voluntary and statutory agencies — particularly the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service — for the enormous work that they have done in developing and implementing fire prevention programmes and strategies across Northern Ireland.

12.45 pm

In the North Down constituency, many people have approached me and asked me to thank the local fire and rescue personnel for their proactive work in visiting homes to make fire-risk assessments, install or reposition alarms, or give invaluable advice on advance action to minimise the risk of a house fire. We must also be thankful that, since 2000, building regulations have required that buildings be designed and built with automatic fire detection, not only to give warning of fires but to facilitate evacuation in an emergency.

Much has been achieved through television in making the public aware of the dangers and causes of fire, the need to have working alarms and how to train and plan for emergencies. Everyone is aware of the dangers posed by chip pans, candles, matches, smoking and — in particular — alcohol, which is a major factor in more than one third of fires in which there is a fatality.

Many schools do good work in providing pupils with health and safety programmes that develop their experience and awareness. The schools that incorporate work on such issues into the curriculum must be rewarded. As a result of the good work that is being done, approximately 96% of homes have smoke alarms. Much remains to be done to ensure that alarms are properly fitted, located and functioning. The statistics are a credit to those who have engaged in a joined-up effort and worked hard in co-operation with various Government agencies, but there is still much to be done. We cannot be complacent. One death by fire or smoke inhalation — often the real killer — is a death too many.

As we applaud and recognise the positive efforts of voluntary and statutory agencies, we must be concerned that some dwellings in the private- and social-housing sectors do not have properly fitted or functioning smoke alarms. The Assembly must ensure that appropriate equipment is provided for those whose physical or sensory disability necessitates special measures and consideration.

It is imperative that the various Departments continue to encourage and support the actions already being taken and co-operate in ensuring that a cost-effective and co-ordinated programme is in place to ensure the provision of working smoke detectors in every home in Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): This important motion calls on my Department, as sponsor of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, to join the Department for Social Development and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) in a co-ordinated programme to ensure the provision of working smoke detectors in every home.

The Health Committee has rightly recognised the positive work of voluntary and statutory organisations in promoting the installation of smoke alarms in homes. I also appreciate the efforts of everyone involved in promoting fire safety. Everyone knows that the causes of fires — both accidental and deliberate — are many and varied, and they all have potentially devastating consequences. It is, therefore, important that we do everything necessary to prevent accidental fires in homes.

The Fire and Rescue Service has a statutory duty to provide information and encourage steps that might be taken to prevent fires and death or injury by fire. It carries out that duty in a range of ways, such as providing information on the prevention of chip-pan fires and the importance of smoke alarms, and visiting homes and schools to advise on fire safety and prevention.

Most people who die in fires succumb to smoke inhalation long before the fire reaches them. Smoke alarms are the simple answer to alerting people when a fire starts, giving them valuable time to escape. An independent face-to-face fire-safety survey carried out last year showed that 94% of houses in Northern Ireland are fitted with smoke alarms, but we cannot be complacent.

It is not enough to have a smoke alarm fitted in every house; occupants must ensure that the devices are working and that they remain working. It is worth noting that as today is Monday, we should remember the “Thumbs Up On Monday” campaign. Indeed, I hope that everyone tests their smoke alarms every week.

Northern Ireland can pride itself on having among the fewest fire-related deaths in the UK. Building regulations already require the installation of mains-powered smoke alarms in all newly built dwellings. In dwellings for which significant alterations are required, such as the upgrading of electrical systems, mains-powered smoke alarms are also installed as standard. An estimated 97% of housing association properties now have such alarms.

Since the 1990s, the Housing Executive’s policy has been to install mains-powered smoke alarms in all its flats, maisonettes and bungalows. That work continues, and, to date, 74% of Housing Executive dwellings have had mains-powered smoke alarms fitted.

The Fire and Rescue Service has also adopted several approaches that are aimed at reducing the number of deaths that occur as a result of fire. Included in those

approaches is the free fitting of smoke alarms in domestic premises; indeed, around 6,000 were fitted in 2006-07. In the same year, over 7,500 free home fire-safety checks were carried out.

The efforts of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service have resulted in the number of accidental fires in dwellings decreasing from 1,005 in 2004 to 830 in 2007. Accidental fire-related deaths decreased from 30 in 1999 to 14 in 2006-07.

I am sad to say that it is still the case that some firefighters who have been called to incidents find that older smoke alarms may not have working batteries fitted or that the battery has been removed for use in another appliance. New smoke alarms have integral batteries that are either unsuitable for other appliances or are hard-wired to the mains electricity supply.

We must persevere with the public awareness campaigns. The “Thumbs Up On Monday” campaign highlights the need to acquire and fit a smoke alarm; the No Battery, No Chance strategy urges us to check the battery in our smoke alarms; the “Writing on the Wall” campaign highlights fire risks in the home; and the approach behind the “Smoke Kills” slogan brings home dramatically the consequences of not having a working smoke alarm. When public services act for the public good, some people will always fail to recognise the risk that is involved in not complying with either legislation or common sense.

Part of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service’s remit is a duty to educate the public on fire safety. I am sure that all Members agree that prevention is better than cure.

Finally, to address the point that was made about collaboration between DSD and DFP, I have already outlined the areas of departmental responsibility that have an impact on fire safety. The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service is the expert body in firefighting and prevention. In accordance with national guidance, the service evaluates the risk that fire and other dangers have for life, property and the environment, and it seeks to deploy resources that will address those risks.

In the spirit of the motion, I am content to order officials to examine more closely the work on the matter that DSD and DFP are doing. That work should be advanced, because we can never be too complacent. A recent survey on smoke detectors in homes showed that, sadly, 23% of people who did not have a smoke alarm said that they would be unlikely to purchase one. That shows that some resistance remains. It is, therefore, right that the Committee highlights one of the hurdles that prevents us from reaching the point where we can, as far as possible, eliminate accidental fires and deaths that are related to such fires.

Mrs O’Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I commend my colleagues in the Health

Committee for tabling the motion. I thank everyone who contributed to the debate, including members of the Health Committee and the Committee for Social Development.

I thank the Minister for attending the debate. The motion calls for concerted action by three Departments, and I am pleased that the Minister has been able to respond. Perhaps he also responded on behalf of the other two Departments.

In opening the debate, the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mrs Robinson, rightly paid tribute to the work of the statutory and voluntary organisations, which have helped to put us at the top of the league table for ownership of smoke alarms. The work of the Fire and Rescue Service, the Housing Executive and others — and the recent changes in building regulations — have contributed to that. However, as Mrs Robinson and other Members pointed out, it is not just a matter of owning or fitting a smoke alarm; it is also crucial to maintain it and keep it in working order.

As well as the number of fitted smoke alarms that are not maintained, we must consider the many homes that still do not have a working smoke alarm. The Chairperson set out some very stark statistics about the consequences of not having a working smoke alarm. She told us that there were 830 accidental house fires last year — eight people lost their lives and more than 250 were injured. A total of 33 people have lost their lives in house fires during the past four years. The most shocking statistic is that 14 of those homes did not have a smoke alarm, and in eight other cases, although smoke alarms were fitted, they were not working.

Mrs Robinson mentioned an issue that was taken up by other Members, including Sue Ramsey and Gregory Campbell. Since 1990, the Housing Executive has had a policy of fitting mains-powered smoke alarms in its properties. Despite that, so far, only three quarters of all Housing Executive properties have smoke alarms. That means that almost 23,000 homes in the social-housing sector are without a smoke alarm. That situation places a large number of people at serious and unnecessary risk, and it must be tackled urgently.

Housing Executive figures show that although 95% of bungalows, 92% of flats, and 90% of maisonettes have smoke alarms, the figure for houses is just 60% — a stark variation.

Sue Ramsey commended the Housing Executive for its policy of fitting smoke alarms over a number of years, but expressed concern about the number of houses still without a working smoke alarm. She also raised the issue of the number of private-sector houses that still do not have a working smoke alarm.

Bob Coulter and several other Members expressed concern about the number of people who do not regularly

check the batteries of their smoke alarms. He said that it would be better if smoke alarms were wired to the electricity supply, rather than powered by battery. He also supported the good work of the Fire and Rescue Service.

Kieran McCarthy also referred to the good work of the Fire and Rescue Service, and said that one fatality was one too many. He called for the resourcing for smoke alarms to be adequate for the job, and he expressed concern about funding for the Fire and Rescue Service — a concern that is shared by the Committee. The Committee is not only calling for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take action, but the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Department for Social Development. The Committee firmly commends the good work of the Fire and Rescue Service.

Gregory Campbell highlighted the shocking fact that, apart from houses in multiple occupation, there is no requirement to fit smoke detectors in privately rented dwellings. That is particularly worrying, since research has shown that those most at risk of fire are those who live in rented accommodation, and pensioners who live alone. That situation is unacceptable and it must be addressed urgently.

Fra McCann highlighted the thousands of homes without a working smoke alarm and called for more detailed information. He referred to the practice in other countries, whereby a fire alarm in every room is a standard requirement. He also referred to the problems in the private-rented sector and in houses in multiple occupation, and how they are regulated.

Carmel Hanna said that someone is twice as likely to die in a house fire if a smoke alarm is not fitted. She highly commended the Fire and Rescue Service for its good work on media campaigns — and several Members referred to the “Thumbs Up On Monday” campaign. She also said that privately rented properties required regulation.

Alex Easton praised the good work of the Fire and Rescue Service and welcomed changes in building regulations. He said that much has been achieved, but more needs to be done. He also praised the ongoing good work in schools to educate children on this matter.

Jonathan Craig spoke about the important and welcome fact that a new type of smoke alarm has become available. It has a 10-year lifespan and uses batteries that cannot be used for any other purpose.

1.00 pm

The Minister set out the Fire and Rescue Service’s role, praised its good work, and referred to the “Thumbs Up On Monday” campaign. He also spoke about changes to building control regulations, and he made a commitment to liaise with DFP and DSD in order to advance the work that has been done on the matter.

In conclusion, many Members have reminded us that in most house fires, it is not fire, but smoke, that kills. A working smoke alarm can provide vital time to allow people to escape, and it can save lives. The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety calls for concerted action to be taken in order to ensure that every family is protected by a smoke alarm. I, therefore, ask Members to support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the positive work of voluntary and statutory organisations in installing smoke alarms in homes; expresses concern that many dwellings in both the private- and social-housing sectors still do not have adequate working smoke alarms; and calls on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department for Social Development and the Department of Finance and Personnel, to undertake a coordinated programme to ensure the provision of working smoke detectors in every home.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Compensation for Farmers

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

Mr P J Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly supports the case for compensation to be provided to farmers and livestock owners who were subjected to their homes being raided, and who endured financial loss, due to the misunderstanding by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, which has now been confirmed, in relation to the source of alpha-nortestosterone discovered in injured male cattle presented for slaughter.

Although I may not have many kind words to say to her later, I welcome the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to the Chamber.

It is regrettable that I have had to table such a motion in order to obtain justice for the farming families that were wrongly victimised during the alpha-nortestosterone debacle in 2006. If the Minister and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) had the courage to say that it was wrong for them to assume that people were guilty until proven innocent at that time, we would not find ourselves seeking justice for the farmers and livestock owners who were caught up in the consequences of the Department's wrongful conclusions.

In the aftermath of those events, DARD engaged the services of Professor Patrick Wall of University College Dublin to investigate the sampling and testing procedures that were used to detect illegal hormone residues in cattle. In his October 2006 report, Professor Wall found those procedures to be in order and compliant with all EU directives. He also highlighted the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) excellent work in that report, and I share the conclusions that he arrived at in both those findings.

The Department commissioned a second report, and, in November 2007, Joan Ruddock, a non-executive member of the DARD board, published her review into the events of spring 2006. Mrs Ruddock's findings confirmed what many of us said in the immediate aftermath of the raids on the homes of innocent families, and she commented on how DARD might improve its approach to enforcement in the future.

It is regrettable that an official report was required in order to confirm that such defamatory intrusions had occurred, but at least Mrs Ruddock's report vindicated the wrongly accused livestock owners. Those of us on the political front who supported the farmers remain satisfied that that was the correct thing to do. However,

the sampling and testing procedures and the analytical work carried out by the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute were never the main issues. The main — and, it could be said, the only — issue was DARD's over-the-top reaction to the discovery of alpha-nortestosterone in male-casualty animals that were presented for slaughter. DARD simply got it wrong, and it is disappointing that, to date, the Minister and the Department have failed to admit that.

It was the opinion of DARD inspectors that, given that the subject animals were hurriedly presented for slaughter and that alpha-nortestosterone was discovered in the carcasses, the only conclusion was that all the owners were introducing illegal growth promoters into their cattle. Indeed, some farmers were blatantly told that it was obvious that they had been using growth promoters and had simply been caught in the act.

I have one owner's permission to describe his case. That beef producer is a constituent of mine, and he is a highly respected family man and a popular figure in the neighbourhood. On the morning of Friday 31 March 2006, he had just finished attending to stock on an out farm and was making his way back to his home farm. As he neared his residence, he was alerted by the flashing lights on the many police cars that were in the immediate vicinity of his home. That was an introduction to the nightmare that was to follow; indeed, some might say that that nightmare remains.

On arriving at the bottom of his lane, he saw several people in white protective clothing and masks going to and from the buildings in his farmyard. If that was not frightening enough, he next saw uniformed police officers looking out of his upstairs bedroom windows. He described the scene as one that we would normally associate with the preliminary investigation of a murder or major criminal incident, not one that is commonly identified with the day-to-day activities of a family farm.

Other farming families had similar traumatic experiences, and the Department should not attempt to conveniently overlook the way in which many of them were stigmatised in their respective localities. Therefore, I ask the Assembly to agree that the victims should be compensated in accordance with their individual experiences and in keeping with their individual financial losses. By financial losses, I refer to those farmers whose holdings were closed due to the incorrect assumption of drug use, as a result of which they incurred additional cost against the animals that they were unable to sell. Some animals crossed the 30-month deadline in the period of enforced closure, which also led to substantial financial losses.

I will repeat the comments that I made when I received a written answer from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development on 14 December 2007. The Minister said that she had arranged for goodwill payments to be

made to those affected, and that that was beyond her statutory obligation. The Minister has stated on several occasions that she had no obligation to make any payments to the victims. That comment would have been correct, and quite acceptable, had drug use been detected at slaughter. However, this is a completely different situation, because the slaughtered animals were thrown into skips on the erroneous assumption that they had all been subjected to growth-promoting drugs. The payment was an obligation, not a goodwill gesture. It served to stall the legal action that some of the wrongly accused livestock owners had planned to take.

I remain committed to seeking justice and compensation, where appropriate, for the victims. It is not that I take any delight in doing so, but I feel obliged, on behalf of the farming community, to remind the Minister that, on the hustings in Cookstown last March, on behalf of Sinn Féin she promised the farmers who were caught up in the issue that, if she were returned to the Assembly, she would leave no stone unturned until they got justice. Other candidates represented the DUP, the Ulster Unionist Party and the Alliance Party; I represented the SDLP. All five of us assured the victims of the nortestosterone case that we were fully behind them in their quest for justice. All the candidates who were on that platform in Cookstown were re-elected, but we find ourselves at different levels in the Assembly structure. The Minister is the only one who can make the conscientious decision to compensate, and that would demonstrate, albeit late in the day, the sincerity of the pre-election promise that she made last March in Cookstown.

In conclusion, as a mere Member, I ask my Assembly colleagues to support the motion, and I make one more appeal to the Minister simply to do what is right in the matter.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Elliott): I apologise for arriving late. I have just been told that I must speak on behalf of the Committee because the Chairperson is absent, for which he sends his apologies.

I thank Mr Bradley for proposing the motion. I welcome and support it, and I endorse the call for compensation for those involved in what can only be called a witch-hunt against perfectly innocent people. The Department of Agriculture must strike a balance — as the Minister realises — between ensuring that nothing untoward goes on in the Department, or in the actions of farmers, and ensuring that the security of premises and animals, which leads to the security of the people who eat the produce, is protected at all times.

The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development has been interested in the compensation issue for some time, and, like Mr Bradley, I have taken a personal interest in the matter. On 13 November 2007, the

Committee received Joan Ruddock's report in private session, and it listened to a presentation on the outcome of her review. Mrs Ruddock's review concerned the Department's handling of the matter in response to the findings of the hormone in cattle presented at meat plants after on-farm emergency slaughter.

As Members may know, legislation banning the use of anabolic steroids has been in place since 1988. On 10 March 2006, a sample from an emergency on-farm slaughter tested positive for that hormone. Further tests and samples from similar animals were also positive. However, the Department's reaction was over the top and was, in many cases, unnecessary.

I reiterate that I support the Department taking significant action against those who are guilty of offences. However, in this instance, those people were not found guilty of any offence, and that is where the difficulty arises.

I have had a blow-by-blow account from the people who were affected by what happened. They told me that enforcement officials from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development arrived on-farm with a huge security presence. They almost sealed off the farm; they searched the farm buildings, and, in some cases, the farmhouses. Such actions were totally unnecessary, especially in situations in which a farmer happened to be an elderly person who was running the farm on their own. The opportunity for such a person to deliberately administer alpha-nortestosterone was practically impossible. Therefore, a common-sense approach is required in such situations.

I am also aware, because people in my constituency had this problem, that farmers were prevented from moving stock off farms, and that that included moving stock directly to abattoirs. As some of the cattle involved were approaching 30 months old, and as farmers were unable to sell them directly to the factories or abattoirs, it meant that as soon as they became 30 months old, their prices were cut automatically when they went to the factory.

Therefore, there are two immediate issues: the extra cost of keeping those cattle on-farm for up to four months, and the additional cost of losing money, because once cattle are over 30 months old there is an automatic penalty from the factories regarding the price they give to the farmer. Therefore, farmers lost twice on such occasions.

I am not asking the Department to take any major action in this instance; I am asking it to consider the small number of cases involved on an individual basis and to compensate those farmers who have been hard done by.

Mr T Clarke: I thank P J Bradley for tabling the motion. On 7 June 2007, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development met with farmers to explain

why such an aggressive course of action had been adopted as regards the slaughter of cattle that had tested positive for what I will simply call alpha-N — I cannot get that big word out.

During the meeting, the Minister informed representatives that because there was no evidence to support illegal administration of the substance, and, indeed, because it was highly likely that alpha-N is a naturally occurring chemical, a goodwill payment would be made to any farmer where no criminality was suspected. That would apply to the vast majority, if not all, the cases in question.

Although I acknowledge fully that consumer protection in the agri-food industry is essential, and that on-farm enforcement is vital to remove animals from the food chain, I have to question the heavy-handed approach to enforcement that was taken by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. However, I do welcome the review that the Minister undertook — as a result of farmers' deep-seated disquiet at the implementation of on-farm testing — to try and learn lessons from the debacle of last year.

Although compensation for loss of animals is essential where no illegality was evident, the Minister must also recognise that some farmers suffered further financial loss because of the stringency of her Department's approach, legal though it may have been. The simple point is that farmers lost out financially due to the disruption of selling animals, having to keep them fed and because of the shadow of suspicion hanging over them as supposed wrongdoers. The Minister must realise that farmers cannot take those financial losses and that it was her Department's rigorous, if not over-zealous, approach that caused financial hardship.

1.15 pm

I urge the Minister to rethink her approach and to ensure, as a matter of urgency and priority, that farmers suffer no financial loss whatsoever as a result of her Department's actions. I support the motion.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It is a pity that Mr P J Bradley did not deal with all the facts when he proposed the motion. The incidents happened in the year before the Assembly was re-established — the year before Michelle Gildernew was appointed Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

When Professor Patrick Wall produced scientific evidence that alpha-N — I could try to improve on Mr Clarke's pronunciation, but I am almost as bad — could be produced naturally, particularly in male cattle, one of Ms Gildernew's first actions as Minister was to initiate a review. She did not have to do that. She brought the farmers together at Cookstown. She brought all of her senior officials, including her new permanent secretary, to the meeting, and gave a very clear

explanation to the farmers. An official apology was offered, and a goodwill payment was made, although the Department was not legally bound to do so. A review into the whole incident was initiated so that lessons could be learned. The results of that review were made known to the affected farmers, and were published on the DARD website.

Some of the raids, particularly those in Newry, in which not only the PSNI but the British Army were involved, with helicopters flying overhead, were entirely over the top. That was entirely unnecessary. However, the question of compensation must be directed at the NIO and the Police Ombudsman. That is where responsibility for the heavy-handedness lies.

The Minister took a good and solid initiative to deal with the issue. To have a go at her and her party is to play politics, rather than to deal with the facts of the matter. The events in question happened a year before the Minister came into office. She did not have to initiate a review, but did so because it was the right thing to do, and she offered goodwill payments. The Department has been told that, legally, it cannot go beyond that.

There is an issue in respect of compensation, but the proposer is taking aim at the wrong Department. The demand for compensation should be aimed at the NIO and the Police Ombudsman, since it is with those agencies that responsibility for heavy-handedness, rough treatment and sully — if not destruction — of reputations, lies.

Members who propose motions should deal with and stick to the facts, and stop trying to score political points.

Mr Ford: I join other Members in congratulating P J Bradley on securing this debate. I welcome the fact that the House has a chance to discuss this matter, although we may comprise rather a thin gathering at this stage of the afternoon.

A small number of people suffered significantly because of the problems created by alpha-nortestosterone — I will try that pronunciation, and see whether I can beat Mr Clarke to it.

The first issue that was highlighted by a number of Members is the alleged criminalisation of honest farmers. We have heard about some of the heavy-handedness, and the way in which police raids were conducted. That created enormous difficulties for people who were decent law-abiding citizens.

However, the reputations of those honest citizens are undamaged. They have been entirely vindicated by the work that has been done. Today, we are dealing with the secondary issue — the financial loss that those individuals suffered because they had been wrongly suspected. They lost the value of cattle, their herds were closed, and, as Mr Elliott said, in some

cases, they lost the value of other cattle. He referred to indirect losses, whereby cattle were retained for longer than 30 months.

That is the only proper issue that can be debated by the Assembly. Over the years, we have seen that, with regard to other animal disease issues — brucellosis, TB and foot-and-mouth disease — appropriate compensation has been paid. However, when it comes to this issue, which involves a remarkably small number of people, the Minister appears reluctant to offer realistic compensation for losses suffered.

Trevor Clarke and other Members mentioned public health. There is no doubt that when action was taken by DARD, it was taken in accordance with the best understanding of the existing science. However, now that science has moved on, it is clear that a small number of people suffered grievous unnecessary loss.

In his introductory remarks, P J Bradley rightly highlighted the Cookstown hustings meeting that was organised by the Ulster Farmers' Union in February 2007. Representatives from five parties supported the case of those who had suffered wrongs, and they agreed that action must be taken. Two of those representatives are now Ministers. Mr Poots is no longer the DUP's agriculture spokesperson. However, the DUP view has been adequately represented by Trevor Clarke. I am almost in complete agreement with everything that has been said by P J Bradley, Tom Elliott and Trevor Clarke.

At that meeting, it was agreed that something must be done. The meeting was held in order to discuss agricultural issues — not police presence, harassment or criminalisation — and appropriate compensation. Account must be taken of the type of costs that were highlighted by Tom Elliott — direct costs that were lost when particular animals were taken, which were compounded by, in some cases, the significant lost value for individuals who may have lost several animals that had passed the 30-month deadline.

The Minister has offered a goodwill payment. However, in some senses, that has blunted the issue. The concern is appropriate compensation for the losses that have been suffered, not that of a goodwill payment, which suggests that there is some slight doubt about what happened, but the Minister is still prepared to express her goodwill. Real loss was suffered; therefore, real action must be taken, not a goodwill effort that will simply fudge the issue.

I find Pat Doherty's remarks somewhat surprising. He certainly outlined the actions that have been taken by the Minister. There is probably a case to say that, so far, the new Minister has been more forthcoming than a direct rule Minister might have been. However, that is not to say that her actions have been satisfactory. I cannot understand how Mr Doherty can talk about getting compensation from the NIO: many other people

have been subjected to police raids when they were suspected of criminal activity. If the police act in accordance with the facts as they understand them, there is no question of compensation. The compensation that is being sought is for agricultural loss. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, who reports to the Assembly, is the person who is responsible now. In that context, the Assembly's call for proper compensation and not a fudged goodwill scheme is entirely reasonable and should be supported by the House.

Mr Bresland: I support the motion that has been proposed by Mr P J Bradley. The action that has been taken by Department of Agriculture and Rural Development officials has clearly caused considerable distress to the farmers and their families whose properties were raided. To date, the Minister has implemented a review of her Department's handling of the issue and has set aside £80,000 to compensate the farmers involved. That is not acceptable. The economic loss far outstrips the value of individual animals that tested positive. The excessive movement restrictions that were imposed by the Department have had a considerable effect on those farmers' incomes.

Livestock farmers in Northern Ireland continue to face economic difficulties. The farmers who have been involved in the alpha-nortestosterone debacle have had to face further economic hardship because of herd restrictions. The good name of those farmers and their families has also been defaced by DARD. It is simply unacceptable that the Minister can prejudge the findings of the investigation and set aside a small amount of money in the hope that the farmers and the issue will go away.

The farmers and their families need an acknowledgement from the Minister that their loss has gone beyond the actual value of the animals involved and that any compensation should include the loss of earnings because of herd restrictions that were imposed by DARD, and recognition of the costs that farmers incurred because of those herd restrictions, such as the feed costs that are associated with keeping cattle in sheds.

DARD officials adopted a heavy-handed approach, blackened the names of farmers, destroyed their standing in the community, and inflicted stress on them and their families. It is time that the Minister acknowledged that and acted accordingly. I support the motion.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat. In 2006, following the discovery of the hormone alpha-N in a number of cattle, DARD conducted an investigation, based on the scientific evidence of the day, which stated that the hormone could be present only if it were administered illegally. That led to a number of heavy-handed searches of farms, two of which occurred in Newry, one in Banbridge and one in Tandragee. All of those raids involved DARD officials who were

accompanied by the PSNI and, in the case of the Newry raids, by British troops in helicopters. The families who were involved were left shocked and traumatised by those events.

Following the initial raids, there were a further 156 discoveries — across the Six Counties — of the hormone, and the cattle that were identified as having the hormone were seized and destroyed. Later that year, all of the farmers were vindicated when Professor Patrick Wall produced a report that proved that the hormone occurred naturally in injured animals. There was justifiable anger at the way in which the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development had handled the affair. Even more damning was the attitude that the Department had done nothing wrong, despite the fact that the raids had been carried out on farms that belonged to people who were innocent of any wrongdoing.

As time passed, there was little focus on the issue, except for the work of one journalist. As far as I can establish, the SDLP was silent throughout the affair. On coming into office, the Minister, Ms Gildernew, stated that it was an issue that she would address retrospectively — much to the dismay and annoyance of DARD officials. The Minister wrote to all of the farmers who were affected by the matter and invited them to a meeting in Cookstown where senior officials and the new permanent secretary listened to the farmers' stories and their expressions of anger about the way in which the Department had handled the issue.

At the end of that meeting, the Minister and the permanent secretary apologised to the farmers whose homes had been raided. The Minister announced that DARD would issue an apology. The Department undertook a review, which was head by Joan Ruddock. Its findings will be made public. Moreover, all of the review's recommendations are currently being implemented.

The Minister explored the possibility of compensating farmers. However, the legal position was clear: DARD has a statutory duty to investigate and pursue any potential administration of illegal substances. Although the raids were legitimate, the heavy-handed manner in which they were conducted, and the trauma that was caused to the families who were involved, is a matter for the Police Ombudsman and the NIO.

The Minister has gone as far as she is legally permitted to go. In many respects, she has gone much further than that. The vast majority of farmers who were the victims of the raids welcomed the initiative to address the issue. Some have approached the Minister and thanked her for her assistance. They are more than satisfied by the initiative that was created by the Minister. However, some of the families who were subjected to the raids are still, rightly, angry about what happened. Their hurt will never go away. The reputations of some

of those people were tarnished. That grievance requires a real willingness on behalf of the Department and the Minister to understand the feelings of those people.

P J Bradley has turned what was a positive initiative full circle. He knows full well that the legal argument on compensation means that the Minister's hands are tied. Of course, that does not mean that we are in any way defending the actions of the Department on the matter. The nature of the raids is a major cause for concern, which is something that we made clear when we criticised the PSNI and the British Army at the time. However, the Minister —

Mr T Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr W Clarke: I have only a short time left in which to speak.

I believe that the Minister should be congratulated on her initiative. We should continue to examine ways of addressing the matter and of alleviating the hurt. Go raibh maith agat.

1.30 pm

Mr Irwin: I thank Mr P J Bradley for bringing this motion to the House. As a dairy farmer, I declare an interest in this matter.

I was contacted by a farmer from my constituency who was extremely distressed, frustrated and incensed by the actions of the Department of Agriculture when his premises were searched by departmental officials, in conjunction with the police. The searches followed tests carried out in early April 2006 on an on-farm emergency slaughter animal registered to him, which were positive for alpha-nortestosterone.

However, as we are all now well aware, the animal that tested positive had not been subject to any form of hormone abuse. In fact, it has since been proven that alpha-nortestosterone is produced when an animal is injured, hence its presence in injured on-farm emergency slaughter animals. As that research concluded that not all cases of positive testing were the result of malpractice by farmers, an additional test has been introduced to distinguish between normal presence and abnormal presence. That, of course, is a welcome procedure and should spare conscientious, hardworking farm families from any further instances of hurt and distress. However, it remains the case that the Department, accompanied by the PSNI, searched four farm premises in the belief that illegal activity had taken place.

On 17 November 2007, the Minister said:

"The Review states that the actions taken by DARD in respect of the surprise on-farm searches were in compliance with legislation."

However, the account of the search given to me by my constituent leaves me feeling extremely annoyed by the attitude and actions of the departmental officials who went to the premises.

Although the Minister said that she believed that the Department acted in good faith and in line with the legislation, I find it unacceptable that, even though DARD and ABFI raised the possibility of natural occurrence a full two weeks before searching my constituent's premises, they still went in full steam ahead, with a guilty-until-proven-innocent attitude. That is extremely unfortunate, given the scientific research that was emerging at the time, to which reference is made in the report.

Indeed, as regards malpractice, paragraph 3 of section 2.1 of the report on the review carried out by Joan Ruddock states:

"The Department must have significant evidence to the contrary, therefore before it can conclude that the farmer has not been guilty of such administration."

Given that scientific evidence was beginning to pile up to show that there was a strong possibility that natural occurrence through injury was the more likely reason for a positive test, surely the Department should have taken a much more realistic and rational approach to any planned searches. I ask the Minister to give a full account of why a more level-headed approach was not adopted in the circumstances.

The fallout from the search of my constituent's premises has been dramatic. The family name has been blackened around the country, and false allegations and accusations have abounded. This was not simply a farm search; my constituent stated that he could not even watch the staff carry out their searches and procedures as their attitude towards him was shocking. I doubt that that is in line with any legislation. I fully understand that the Department is bound by law to carry out such tests. However, it is the manner in which the searches were carried out, and the assumption of wrongdoing, that is most untenable.

Mr Doherty talked about political point-scoring. I am certainly not trying to score political points, but the police raided those farms in conjunction with, and at the behest of, the Department of Agriculture. That must be taken into account. The Department had the lead role in this affair.

The ex-gratia payments offered for the condemned cattle were welcomed by the farmers as a small gesture. However, many farmers are considerably out of pocket due to herd closure and the associated expenses. Great hurt still exists among those farming families, and I support the case for compensation for the loss of those animals, where it has been proven that no malpractice had taken place.

Can the Minister confirm what steps the Department is taking in examining its approach to searches? How many more cases of positive testing have been discovered that have been proven, through the new test, to be in no way related to hormone abuse?

Farmers remain out of pocket as a direct result of the actions of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. I fully support the need for a fair payout to those farmers who had herds closed and who incurred significant expense, not to mention the distress and the hurt caused by the decision to search their premises.

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

Mr Irwin: The Department must act now to rectify this matter and to restore the trust of the farmers involved. I support the motion.

Mr Savage: I declare an interest as a farmer, and commend the Member for South Down Mr Bradley for securing the debate on such an important issue.

The use of hormonal substances for animal growth production was prohibited by the EU in 1988, and legislation was introduced to prescribe measures for monitoring residues and for the actions to be taken on the discovery of positive results. The use of anabolic agents is prohibited for a variety of reasons, including possible adverse human health effects, consumer resistance, the negative effects on animal welfare and the impact of residues on the environment.

Nortestosterone is a well-known anabolic steroid. It was first synthesised in the 1950s and was believed initially to have no natural source. Subsequently, it was shown to occur naturally in boars, stallions, pregnant cows and veal calves. Its presence in adult male bovines is currently deemed illegal under EU law.

In light of the events that have taken place regarding the use of nortestosterone in cattle, I wish to put on record my recognition of the Minister's swift action in meeting the farmers associated with those cases just one month after she took office. I welcome the fact that she has recognised the plight of the farmers who lost animals without any evidence of wrongdoing on their part, and that goodwill payments will be made to those who were affected. It must also be recognised and put on the record that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is making those goodwill payments on a moral basis. That is because, under the law, it has no statutory obligation to do so.

The Ulster Farmers' Union has welcomed those goodwill payments along with the review that was ordered by the Minister. It is pleasing that in the wake of Joan Ruddock's report on the issue, the Department has developed an action plan including mechanisms that will be built into the management process to facilitate earlier and speedier responses to findings arising from emerging science. In that regard, the Department will also adopt a project management approach.

I commend the Minister for her endeavours, and I trust that all sides of the House will unite around farmers who have been hard done by in this instance. I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: Ther isnae ocht that a can sae farther than whut his' a'ready bin saed, wi' ither memmers o' tha semmilie. I wud jist laek tae agree wi' whut tha deperment saes aboot tha tratemunt o' fermers.

There is not much to add to that which has already been said by other Members of the Assembly. I simply wish to endorse what the Department has said in its report about the treatment of farmers.

The Minister received a great deal of kudos for her responses to the BSE and bluetongue crises. However, she is only as good as her last win, and, with respect, the Department must continue to address the issues.

The review of the Department's handling of the alpha-nortestosterone issue recommended:

"That DARD examines the manner in which it approaches on-farm searches with particular emphasis on communication, taking into account that not all farmers subject to surprise searches will have engaged in illegal activity".

The Department's statement and Members' descriptions of some cases have highlighted the fact that, sadly, something went wrong. However, the Department's statement is at odds with the reality of the cases concerned.

For many hard-working farmers, the most disturbing aspect of that dreadful and costly mistake was that they had done nothing wrong, yet they were treated with the utmost disrespect and with more suspicion than most criminals are subjected to during an interview. Those men and women had their homes and livelihoods subjected to the most rigorous scrutiny, and they were presumed guilty until they were proven innocent. I do not profess to have a law degree, but I know that in this country, in law, one is presumed to be innocent until proven guilty. Why was that not presumed of the farmers?

The farmers do not want ex-gratia payments; they want realistic compensation. Compensation has been requested, it is morally needed, and paying it is the least that the Department can do. They do not want goodwill payments but real, honest-to-goodness compensation. As well as paying the farmers the compensation that they are rightly due, the Minister must carry out a review in order that a real and practical change can be made to the way in which her Department treats people and handles issues. In my constituency, I am aware of many instances of departmental officials calling at farms and showing a certain disregard for the farmers and other farm workers. That behaviour has been a bone of contention for some time, and I have made that known to the Department.

It is important that the farming community has a relationship with the Minister; indeed, I encourage that relationship, as, I am sure, does the Minister. However, in this instance, not only was the Department proved wrong, but its actions have made the farming community lose even more faith in it. DARD is supposedly there

to help farmers, not to harm their future prospects and make life difficult for them. The Department is not doing its job correctly, and, as a matter of urgency, it is up to the Minister to recognise and change that fact. I support the motion.

Mr Kennedy: I thank and congratulate P J Bradley for bringing the issue to the attention of the House.

It is important that we debate the matter because it raises major questions about how Department of Agriculture and Rural Development officials handled the episode. In the view of the majority of Members who have spoken so far, it is clear that important lessons must be learnt as a consequence of the actions that departmental officials took in April 2007. The episode has caused considerable distress to several of my constituents, and my constituency colleague William Irwin rightly highlighted that point. Reputations have been severely damaged, and farmers who are well respected in the areas in which they have lived and operated their farm business for many years have found themselves to be the subject of speculation, ridicule and criticism. All that negativity is unfounded and is the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. The episode is a case in point that proves that science does not always get it right, and Members have given examples of that in the evidence that they have produced today.

I will briefly outline some of the deep-seated criticisms that were made by farmers who were caught up in the episode.

1.45 pm

The constituent who raised the subject with me had his bullock killed on 3 April 2006. Approximately three weeks later, on 27 April 2006, departmental officials and the PSNI raided his farm. Some Members find it hugely ironic that, had the raids taken place pre-devolution, there would have been a major political row over the actions of the PSNI and departmental officials. Happily, there is no such row today, and the Minister presumably supports the PSNI on those matters.

However, the approach of the departmental officials in the first instance raises serious issues. Some 11 staff, accompanied by 11 PSNI officers, took part in the raid on my constituent's home, and back-up was available in the form of additional PSNI officers who waited in minibuses on the road. One questions the logic of that and, given the outcome, whether it was effective use of police time.

To the distress of the farmer and his family, the farmhouse was ransacked and all manner of personal material was searched. He told me that even the attic was searched. My constituent took advice to contact his solicitor and to avail himself of independent tests on his cattle, for which he had to pay. He also incurred

additional feeding costs, because he was not allowed to move other livestock.

Any rogue operators must be dealt with, but the Department should learn hard lessons from those incidents, be prepared to own up to its failings and at least compensate those farmers who suffered considerable distress and whose reputations were damaged.

Mr Armstrong: I declare an interest in today's debate because I was one of the last farmers to have a young male animal taken to the abattoir and found to have an excess of that hormone in his blood. I assume that the Department did not feel it necessary to visit my farm on the suspicion that I was keeping hormones there.

The events that Members are debating today illustrate what happens when an inflexible bureaucracy gets things wrong. In this instance, things went horribly wrong, with terrible consequences for innocent people. No doubt Members will hear that lessons have been learned, and systems have been modified to ensure that it will not happen again. However, that is of little comfort to the affected farmers and their families.

A fundamental legal principle of law is that someone is innocent until proven guilty. In this sorry tale, raids were carried out on the homes of law-abiding farmers as though the DARD officials were looking for drugs or illegal weapons. The officials should have appreciated that they were dealing with hard-working, honest farmers, not terrorist godfathers or criminals — there appears to be a marked reluctance to carry out searches on the homes of those individuals, but farmers are a nice, soft target. The only problem was that the farmers in Northern Ireland were innocent.

I am not naive enough to believe that all farmers are angels and free from any taint of wrongdoing. Farmers are the same as any professionals, be they doctors, lawyers, teachers and perhaps even politicians, and there are some bad apples among us. However, I am confident that the majority of farmers are law-abiding individuals seeking to do an honest day's work and to provide for their families.

The Ruddock review concluded that surprise on-site searches are a necessary tool to ensure enforcement of regulations, but greater emphasis must be placed on the need for sensitivity in conducting such searches. That will allow a spirit of partnership to develop between the Department and the farmers and a good working relationship to develop for the benefit of all sides. It goes without saying that fair compensation must be paid to the farmers affected.

The second key point is that science was not correct in this case. That is a lesson for all those who operate in a bureaucracy. Box ticking is the order of the day for many bureaucrats. There is no room for common sense, or for questioning whether their actions are right

— just as long as the information fits the form that they are checking.

This case shows starkly that the so-called experts — whether they be in Dundonald House or in Brussels — are not infallible. Not only do they get things wrong, but the fundamentals on which they base their directions can also be wrong. When the experts accepted that they were wrong, I was left wondering what other central tenets of science on which they base decisions affecting farmers are also wrong.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I have listened with interest to the points raised by Members, and I wish to put a few facts straight.

On becoming Minister, there was no requirement for me to reopen the issue as the Department was in the process of implementing the Wall report, which concluded that the Department had acted on the best scientific advice available at the time and that it had acted within the legislation. However, I was acutely aware of the anger and frustration in the farming community; therefore, I made it an early priority to deal with the issue on taking up office.

I took immediate action on the alpha-nortestosterone issue. I met with affected farmers to explain my Department's position and to hear their views face to face. I apologised for the disruption and distress caused by the on-farm searches. I took the additional step of going beyond our statutory obligation and authorising a goodwill payment to cover the cost of condemned animals. I also commissioned Joan Ruddock to carry out an independent review of the Department's handling of the issue. All the recommendations have been accepted, and work is under way to implement each of them as they apply to the Department to ensure better handling arrangements in future.

The events happened the year before I took up office, but when I came into office I acted immediately to rectify the matter to ensure that it would not happen again. I am well aware of the issues raised. I intend to summarise the main points of the alpha-nortestosterone issue, to clarify the details of the goodwill payment made to farmers, and to explain the rationale behind my decision not to pay compensation.

The alpha-nortestosterone issue began in March 2006 when a male on-farm emergency slaughter (OFES) animal that presented at a meat plant tested positive for the illegal growth-promoting hormone alpha-nortestosterone. The opinion of the highest scientific authority in Europe at that time stated that a finding of alpha-nortestosterone in a male bovine indicated illegal administration. EU legislation requires that where the substance is found, the animal must be excluded from

the food chain and an investigation into the herd of origin carried out.

As a result of two previous cases of illegal use of alpha-nortestosterone where legal hormones were found in farm dwelling houses, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's Veterinary Service carried out a search of a dwelling house and farm under the authorisation of a warrant signed by a resident magistrate. Three further cases were investigated in a similar manner.

P J Bradley has made numerous comments in the press about my support for the police raids. This is not the forum to discuss my views on policing, but rather an opportunity for me to explain how I dealt with the unique situation. Subsequent investigations did not involve unannounced visits or searches under warrant. Some of the comments by Members today have capitalised on people's distress. I have also been struck by the absolute hypocrisy of some Members who would not have been too annoyed about nationalists or republicans being raided by police in the past.

In order to protect public health and to fulfil EU statutory obligations, 100% testing of male on-farm emergency slaughter cattle was initiated in April 2006.

That resulted in herd restrictions, and although I appreciate that such restrictions can cause management difficulties on farms, they are a necessary component of the Department's enforcement action. Restrictions are not intended to penalise farmers, and our aim is to de-restrict herds at the earliest opportunity. However, restrictions are essential in ensuring that potential problems are contained on individual farms and that the interests of the wider agrifood industry are protected.

The matter was not restricted to south Down, it occurred throughout the North: there were a high number of positives identified in all of the Six Counties, but no evidence of illegal administration was detected during follow-up, on-farm investigations. All of the animals that tested positive were condemned and were removed from the food chain, with the herd owner incurring the financial loss.

Following criticism from industry and public representatives, who suggested that the Department's sampling and testing procedures may not have been sufficiently robust, the Department commissioned Professor Patrick Wall of University College Dublin to carry out a full assessment of its procedures for hormone testing. Professor Wall's report was published in October 2006 and confirmed the integrity and legitimacy of the Department's sampling and testing procedures. He also concluded that the accepted scientific opinion, which states that alpha-nortestosterone does not occur naturally in male cattle, should be reviewed in light of increasing evidence that the hormone may occur naturally as a result of stress or injury.

In March 2007, and as a result of Professor Wall's findings and following detailed discussions with the relevant regulatory authorities, the Department reduced testing of male OFES cattle from 100% to a risk-related approach based on the opinion of the official vet at the meat plant. Legal advice was sought from the departmental solicitor's office on a number of occasions as the issue developed. That advice confirmed that, under EU law, the Department must remove male cattle that test positive for alpha-nortestosterone from the food chain regardless of whether evidence of illegal administration has been found. It also confirmed that the Department must carry out appropriate follow-up investigations into the herd of origin.

Legal advice was clear that the Department can discharge that responsibility without incurring legal liability to pay any compensation, which is a vital point in the context of the debate. Departmental lawyers also confirmed that the enforcement action taken by the Department was reasonable and proportionate, was based on the best scientific knowledge available at the time, and was in line with the Department's community obligations.

Mr Elliott: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Gildernew: No, I will not.

In June 2007, I met farmers who had been affected and announced that, although the Department had no legal obligation to pay compensation, I would make a goodwill payment to those whose animals had been condemned. That payment was recognition that farmers had suffered financial loss through no fault of their own — it was a gesture of goodwill towards the farming community and was not an acceptance of liability by the Department to pay compensation. The payments were equivalent to the market value of the animals at the time of slaughter, and more than £87,000 was paid to 139 herd owners in July 2007. I became the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development in May 2007, and the payments were made in June and July. Therefore, I dealt with the issue immediately after coming into post.

At the meeting in Cookstown, which a number of Members alluded to, I apologised wholeheartedly for the disturbance and stress caused by the on-farm searches. I am acutely aware of the trauma that was caused — particularly the experience recounted by Bridget Morris — and undertook to initiate a review of the Department's handling of the alpha-nortestosterone issue to see what lessons could be learned. I appointed Joan Ruddock, a non-executive member of the departmental board, to carry out the review. Her task was to examine all aspects of the issue, including the scientific basis for the initiation of action and the follow-up on-farm investigations.

The Ruddock Review was published in November 2007 and concluded that the actions taken by the Department regarding on-farm searches were in compliance with the legislation and were reasonable in the context of the scientific knowledge available at the time, and of previous experience of illegal administration of growth-promoting hormones. The review confirmed that the Department is permitted to enforce its statutory obligations without incurring liability to pay compensation, and that there is no statutory provision for the authorisation of compensation in those circumstances.

Joan Ruddock also made a number of recommendations on how the Department could improve the handling of similar situations in the future.

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

Those recommendations present a constructive way forward and will improve future handling arrangements. I have accepted the recommendations, and they are currently being implemented. I want to reiterate that point to ensure that this situation does not arise again.

2.00 pm

There is now emerging EU recognition that alpha-nortestosterone is likely to occur naturally in injured or stressed male bovines. We expect that the European Community Reference Laboratory will draft a guidance paper to reflect that position. Further scientific work to inform the evidence base in this area is expected to be completed by the end of February 2008. Officials are reviewing and updating the standard operating procedures, which detail how DARD approaches on-farm searches, in order to ensure that best practice is being followed. It is envisaged that that will be finalised by March 2008.

As the review highlights, meat processors are an important link between retailers and consumers. My Department is committed to involving them more fully via their representative bodies in developing future contingency plans.

DARD's procedures and actions have been the subject of two independent investigations: Professor Wall confirmed the legitimacy and integrity of our sampling and testing procedures; and Joan Ruddock concluded that enforcement actions were reasonable, given the circumstances that prevailed at the time. Legal advice further confirmed that the legislation was implemented in a fair and proportionate manner and that DARD is not liable to pay compensation. Furthermore, I took the additional step of authorising a goodwill payment to farmers to cover the cost of condemned animals. There was absolutely no statutory obligation to do so, and, in my view, that decision fully satisfied the moral obligation under a unique and unusual set of circumstances that had not been seen elsewhere.

As the issue unfolded, I had to balance two main priorities. First, there is DARD's statutory obligation to protect public health and to maintain the reputation of the local livestock industry; my Department must be permitted to enforce robustly the law for the greater good. Secondly, I had to ensure that, when DARD enforces the law, no one is unreasonably or unfairly treated. My Department handled the alpha-nortestosterone issue in the most reasonable manner possible, given the unique circumstances that prevailed at that time.

As the Minister, I am content that I dealt with the issue proactively when I came into office: I met the farmers involved, apologised for the trauma caused and went beyond DARD's statutory obligations by making a goodwill payment to those farmers to cover the cost of condemned animals and to help to alleviate any hardship that they were facing. I contend that that was an honourable, balanced and correct response that recognised the financial implications to the livestock owner.

The Ruddock Report gives us a positive way forward, and the Department will implement its recommendations in order to ensure better handling arrangements in the future. For that reason, and because DARD's actions were proportionate and in line with legal requirements, I cannot support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr P J Bradley: Almost every Member who contributed to the debate to support the motion was singing from the same hymn sheet, so I will not repeat all their comments. However, I want to thank Mr Elliott, Mr Trevor Clarke, Mr Ford, Mr Bresland, Mr Irwin, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Kennedy and Mr Armstrong; I will deal with the contributions from two other Members later. Every Member in the former category referred to DARD's over-the-top reaction to the situation and related the experiences of their own constituents, which are more important than anything that Members have to say. It is those experiences on the ground that really count, and some farmers are still suffering from the ordeals that they endured on those terrible mornings.

I ask the Minister and DARD officials to read Hansard, where they will find the words of responsible Members who are trying to do what is right for their constituents. Those Members are simply seeking justice for victims, a phrase that has been bandied about for the past 40 years. The Department can do something for those victims, and I urge it to do so.

The contributions from Mr Doherty and my colleague the Member for South Down Mr Willie Clarke clearly indicate that they have no knowledge or understanding of the farming community. I do not know whether they spoke to any farmers who had been raided or heard any experiences at first hand. Pat Doherty was certainly not

aware of the thrust of the motion, which does not concern which Minister was in situ or when the raids took place. The motion simply concerns farmers who were wrongly accused by DARD, not any subsequent reports. We could debate the issue until Tib's Eve, and the message would still not get across: this debate was about farmers.

I remind Mr Pat Doherty that it was not the Northern Ireland Office that told farmers that they had been caught red-handed, nor was it police officers. In my constituency, it was DARD vets who told people that they had been caught red-handed. Therefore, there is no reason to direct blame at the Northern Ireland Office.

Earlier today, Mr Doherty was appointed to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. I am already asking myself why he has been slotted into that Committee if it is not to help farmers.

Ms Ní Chuilín: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Earlier today, P J Bradley proposed a motion on behalf of the Business Committee. He should refrain from making political points; he was happy enough to move that motion. I would like a ruling on that matter.

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

Mr P J Bradley: My DARD Committee colleague Willie Clarke made a comment about the heavy-handedness of the raids, but it took Mr Irwin to remind him that it was DARD that called in the helicopters and the Police Service. He also criticised a journalist for keeping the issue alive. That was very unfair to the journalist, who cannot defend himself. I would like to think that I — and many colleagues from neighbouring areas that were affected — also kept the issue alive. I intend to continue to keep the issue alive. I do not know how much further the issue can be taken by the House, but if there is reconsideration on the part of the Minister and her Department, it might not be necessary to take it any further. The issue is not going to go away.

I wish to thank everyone who supported the motion. Before Members vote, I ask them to consider the position of the farmers who had their homes raided and the way in which they and their families have been stigmatised in their local communities. They deserve better.

Mr Elliott: Does the Member accept that, although the Minister indicated that the raids and incidents took place before she took office, she is in office now, and the opportunity exists for her to do something about it?

Mr P J Bradley: That is exactly the point. There is no question that the Minister is the person with the power. She mentioned goodwill payments. I ask her to use her goodwill chequebook to offer the compensation that this House demands on behalf of the farmers.

Mr T Clarke: Does the Member accept that the Minister said earlier that she was making a political point, from her own point of view, about her support

for the police? Does the Member accept that the Minister might perhaps be a dab hand at getting compensation from the security forces for the farmers, because she and her party have been a dab hand at that?

Mr P J Bradley: I do not wish to relate this issue to any politics other than the politics of the reason that we are here: on behalf of the farmers who have been victimised.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly supports the case for compensation to be provided to farmers and livestock owners who were subjected to their homes being raided, and who endured financial loss, due to the misunderstanding by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, which has now been confirmed, in relation to the source of alpha-nortestosterone discovered in injured male cattle presented for slaughter.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question Time is at 2.30 pm, so I propose to suspend this sitting until that time. After Question Time, the next item of business will be the Adjournment debate.

The sitting was suspended at 2.08 pm.

On resuming —

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

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has received notification from the First Minister that, owing to business at Westminster, he will not be present in the Chamber today for questions to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. As scheduled, the deputy First Minister will respond to questions.

Shared Future

1. **Mrs Long** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what its assessment is of the Executive's plans to promote a shared future in light of the draft Programme for Government. (AQO 1444/08)

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): A shared future policy and strategic framework for good relations for here is an inherited policy from the previous Administration. However, as stated previously, we are fully committed to promoting the interests of the whole community towards the goal of a shared and better future and a prosperous, peaceful and settled society.

It is, therefore, a key priority of the Executive to increase budgets dramatically in order to resource work to achieve those objectives. Having considered the progress, we are working on detailed proposals for a programme of cohesion and integration, which we will bring to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for consideration. Key objectives, actions and targets will be developed in the context of those proposals.

Mrs Long: Will the deputy First Minister give any indication of the timescale for the publication of that programme? In the draft Programme for Government, it was referred to as a programme to promote societal relations. Previous answers indicated that there would be some detail in the new year. Can a more definite timescale be provided?

The deputy First Minister: There is work to be undertaken on that matter. When that work has been

completed, we will be able to outline for the Assembly the time frame for moving forward. There has been significant progress in the past three years with improved relationships and historically low levels of violence and tension. We want to ensure that relationships in the community continue to improve. We also wish to address the challenges that face new and host communities.

The objective of improving societal relations is specifically addressed within the public service agreement framework. By contributing to the Executive's aim of building a peaceful, fair and prosperous society, with respect for the rule of law, all the key goals outlined in the draft Programme for Government can be seen to set the context for the promotion of good relations.

As I said, we have witnessed low levels of violence and tension, and we must ensure that those gains are sustained. We must ensure that our communities, our economic and business sectors, and our public services are equipped and resourced at local level to face the challenge of increased numbers of newcomers, because newcomers will enrich our cultural diversity and our prosperity. We must ensure that newcomers are integrated into communities that are not divided, separate or unequal. We are committed to building and shaping a society that is free of sectarianism, racism and any form of intolerance.

Mrs D Kelly: Is the deputy First Minister saying that an absence of violence is the only standard by which to judge whether relationships have improved? In my constituency last week, anti-Catholic and anti-Pope leaflets were distributed.

Given that he has said that there are dramatically increased budgets in the draft Programme for Government for building community relations, will the deputy First Minister comment on the £0.6 million that his Department proposes to take away from the Community Relations Council? Has he made an assessment of the impact that that will have and of the implications of such a move?

The deputy First Minister: I, along with every Member of the Assembly, condemn any form of sectarianism, whether it is the kind that took place in the Member's constituency or the kind that occurred in the Serpentine Road area of Belfast over the weekend. The draft Budget recognises that, over the past three years, there has been significant progress in improved relationships, with historically low levels of violence and tension. We want to ensure that relationships continue to improve in the whole community and to address the challenges that face new and host communities.

In the past three years, expenditure on good community and good race relations was approximately £21 million. In the draft Budget, we propose to increase that investment to ensure continued improvement in relationships and to address the challenges facing new and host communities to almost £28 million over the next three years.

Investment during 2008-09 and 2010-11 will, therefore, be in the region of £26 million, taking into account efficiency savings during that period, to meet the public service agreement target of improving societal relations. That money will be in addition to EU Peace III funding. A key element of the investment proposals includes a significant increase over that period to promote inclusion and integration at a local level.

Mr Burnside: I am sure that the deputy First Minister will agree that the best way of ensuring a successful shared future for the community is for it to be based on the right institutional framework for government. The mandatory coalition that exists here, whereby all main parties are in Government, with no official Opposition, has only one similar equivalent elsewhere in the world, and that is the Lebanon. That is hardly an example of a stable constitutional position.

When will the deputy First Minister, and indeed the House, examine constructive evolution from the post-conflict all-party mandatory coalition to weighted majorities whereby we can voluntarily co-operate with one another in an Executive that is based on a voluntary coalition, perhaps with weighted majorities that would reflect the unionist and nationalist communities?

The deputy First Minister: We are where we are. We are here as a result of many months and years of intensive negotiations, and we have eventually reached a situation that appears to command the overwhelming support of our constituents. Regardless of their dislike of mandatory coalitions, all parties recognised the unique challenges that we faced: first, in reaching agreement, and secondly, in trying to achieve a situation in which we could move forward together in a spirit of co-operation to provide proper governance for the people whom we represent.

We have reached that point against the backdrop of many people telling us that it was not possible, that it would never happen, and that, even if it did happen, it would be only a matter of weeks before things fell apart. Quite clearly, that has not happened. We have confounded the critics, and we are moving forward decisively to provide the type of governance that people voted for in the Assembly elections. We are charged with the responsibility to deal with the political structures that are before us at the moment.

I have just come from an Executive meeting at which the four parties were very positive and constructive about how we should move forward. We were dealing with vital issues in the Budget, the Programme for Government, and the investment strategy, looking to the next 10 years.

People are entitled to dislike the present form of government, but it is working in the interests of the people. They voted for it, and it is our duty and responsibility to take forward those structures in a way that helps them to reach their full potential.

Children's Fund

2. **Mrs Hanna** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action it is taking to improve the Budget allocation for the children's fund. (AQO 1450/08)

5. **Mrs M Bradley** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what is its assessment of the implications of any reduction in the current children's fund budget, particularly in relation to child poverty and protection. (AQO 1449/08)

The deputy First Minister: With your permission, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I will answer questions 2 and 5 together.

The First Minister and I, and our Executive colleagues, are committed to tackling child poverty here. That was outlined in our draft Programme for Government and draft Budget documents, which include a commitment to achieve a reduction of 67,000 by 2010 in the number of children living in poverty, compared with the 1998 level of 135,000. The junior Ministers made the case strongly for significant funding for children's services in pre-Budget discussions and succeeded in securing an allocation of £26 million for the Department of Education, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to facilitate the continuation of projects that were previously funded by the children and young people's funding package, in addition to a range of mainstream programmes.

Funding has also been allocated to take forward the development of the play policy. In addition, funding has been secured for exemplar, area-based interventions, which will help to demonstrate the effectiveness of early interventions locally and highlight the benefits to children, young people, families and communities.

As for the children's fund, all allocations in relation to the priority funding packages that were initiated by direct rule Ministers, and other ring-fenced items, have been removed from departmental baselines. That was done on the basis that if the individual supported projects are considered to be of significant value, the funding streams should be in departmental programmes, rather than managed through central funds.

It is too soon to detail whether there has been an overall reduction of funding for work with children. Ministers have yet to finalise their priorities, and the final picture will become clear only when that has been done.

Mrs Hanna: Do the deputy First Minister and the junior Ministers believe that the resources required to tackle child poverty and to provide good practical parenting and early-years programmes, and resources for the needs of autistic children, are available?

The deputy First Minister: We are facing a challenge, but we have the strategies and the funding that are required to face the difficult issues regarding the unacceptable levels of child poverty. The children and young people's action plan that was published on 20 March 2007 detailed time-bound actions to be taken by Departments, the NIO and the Courts Service, and it was designed to deliver on the aims of the strategy. Future action plans will follow a three-year cycle in line with Government finance policy. Work has begun on a review of the first action plan and the development of the next three-year action plan to deliver on the six high-level outcomes of the strategy. I am convinced, therefore, that if the Executive move forward decisively and together — particularly with all Departments playing their part — we will have the ability to make a big impact on the unacceptable levels of child poverty in our society.

Mrs M Bradley: We are not on target to eliminate severe child poverty by 2012. How does the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister intend to achieve that aim when there is a definite lack of resources and actions to tackle the issue as it stands, never mind after 2008?

The deputy First Minister: The targets that we have set ourselves are ambitious, but with goodwill on all sides — particularly with individual departmental involvement — we can make a serious impact on the unacceptable levels of child poverty in society. It is a tall order, but in the draft Programme for Government, we committed ourselves to making an impact, and only time will tell whether that is achievable.

Mr Beggs: Will the deputy First Minister concede that the failure to mention childcare in the draft Programme for Government is a sad reflection of the Executive's draft priorities? Does he agree that we must invest in people — particularly children and young families — and that failure to do so will have implications for child poverty?

The deputy First Minister stated that £26 million was being spent on children's funding. Will he acknowledge that that is a significant reduction from the direct rule expenditure of £51.7 million guaranteed over two years?

The deputy First Minister: We are supporting all sorts of programmes that can make a big impact as we move forward. For instance, Sure Start is a targeted programme designed to ensure that all children get a good start in life. It arose out of the recognition that child poverty leads to unacceptable differences in life chances, but it is available to all children under four in designated areas. It aims to work with parents and children to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of preschool children — particularly the disadvantaged — to ensure that they are well prepared for school and later life.

In areas in which Sure Start has been implemented, all families with children under the age of four, including pregnant women, have access to a range of services, including early education and play, childcare, healthcare and family support. Better co-ordination between the services is being provided for children and families in the Sure Start areas, and that is important. Sure Start represents an investment of £9.5 million for 2007-08. Approximately 22,000 children under the age of four, and their families, have access to the services provided under the programme in 25 projects.

2.45 pm

Seven new Sure Start projects will be operational by the end of 2007-08. Nineteen existing projects have been extended, and that will provide services for an additional 12,000 children and will ensure that 20% of the most disadvantaged wards here are served by Sure Start. That is an example of an intelligent direction of resources towards the right programmes. We believe that if we can do that, it will have a big impact.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answers to the previous two questions. Will he outline to the House the role of the junior Ministers in promoting issues that are important in relation to children and young people?

The deputy First Minister: The junior Ministers have been given special responsibility for co-ordinating policy and promoting the rights and needs of children and young people. They are driving children's issues forward and are taking the lead in reviewing, and revising as necessary, the 10-year strategy for children and young people.

All Departments will be involved in setting special targets over the next three years, which will be published in a revised action plan for children and young people and will be approved by the junior Ministers. The junior Ministers have had a series of engagements with a number of individual voluntary-sector organisations that advocate for children and young people. In addition, they met 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 were priority issues for children and young people.

That is vital work, and the junior Ministers recognise the importance of bringing a paper to the Executive Committee meeting on 31 January that will seek an agreement to re-establish a ministerial subcommittee as soon as possible with the intention of improving the integration of policy and service delivery on cross-cutting issues. They also intend to discuss those issues with the Committee of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and it is intended that all Ministers will be invited to the first meeting of the subcommittee to decide their priorities.

Civil Contingencies Policy Branch

3. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans it has to carry out a review of the work of the civil contingencies policy branch. (AQO 1292/08)

The deputy First Minister: The civil contingencies policy branch (CCPB) promotes civil contingencies policy development and implementation across the public sector and facilitates the co-ordination of responses to emergencies in an NI-wide impact area.

The branch reviewed its operational structures and systems in 2006-07, and a number of new cross-public-sector groups were established as a result. Its work is kept under continual review in the light of ongoing risk assessments and consultations with key stakeholders, including Departments, emergency services and district councils.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the deputy First Minister for his reply. Will he, along with his Executive colleagues, consider recreating the civil contingencies fund, which could compensate the owners of Orange Halls, for example, that have been systematically burned down in what amounts to a Province-wide, extremist, political campaign? It would help them when applying for speedy rebuilding and reinstatement costs.

The deputy First Minister: Naturally, I express my sympathy to the Orange Order, particularly in those areas where it has had its halls burnt as a clear result of sectarian attacks. Those attacks are disgraceful, and the people involved should be ashamed of themselves, along with those who attempt to burn GAA clubs and foment division and conflict in our society. They cannot be allowed to succeed.

There is a duty on all of us to do everything in our power to ensure that people who participate in those despicable attacks are brought before the courts. People in all communities should co-operate with the PSNI to bring a halt to this ridiculous activity as soon as possible.

Orange Halls have had a particular financial burden, and the First Minister and I have been involved in discussions with the British Government, and between ourselves, regarding the real difficulty in which the Orange Order finds itself.

The civil contingencies policy branch is not responsible for the delivery of all civil contingency activity. Each of the Departments, their agencies and non-departmental public bodies are responsible for civil contingencies in their sectors. Other responders, such as the emergency services and district councils, have roles to play in planning for and delivering a local response.

CCPB's role is to promote effective civil contingencies policy and implement it across the public sector — not to write plans for operational responses. OFMDFM has offered a lead and has come out strongly against the

attacks. It recognises the financial burden that has been imposed on the Orange Order, and further discussion will show whether that situation can be resolved.

Mr Attwood: I have a serious question in relation to emergency planning. Will the Minister confirm whether a bunker has been constructed, allegedly in or around Ballymena, so that, in the event of a grave or catastrophic event, there would be a place of refuge?

A Member: For Junior? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Attwood: I suspect that more people than Junior might go to that place of refuge. *[Laughter.]*

In the event of a grave or catastrophic event, there would be a place of refuge for up to 300 people. Is the Minister aware that a bunker has been constructed? Did it cost between £300 million and £400 million? Is he prepared to lodge in the Assembly Library a list of the titles of the 300 people who may avail of that place of refuge? If that is true, does the Minister agree that it is preposterous, and that there are far better projects in the North on which public money could be spent?

The deputy First Minister: That sounds preposterous to me, and I hope that I am not one of those 300 people. I know absolutely nothing about a bunker in Ballymena or a list of 300 names. However, if it is a serious question — and I presume that it is — we will all be interested in hearing the answer from whoever constructed the bunker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: If there is a bunker, places in it will be allocated purely on a points system. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá ceist dháiríre agam.

Will the Minister outline the role played by the civil contingencies policy branch in the aftermath of the recent fire tragedy in the Lammy area of Omagh? Go raibh maith agat.

The deputy First Minister: The civil contingencies policy branch represented the First Minister and deputy First Minister at multi-agency meetings on the recent fire tragedy in Omagh. It liaised with colleagues in central and local government and co-ordinated the response of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to correspondence received in relation to that sad and tragic event.

Good Relations

4. **Mr Neeson** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm whether the fostering of good relations remains a key priority; and to identify five key actions planned to deliver good relations in the context of the draft Programme for Government 2008-11. (AQO 1440/08)

The deputy First Minister: As OFMDFM said previously, it is fully committed to tackling sectarianism,

racism and intolerance. The draft Programme for Government contains high-level commitments that support its public statements. The example set by the House and the Executive demonstrates our collective commitment to provide leadership in building the shared and better future that our people deserve.

Our priority must be to build on the peaceful summers that we have enjoyed recently. That has been the product of much hard work by many people at interfaces and other areas who have successfully built and maintained relationships, even at times of great tension. Our future strategy will be to sustain that success and support measures such as the use of mobile phone networks in campaigns to influence young people away from recreational rioting.

As I have already said today, a key priority of the Executive is to dramatically increase budgets to resource work to achieve those objectives. Much has been achieved, but much remains to be done. That message is at the heart of the draft Programme for Government and informs our relationships in Government.

Mr Neeson: Is the Minister aware of the statement that was made recently by five clergymen in north Belfast, expressing their concerns about how the draft Programme for Government deals with — or fails to deal with — divisions in our society?

Furthermore, is he aware that the latest edition of the Community Relations Council's publication criticises how the Executive, through the Programme for Government, have dealt with sectarianism? What is the deputy First Minister's reaction to that criticism, and what does he plan to do about it?

The deputy First Minister: The 'Shared Future' framework document and the racial equality strategy were debated on 4 June and 3 July 2007 respectively, and in line with the resolutions to those motions, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will introduce detailed plans, which are consistent with the Pledge of Office, to promote the whole community's interests and to achieve a shared future and a prosperous, peaceful and settled society. The Department will also introduce plans for 2008-11 that will detail how racial equality and an inclusive society for our increasingly diverse community can be achieved. At the core of those proposals is the idea that action must be taken to tackle racism, sectarianism and intolerance. We intend to discuss those proposals shortly with the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

People must recognise that the institutions have been in place for only a few months. A great deal of hard work has been going on, particularly on the development of the Programme for Government, the Budget, and the 10-year investment strategy. It is, therefore, far too soon for people to judge the quality of that work. Only when proposals have been introduced and it is clear how they will be implemented should people judge whether the Executive are making a real impact.

However, I know that the sight of the First Minister, me and the SDLP and Ulster Unionist Party Ministers has sent a positive message to the entire community. Over the past eight months, tremendous work has been done, and that will continue. Those who harboured the notion that all this would fall apart have had to sit up and take notice that the parties are dedicated to ensuring the fulfilment of the dreams and views of their constituents.

Therefore, it is too soon to make judgements. People can judge us properly only over time, so it is unfair to do so over a matter of months. We have made rapid progress that I believe will continue. However, people will be in a position to judge us only when we have introduced and implemented our proposals.

Mr Craig: Does the deputy First Minister agree that good relations should apply not only to religious and political breakdown in Northern Ireland, but to ethnic relations in the general population? That is a matter of increasing importance in my constituency and in those of others. Should that aspect of good relations not be given a much higher priority?

The deputy First Minister: I could not agree more. How we treat the newcomers who come to our shores is one of the great challenges that we face in the North and, indeed, on the island of Ireland. There is no doubt whatsoever that those newcomers have made important contributions to our economic successes, our hospitals, schools and many of our other services. Such good relations are a high priority for the Executive, and the First Minister and I are dedicated to eradicating racism and sectarianism of whatever description. That is reflected in our programmes and policies and in those that Departments have adopted. It is clear that every Minister is as dedicated and committed as us to the success of that work.

In the past three years, around £21 million has been spent on good relations and good race relations, and, in the draft Budget, we have proposed increasing that investment to approximately £28 million over the next three years in order to ensure continued improvement in relationships and to address the challenges that face new and host communities. That is a substantial financial commitment.

3.00 pm

ENVIRONMENT

Rural Planning Legislation

1. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to make an announcement on new rural planning legislation; and to detail the range

and number of stakeholders with which her Department is consulting on this matter. (AQO 1366/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): When I reissued draft planning policy statement (PPS) 14 on 25 October 2007, I stated my clear view that the review of draft PPS 14 would have a short and focused timescale. I said that I would publish a new draft PPS 14 within six months and that that would be followed by a period of public consultation. I am holding to that commitment. The Executive subcommittee has determined that, as part of the process, there should be engagement with key stakeholders on the findings emerging from the review. Therefore, meetings will be held in February at various locations across Northern Ireland; the outcome of those meeting will also help to inform the revision of draft PPS 14.

Mr McElduff: Is the Minister aware that the fall in planning applications, which has been caused by the presumption against new single homes in the countryside, is having a disastrous knock-on effect on the rural economy, particularly in the building trade in counties such as Tyrone and Fermanagh, as has been highlighted in the past week by University of Ulster economist Michael Smyth? Have there been any Executive-level discussions about measures that might be taken to support the building trade at present?

Mrs Foster: I continue to engage with all stakeholders, and I will be having a meeting soon with the Construction Employers Federation about its concerns, not only in relation to draft PPS 14, but across the spectrum. I also understand from my officials in the Planning Service that five years' worth of planning applications have not yet been built. That being the case, I am somewhat bemused by the allegation that builders all around the country are going to be out of work when so many applications have not been taken up. Bearing that in mind, as I said in answer to the initial question, I was determined that the review would be focused and time constrained.

The Member is fully aware that there will be stakeholder engagement across Northern Ireland, including — most notably for him — in Omagh. We will discuss with the various stakeholders the emerging findings from the review. I trust that he will also take the opportunity to speak to his ministerial colleagues about progress on draft PPS 14.

Mr Burnside: I am sure that the Minister will agree that draft PPS 14 established a much too rigid framework, although that is understandable, given what people call "bungalow blight". There is a tremendous trend among farmers for replacing many fine old stone-built houses in the countryside with bungalows. They get planning permission for a replacement house, they build a bungalow, and they let the old stone house fall apart. With luck, it will be used to house a few cattle. During

the review, will the Minister consider giving an incentive, perhaps by means of a grant, to farmers to improve fine old buildings rather than replace them with bungalows?

Mrs Foster: I am happy to confirm that my Department is carefully considering one issue to which the Member referred — the fact that old buildings are being allowed to go to rack and ruin while new buildings are being built close by. We want to maintain vernacular buildings in the countryside, and we are considering pertinent design issues. Many architects have made submissions to me stating that design should form a large element of the policy outlined in draft PPS 14. Therefore, I am very happy to confirm that we are examining that area closely.

Mr O'Loan: With regard to the emergency bunker in Ballymena, the problem at the moment is that, if Junior were to go into it, none of his party colleagues would want to go in with him.

Will the Minister confirm whether the junior Minister Ian Paisley Jnr has attended meetings of the working group on rural planning? Will she also confirm whether he is a member of that group? In view of his particular interest in planning, which not everyone would regard as dispassionate, does she regard his participation as appropriate?

Mrs Foster: No planning permission has been granted for a bunker in Ballymena; therefore, if one exists, my enforcement team will be interested in having a look at it.

Regarding the actual question as opposed to the preamble, the Ministers on the subcommittee are Nigel Dodds, Michelle Gildernew, the junior Ministers Gerry Kelly and Ian Paisley Jnr, Conor Murphy, Margaret Ritchie and myself. We have had a good debate regarding PPS 14. Three meetings have taken place: the first on 12 November 2007, the second on 10 December 2007 and the third on 14 January 2008.

The subcommittee is considering a range of policy options and is developing new policies that will attempt to balance the needs of the environment and the rural communities. We are also concerned — and this is an important point — with the practical implementation of the policy, because, shortly after I took office, it became clear to me when engaging with officials from the Planning Service that one of the most difficult issues regarding PPS 14 was with planners and the difficulties that they had in implementing the policy. Therefore, we must also consider that.

Regarding the suitability of the two junior Ministers' attendance at the subcommittee, they are reporting back to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and I have no difficulty with that.

Environmental Crime Team

2. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on the success of the environmental crime team that exists within the Environment and Heritage Service. (AQO 1302/08)

Mrs Foster: I have been greatly encouraged by the success that the Environment and Heritage Service's (EHS) environmental crime team has achieved. Since 2005, it has overseen 244 successful prosecutions against those convicted of illegal-waste offences. Those cases have generated fines of £568,415. In addition, six custodial sentences have been imposed, ranging from two to 12 months.

Courts view environmental crime with increasing seriousness, as is evidenced by the high fines that are often imposed and the jail terms that have been handed down to some of the most serious offenders. In my view, that is mainly due to the work of this highly professional and committed team, which has made great progress in tackling illegal-waste crime, while operating in often difficult circumstances.

The team makes use of its increased legal powers, and has developed strong working relationships with other law enforcement agencies, including those in the Republic of Ireland. Its work has helped to increase public awareness of the impact and seriousness of illegal dumping.

I was particularly pleased by the recent success in achieving a confiscation order against environmental criminals, which was the first in the United Kingdom.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Minister for outlining the environmental crime team's successes in securing prosecutions, fines and custodial sentences. Will the Minister tell the House what structures are in place to allow EHS to build upon its successes in respect of illegal dumpers?

Mrs Foster: The environmental crime team was formally set up in 2005-06. It had worked as a team before that, but that is when it was designated an environmental crime team. The team forms a dedicated intelligence unit to target not just the complicit land owners, but those who drive the crime of illegal-waste dumping.

EHS will train further staff as financial intelligence officers in partnership with the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Assets Recovery Agency. While the team has been developing its financial investigation and financial intelligence skills, it has formed a partnership with the Assets Recovery Agency and the Police Service of Northern Ireland to refer cases for confiscation under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002.

Environmental crime team investigators commenced a programme of retraining in October 2006 on issues such as the Police and Criminal Evidence (Amendment)

(Northern Ireland) Order 2007, investigative interviewing, human rights, the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 and court skills. All of those skills are required to enable the team to bring people to justice when they commit environmental crime.

I am pleased with the progress made by the environmental crime team, and I trust that it will go from strength to strength now that it has that skills base.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am sure that the Minister shares my concern about the scale of illegal dumping in the Belfast hills. It is estimated by the Belfast Hills Partnership that one million tonnes of waste are dumped there every year.

Will the Minister agree that a recent report by Criminal Justice Inspection made it clear that EHS is failing to tackle persistent environmental offenders? Furthermore, will she update the Assembly with respect to costings for the establishment of an independent environmental protection agency?

Mrs Foster: I received a report from the Criminal Justice Inspection in 2007, in which mention was made of the environmental crime team. That team has since developed, and the Member will acknowledge that. Since that date, I have also looked at having a single environmental team to deal not only with illegal waste dumping but also water pollution — currently dealt with by the water unit in EHS — and other elements of environmental crime such as wildlife crime.

I am working towards, and want to see implemented, the recommendations of Criminal Justice Inspection: a single environmental crime unit in EHS to deal with the range of environmental crimes that we encounter.

As to the question about the costings, I have received a question for oral answer from the Alliance Party Member for North Down. I will not steal his thunder. I am sure the Member will get a copy of the answer, if that is not reached today.

Mr Gardiner: Will the Minister agree that the removal of a rath, dating from the era of St Patrick, in the village of Waringstown in my constituency of Upper Bann, was an environmental crime? What punishment does she propose for the officials who failed to adequately protect that site?

Mrs Foster: The Member had been in protracted correspondence with the Department in relation to this issue long before I became a Minister. Correspondence continues, and I hope that we will at some stage come to a resolution and closure of the matter.

Planning Service

3. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister of the Environment whether the Planning Service is fit for purpose. (AQO 1475/08)

Mrs Foster: The Planning Service has been confronted with a number of challenges in recent years, such as a 62% increase in the number of planning applications between 2000 and 2006, and greatly increased regulation and public scrutiny.

Against that background, and within the constraints of the current planning system, I am happy to say that performance against business targets is improving. It is pleasing to note that half-yearly results at the end of September 2007 confirmed that the Planning Service was meeting three out of the four business targets for those parts of the process that lie within its control. That is in spite of an increase in the number of applications received so far this year, compared to the same period last year. Planning Service has also been successful in dealing efficiently with a number of key infrastructural proposals, such as the Titanic Quarter. However, there is always room for improvement, and I assure the Member that the Planning Service is committed to improvement.

We should distinguish, however, between the Planning Service and the planning system. The question refers to the Planning Service: I believe that our focus should be on the entire planning system, but I am the first to acknowledge that we must improve our part — the Planning Service.

My officials are making progress with a number of improvements to the planning process, including: piloting streamlined council consultation arrangements with the city council in Londonderry; making greater use of pre-application discussions; revising the procedures for dealing with reserved matters applications; reforming the development control group structure to speed up the decision-making process; streamlining the processes involved in preparing for an appeal; and looking at ways to enhance accessibility to the planning system through better use of technology.

I recognise that a modern up-to-date planning system is integral to delivering the Executive's goals for Northern Ireland, as indicated in the draft Programme for Government, and we will be working towards that goal.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members will know that the Speaker made an announcement this morning about the use of mobile phones in the Chamber. A mobile phone has just caused interference. Members have been made aware of the effect that that has on the recording equipment in the Chamber. I ask all Members to switch off their mobile phones.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister for her extensive answer. I am sure, however, that she concurs, on the basis of her constituency experience, that frustrations with the Planning Service and the planning system are common among constituents in the North.

3.15 pm

However, with regard to the Minister's last point, is she satisfied that the Planning Service and the wider planning system will be fit for purpose, for example, to accelerate potential inward-investment opportunities should they arise during the next three years? In particular, is she satisfied that in the event that hotel-development opportunities arise, especially outside Belfast or wherever they might be, the Planning Service and system will be able to give potential hotel developers certainty that if they invest here, they will get approvals in good time in order to service any increased tourist demand as identified in the Programme for Government?

Mrs Foster: I could just get up and say yes; however, I am not known for brevity of that nature. The Member is aware that my Department is committed in the Programme for Government to process applications for strategic projects in six months. That is a challenging prospect for the Planning Service. However, it has already been achieved in respect of some major applications. I believe that it can continue to do so. I stress that this is not just a matter for the Planning Service, but for the entire planning system. Therefore, applicants and agents must play their part with Planning Service in order to develop a better system. That includes having pre-application discussions with the Planning Service in order that quicker and more efficient decisions can be made, whether they are consents or non-starters, so that, if necessary, people can go back to the drawing board immediately and without having to wait.

I recognise that there is frustration at constituency level. Indeed, constituents, not just from Belfast but from across Northern Ireland, have raised several specific issues with regard to apartments, garden grabbing, and so on. I am listening closely on all of those issues. Indeed, I met a delegation of residents from south Belfast and several others who have come to see me. The Department is in listening mode. The Member is aware that I am committed to a planning reform agenda, which I hope to bring forward before summer 2008.

Mr T Clarke: Will the Minister tell the House what she and her Department are doing to restore public confidence and faith in the Planning Service?

Mrs Foster: I hope that people in Northern Ireland realise that the Administration is a listening one — certainly, I have done my best to get out and listen to people's various concerns about the Planning Service.

There is no doubt that the Planning Service does a difficult job. It must reach decisions on developments, and if there are objectors to a particular development, they may be disappointed and may say, therefore, that they have had a bad experience with the Planning Service. If an applicant is turned down, he or she will

have had a bad experience with the Planning Service. It must be recognised that that will always be the case, and it is important to distinguish between dissatisfaction with a particular decision and a general lack of confidence in the process through which that decision is reached.

The Department and the Planning Service, in particular, are committed to ensuring that the planning system delivers a first-class service to all of the people of Northern Ireland. That is why the Department is undertaking wide-ranging planning reform and why I am delighted that Greg Lloyd, a well respected professor of planning law at the University of Liverpool, has agreed to lead that reform process. In February, I will be taking the opportunity to visit colleagues in Scotland, during which time I will take a close look at their planning system. I also hope to learn from their recent reform process.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister explain why there has been significant drift of senior and middle-level planning officers to the private sector?

Mrs Foster: The simple answer to that question, which has already been said, is money. Planners are much better paid in the private sector. However, that can be looked at in two ways: one can get depressed about the fact that the Planning Service is losing out on senior planners above a certain level. However, on the other hand, it is recruiting good graduates.

Through the development of incentive schemes, I hope to encourage them to remain in the Planning Service. Additionally, I hope that senior planners who have gone to work in the private sector will ensure that planning applications that are submitted to the Planning Service will be of a certain standard. If that is the case, I hope that it will be of benefit to the planning system in general.

National Park in the Mournes

4. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of the Environment what action she is taking to implement proposals for the establishment of a national park in the Mournes. (AQO 1457/08)

Mrs Foster: I consulted the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside (CNCC), the Committee for the Environment, and the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development about the Mourne national park working party's report in September 2007. Recently, I received a response from CNCC, and I look forward to the Committees' responses soon. Last week, I met a small group of Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) representatives and others in the Mournes to hear their views. The proposal to designate a national park in the Mournes has created a significant response from the local community and beyond. In view of that,

it is only right that I give proper consideration without the constraints of a deadline to the working party's report and to the views of those whom I have met.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her detailed response. Will she agree with me that the matter has been rumbling on for some considerable time and that it would be in the interests of her Department, farmers and landowners to get something done as soon as possible so that tourism can be encouraged? Tourism is one of Northern Ireland's big assets; in some areas it is the only asset. It is important that the matter be brought to a successful conclusion as soon as possible, with agreement from as many people as possible.

Mrs Foster: The Member says that tourism is the only industry in some areas. Last week, I met a group in the Mournes that would firmly reject that point of view. I was impressed by the farming representatives that I met in Ballinran last week when I was in the kingdom of Mourne. I was impressed by their breadth of knowledge about national parks and, in particular, by their confidence in their future in agriculture. They certainly do not see themselves as part of a dying industry. We should encourage that attitude, given the bad spell through which agriculture has come.

As Members know, the working party reported last year. It reported the desire of many people for a national park and also the concerns of farmers. I want to consider farmers' views as well as the other issues in the working party's report; I also want to consider the responses that I await from the Committee for the Environment and the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for visiting the Mournes and hearing, at first hand, the concerns of the farmers about the proposal for a national park. My question is about the three reports that are now with the Minister: the report from the working party; the report from the Mournes area of outstanding natural beauty residents' action group; and the independent report of the nominees for the Mourne trustees. Will the Minister attach equal importance to the contents of all three reports?

Mrs Foster: The Member is correct that I have received those three reports. I understand that some clarification is needed with regard to the trustees' report, which was communicated to me at the UFU meeting last week. I hope to have a focused meeting with the trustees of the Mournes only. I will do that in the near future.

The Mourne working party identified many issues, and I commend its work. The issue of access was raised, regardless of whether there would be a national park or not. I know that Mr Bradley will be aware of that. Because access does not depend on whether there is a national park, I have asked the Environment and

Heritage Service to commit a further £500,000 over a three-year period to address the issues connected to it.

When I was in the Mournes I assured the people to whom I was speaking that there were no strings attached to that money, regardless of whether there would be a national park or not. In other words, landowners who are not in favour of a national park could make use of that money to upgrade their access in the Mournes. That message was well received.

A national park for the Mournes is a matter that we will have to consider carefully. I will take the farmers' views on board, as well as those who want the Mournes to be a national park that can be developed for tourism.

Mr Easton: The working party has identified the need for positive management for the Mournes. How will the Minister support that?

Mrs Foster: The Mourne Heritage Trust, which is a well-respected body in the Mournes, has been tasked with co-ordinating the management of the Mourne area of outstanding natural beauty. I recognise that quite a few designated areas already exist in the Mourne area, and that has brought the environmental product there very much to the fore.

The Department already provides grant aid to the Mourne Heritage Trust through its natural heritage grant programme, and it will consider further initiatives for which the trust, or others, may seek funding. As I have already said, access is an issue. That is not connected to any decision on whether or not there should be a national park, but it was identified in the working party report. We hope that the £500,000 that I mentioned earlier will benefit the area and provide additional resources for developing and improving access, providing better information for walkers and helping landowners to deal with many of the access problems that they face.

Review of Public Administration

5. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on proposed powers for district councils under the review of public administration.
(AQO 1459/08)

Mrs Foster: Following the publication of the emerging findings of the review of local government aspects of the review of public administration (RPA), a major stakeholder event was held in Cookstown on 25 October, attended by over 120 delegates. Four subregional events were subsequently held in Armagh, Limavady, Omagh and Lisburn. Stakeholders were also invited to submit written comments on the emerging findings and initial proposals, if they felt that that was appropriate. Some 58 organisations and individuals submitted comments.

The views expressed at the stakeholder events, in the written responses, during the take-note debate in the House on 13 November and by the Committee for the Environment have informed further discussions in the Executive subcommittee — which I chair — and at a number of bilateral meetings that I have held with ministerial colleagues, particularly in relation to the functions that might transfer to local government to strengthen its role. Those discussions are continuing and are reaching a critical stage. I want to ensure that all the views that I have received are fully and carefully considered as the thinking on the three strands, of which the Member will be aware, is drawn together before final recommendations are made to the Executive.

Mrs Long: One of the key powers that most local government organisations would like to see devolved to them is community planning. However, for that power to be effective, other powers would have to be devolved that would allow local government bodies to produce, not simply a wish list for their borough, but also a to-do list. Does the Minister agree that other significant powers will have to be devolved to local councils if they are to have a substantive role in community planning?

Mrs Foster: As far as I am concerned, community planning is the linchpin of what we are trying to do with the review of public administration. The Member is right to say that the matter does not only affect my Department as regards planning; it affects a range of Departments. It is that suite of functions that the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) has been pressing for and that we have sought in the bilateral meetings that I and ministerial colleagues have had over the past days.

I want to take this opportunity to commend NILGA on its work and its very realistic approach to all those issues. It has looked at the issues, been involved in stakeholder engagement, looked at what was on the table as a result of the emerging findings, and pushed all along for more to come on the table. I have found NILGA to be a very helpful tool in my kit, and I hope that when the end of the process is reached, that will be reflected in the range of functions that is devolved.

Dr Deeny: Health professionals also have concerns about the delay in finalising the number of councils — particularly those of us who have been appointed to the new local commissioning groups. As the Minister will know, the local commissioning groups, in terms of both their number and their make-up, are very much dependent on the number of councils in Northern Ireland —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Can the Member get to his question?

Dr Deeny: It is coming.

My question is: can the Minister tell us when she will announce the future number of councils in

Northern Ireland and their respective geographical make-ups? Can she give us some idea of how many councils there are likely to be in future?

3.30 pm

Mrs Foster: The Executive subcommittee is due to meet soon to discuss and agree final recommendations to the Executive, which will include its views on the number and functions of those bodies, and the vision to which all Members are signed up. The Member made a point about health professionals. In an early engagement with me, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety made it clear that, no matter the number of councils that is settled on, the local commissioning groups would be able to engage with that number of councils, and that there was no need for me to be concerned about that matter. That was a very helpful early intervention.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Departmental Solicitor's Office

1. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what consideration he has given to transferring responsibility for the Departmental Solicitor's Office out of his Department. (AQO 1494/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): Consideration was given by direct rule Ministers in 2006 to the transfer of the Departmental Solicitor's Office, as the core component of the new Government legal service for Northern Ireland, to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in April 2007. In early 2007, preparations for that transfer were halted, pending the anticipated progress on devolution.

The Departmental Solicitor's Office has operated successfully for many years as part of the Department of Finance and Personnel, while providing professional legal services to all Northern Ireland Departments. I am satisfied with that arrangement, and I have no plans to seek the transfer of responsibility for the Departmental Solicitor's Office to another Department. However, as you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, any significant transfer of responsibilities among Departments would, in the first instance, be a matter for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Mrs D Kelly: In view of that answer, will the Minister outline any functions that he hopes to transfer under the review of public administration?

Mr P Robinson: That is the subject of a later question, but it is sufficient to say that the Department of Finance and Personnel deals with central Government. I am

sure that the Member is not suggesting that we hand over control of central Government to local government.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Minister tell the House whether Ministers and Departments are obliged to follow legal advice that they receive from the Departmental Solicitor's Office, and, if not, what the implications are of failing to do so?

Mr P Robinson: All Ministers are obliged to act within the law, and will take legal advice from time to time. Whether or not their actions are consistent with the law, it is, in the final analysis, a matter for the Minister whether he or she accepts that advice or not, and takes the consequences. I am sure that if the Member were to trawl through history, he would find some instances in which a Minister did not take such advice and ended up in court.

Departmental Spending

2. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the discretion that Departments have in relation to how money allocated through the Budget process is spent. (AQO 1340/08)

Mr P Robinson: Although the strict legal response to the Member's question is that all Government expenditure is subject to the approval of the Department of Finance and Personnel, Departments, in practice, spend on the basis of delegated authority, which can be amended or withdrawn at any time. However, I take it that the burden of the Member's question was to determine the level of discretion that is available to Departments to reprioritise the allocations that are given to them.

The proposed allocations in the draft Budget were developed in conjunction with Departments, and, therefore, reflect their initial view of how allocations should be used. The Departments had a further opportunity to amend those views before the finalisation of the Budget position. That meant that Executive Ministers had broad discretion in distributing the additional funds that are available for specific services within their Departments.

The final Budget position will show allocations to Departments at the level of spending areas. The number of spending areas in each Department ranges from two for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to 13 for the Department of Finance and Personnel. Departments will have complete flexibility to transfer allocations within spending areas, but any proposed reallocation among spending areas must be approved by the Executive. It also remains open to the Executive to ring-fence any funding allocation for a specific purpose.

Mr Irwin: In light of the Minister's answer, should each Minister reflect on the outcome of the consultation process when determining his or her priorities?

Mr P Robinson: I am pleased to say that almost 10,000 people took the trouble to make submissions not only on the draft Budget but on the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy. That indicates a much higher level of involvement in consultation than we have ever had previously in Northern Ireland. Ministers will want to benefit from that level of public consultation. The Budget, which will come before the House tomorrow, will reflect the outcome of that consultation. When Ministers distribute their allocations, they will want to take the consultation into account. They will also take the consultation into account in any in-year monitoring rounds.

Ms Lo: What plans does the Minister have to put in place a strategic approach to ensuring that underspends are allocated against agreed priorities rather than dealing with them in an ad hoc manner through each of the quarterly monitoring rounds?

Mr P Robinson: The nature and purpose of monitoring rounds is to deal with ministerial pressures. It is not possible, strategically, to ensure that every programme in a Minister's Department will run in accordance with the timescale that he or she had hoped to meet at the time of the Budget. Programmes will experience new issues and pressures, and there will always be slippages. When there have been slippages, the purpose of monitoring rounds is to take the funds that are available and use them to deal with pressures. However, if it is possible to allocate beyond any pressures that have to be met, the strategy in the Programme for Government allows for that. As the monitoring rounds progress, we will consider shortfalls in any Programme for Government targets. Strategically, we would use in-year spending rounds to assist Ministers to meet those targets.

Dr McDonnell: In the interests of openness and transparency, should individual Ministers be allowed to make frank statements to the House on the details of their departmental budgets? At times, we spend a lot of time discussing fairly small amounts of money, such as that spent on the North/South Ministerial Council. It would be useful for the House to have the chance to debate the way in which large budgets are spent inside Departments.

Mr P Robinson: Mr Deputy Speaker, you have had to sit on that Chair on several occasions when the House debated those issues. I am sure that you have not seen any reluctance on the part of Ministers, or Members, to make their views known on allocations and pressures. The purpose of the consultation process has been to allow everyone in Northern Ireland who wishes to express a view to do so. At some stage, Ministers must take a collective Executive decision.

The Executive have done that, and we will bring forward a Budget statement tomorrow based on the agreement of the Executive. I am not in a position to restrict Ministers from making statements on behalf of their Departments. I hope that any such statements would recognise the considerable steps that have been taken by all Executive colleagues to ensure that the Programme for Government can be supported by all Ministers and is worthy of the support of the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Economic Vision for Northern Ireland

4. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what is his assessment of the economic vision for Northern Ireland within the draft Budget 2008-11.
(AQO 1485/08)

Mr P Robinson: The draft Budget aims to create a dynamic, outward-looking, competitive and innovative regional economy. Spending proposals focus on ensuring that resources are made available to secure productivity improvements in Northern Ireland through investment in the four main drivers of productivity: skills, enterprise, innovation and infrastructure. Such investment is necessary to achieve the public service agreement target of halving the private sector's productivity gap with the UK average — excluding the south-east of England — by 2015.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for his response. In light of the Varney Review, and its statement that Northern Ireland should be satisfied with taking its share of the proceeds from a booming UK economy through the Barnett formula — and thereby perpetuating the financial penalty on the rest of the UK — how can such a vision can be achieved, particularly given that Sir David Varney did not foresee any meaningful change to the gap in the levels of gross value added (GVA) between Northern Ireland and the UK?

Mr P Robinson: Everyone in the House was disappointed at the outcome of the Varney Review, but I hope that the Assembly's greater involvement in Varney II will bring us a better outcome. Northern Ireland's GVA is about 81% of the UK average, and the Programme for Government is intent on addressing that disparity. The only way that that can be done is by the Assembly increasing economic growth through allocating resources to the key Departments involved, and by those Departments introducing proposals to upskill the workforce. The Departments must be innovative in generating new jobs and they must ensure that the new jobs are created in occupations that will attract higher wages than many existing jobs in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is among the areas

of the United Kingdom that are experiencing the largest increases in economic growth.

Mr Storey: To follow on from the Minister's comments, will he state how his draft Budget allocations seek to encourage economic growth?

Mr P Robinson: I have outlined what I consider to be the drivers of productivity. The Departments that have responsibility for those drivers are the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department of Education and the Department for Regional Development, which has responsibility for improving infrastructure.

Without specifying any possible changes in the final Budget, it is worth pointing out that in the draft Budget, we allocated an increase in resources to those Departments over the CSR period that was well above the block average of 3.6%. The Department for Regional Development will receive an average increase of 6.5%; the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will receive a 4.8% increase; the Department of Education will receive a 4.3% increase, and the Department for Employment and Learning will receive 3.9%. In my Budget statement, some of those figures will change, which, I hope, will be helpful.

Mr Cree: The Varney Review of taxation policy failed to deliver anything significant to the economy and contributed nothing to the economic vision. The Minister has touched on the new review: will he share with the Assembly his expectations of the Varney II review and state when the report will be published.

Mr P Robinson: The only positive to come from the Varney Report was the provision of an economic analysis, some of which is useful, but the report provided no concrete benefit to Northern Ireland. All that can be said is that Varney II can do no worse than the first version.

3.45 pm

As Minister, there are things that I can control and there are things that I cannot control. I cannot control the Treasury; no one has managed to learn how to do that. As a devolved institution, all we can do is argue our case, attempt to convince people, and state to them that there is a very real need here for new instruments to help us to grow our economy. The difference between the first Varney Review and Varney II is that having greeted Sir David when he started his first review, I had no further meetings with him — nor, having sought a further meeting with him, did I get one — whereas, this time, Northern Ireland officials will be involved throughout the process, which I think means that the views of the Assembly will be heard throughout and, I hope, will have an impact.

Civil Service Modernisation Projects

5. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the progress on the main Civil Service modernisation projects, including Workplace 2010.

(AQO 1495/08)

Mr P Robinson: Significant progress has been made across the Civil Service reform and modernisation programme. The centre for applied learning has been fully operational since October 2006, the Records NI project will be completed by March 2008, and the other key corporate services projects, providing shared-service centres for human resources, accounts and ICT, are being rolled out across the Northern Ireland Civil Service, and will be complete by April 2009. The procurement for NI Direct will get under way this month, with a view to introducing the single telephone point of contact for public services in Northern Ireland on a phased basis from December 2008 onwards.

On Workplace 2010, I am pleased to say that the two remaining bidders — Land Securities Trillium and Telereal — have been invited to submit their best and final offers for the contract, and those should be received by the end of April. I can also confirm that the independent review of policy on the location of public-sector jobs is under way, and I expect a report from the team by the summer. The Member will be aware that although the placement of jobs was not part of the initial reform project, it is my intention to draw that issue in as part of the reform project and to align it closely with Workplace 2010.

Mr P Ramsey: Will the Minister outline the views of his Department in respect of decentralisation of public-sector and Civil Service jobs to regions of high unemployment, and the environmental impact of the subsequent reduction in commuting requirements? Finally, can he define what is considered a reasonable travel to work area?

Mr P Robinson: Having set up a review, I think it is wrong for me to state what I believe the outcome should be. I met Sir George Bain as he started the review, and I believe that the review team have already had some initial meetings. I have previously expressed views in the Assembly on the issue, so I do not approach it reluctantly.

There are real advantages for Northern Ireland if we can have a fair distribution of jobs around the Province, with reduced pressure on our infrastructure if jobs are close to people rather than bringing people along our roads to jobs. If we can grow the economy, particularly in the areas that we are pressing for — financial services, business services, and computer technology — those jobs are more likely to come to the greater Belfast area. Therefore, it becomes all the more

important that we look at the jobs where we have a greater control of location and consider their displacement to other areas of the Province.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for that last answer in particular, and I have a related question.

If female civil servants are given an advancement opportunity, they may have to relocate or commute to avail themselves of it. That can cause difficulties for those who have child-rearing responsibilities. Will the review take that important issue, which relates to equality of opportunity, into consideration?

Mr P Robinson: I am sure that consideration of that issue was in the review panel's remit. We have been inclined to examine how the public sector works on the basis of what has been its historical *modus operandi*. The truth is, however, that things will change considerably in the future. I visited Clare House and spoke to some of the staff there. One lady who was from the greater Belfast area told me that she worked mostly from home and came to the office perhaps only once a week to deal with some issues.

There will be greater flexibility in the future, and it is likely that computers and the advancement of technology will play their part in that flexibility. More people will stay in their own area rather than work in town centres.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response. Given that some reform projects have recommended the centralisation of information, will the Minister set out the latest position on the important, and topical, review of data security?

Mr P Robinson: Members will know that, following the most recent high-profile data loss by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs in the third week of November 2007, I initiated a review of the way in which Departments and agencies handled data. That review has been led by Bill McCluggage, and the process has been that people from each of the relevant areas of activity have been contacted and allowed to conduct self-analysis on the basis of a series of questions. The outcome of the review indicates that improvements can be made, and we will report shortly to the Committee when we have more detail. The report will deal with a series of issues about the transfer and handling of data. Clearly, improvements can be made. Considering the frequency of those types of occurrences in GB, it is incumbent on us to ensure that Departments that hold personal details in many areas of activity have the highest level of security. It is important that we do not find ourselves in the same position as those in GB have found themselves.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Review of Public Administration

7. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to list the functions that he has offered up for transfer to local government under the review of public administration. (AQO 1496/08)

Mr P Robinson: The Department of Finance and Personnel is responsible primarily for the finance and personnel policies of central Government Departments. Discussions were held on the matter under the review of public administration (RPA), and the previous Administration decided that no DFP functions should be recommended for transfer to local government.

Mr Gallagher: That is a disappointing response that is shared by those in local government. It gives strength to the growing view that the Minister and his officials are using the RPA as an empire-building exercise. Given that there will be fewer councils after the creation of the new authorities, some council assets will be surplus to requirement.

As for the disposal of those assets —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Gallagher, it is Question Time. Please put a question to the Minister.

Mr Gallagher: Will the Minister tell the House whether, when those assets are disposed of, the money will remain in local government or be taken back to the centre?

Mr P Robinson: I am somewhat confused by the Member's comments. The Member said that he was disappointed by the response, but he did not identify one function of the Department of Finance and Personnel that he believes would be appropriate to delegate to local government. The reason, of course, that he did not do that is because there are no functions of the Department of Finance and Personnel that could appropriately be handed to local government.

By its nature, the Department of Finance and Personnel deals with central Government; it is responsible for civil servants. I assume that the Member is not suggesting that we hand over the control of those who are looking after Northern Ireland Departments to local government. The Department of Finance and Personnel deals with the finances of the 11 Departments; I assume that he is not suggesting that we hand the control of the finance of central Government to local government. There is no function of the Department of Finance and Personnel that should, or could, be devolved to local government.

I happen to be one of the strongest supporters of delegating more powers to local government. Any of the Member's colleagues should know — perhaps more than most — that in the Executive subcommittee, I am the one who has been pushing all Ministers to ascertain what additional powers they could hand to local government. The only area of the work of the Department of

Finance and Personnel where there is a relationship with local government concerns some EU funding. That can be transferred, or a greater role given to local government in that respect, only if the function that the European funding is related to is also devolved to local government. Unless any Member can tell me of one function of my Department that could be devolved, we will have to regard the issue as closed.

Mr Ross: Bearing in mind the fact that there are very few — if any — functions of the Minister's Department that could be transferred to councils, could he explain to the House what actions he or his office has taken to encourage other Departments to transfer powers to local councils?

Mr P Robinson: Representatives of local government have met me, officially, as Minister of Finance and Personnel, on this issue, and they have encouraged me to encourage others to involve themselves fully. I was first elected to local government in 1977, and I believe that there is no better delivery unit than local government. We found that out when there was flooding; we turned to local government for help.

I am a massive supporter of local government. I believe that it could manage and handle additional functions, but only functions that do not have an overarching responsibility for central Government areas of activity. That is the difficulty, so all that I can do is encourage colleagues. I have done that in the subcommittee that has been set up, and I will continue to do that in the Executive. I must say that, in recent meetings of the subcommittee, I have found that there has been a greater degree of unity among the Ministers about how we can move forward on this issue, and I believe that we are making progress.

Stormont Estate: Events in 2008

8. **Mr Burnside** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the major (i) sporting events; (ii) cultural events; and (iii) other events, planned for the Stormont Estate in 2008. (AQO 1267/08)

Mr P Robinson: The events calendar for the Stormont Estate changes regularly, with events being added throughout the year. At this early stage, there are four major sporting events in the 2008 calendar: the Thirty-first Belfast International Cross-Country Race, which was held in early January; the Tour of the North — the cycle race, not the Orange parade — on the evening of Good Friday in March; the Red Bull Soapbox Race in late May; and the Tesco Race for Life, in support of breast cancer awareness, in early June. To date, no other major events have been planned for 2008. However, I expect further approaches to be made.

4.00 pm

Mr Burnside: There seems to be a total lack of co-ordination and promotion of the Stormont estate as a venue for events. I used to enjoy attending the odd Vanguard rally here; they were great events in the early 1970s. However, events are held here only because of the initiative of those behind them. I submitted this question to the Business Office to be addressed to the Assembly Commission, and it was transferred to the Finance Department. Regardless of the Department, there should be a centrally co-ordinated campaign. I ask the Finance Minister to initiate that.

If someone wants to hold a rally, marathon or even a funeral — like George Best's — in the Stormont estate, the initiative comes from bodies such as Castlereagh Borough Council or sporting organisations. It would be much better if there were a central Department that dealt with getting sporting or cultural events and rock concerts held at this great venue and which promoted the grounds in co-ordination with other Departments. Will the Minister ensure a more positive and co-ordinated use of the Stormont estate?

Mr P Robinson: Everyone recognises that Parliament Buildings and its grounds are ideally situated, and we want to encourage as many people as possible from Northern Ireland to visit the site. We encourage people to use the facilities and to have a very good relationship with people involved in promotion, which will continue. I encourage anyone who wants to use Parliament Buildings and its grounds for an event to contact my departmental officials, who are happy to be proactive in looking for those who could hold their events here.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is questions to the Assembly Commission. Several Members of the Commission will answer questions. Question 1 has been withdrawn.

Assembly Education Programme

2. **Mr Storey** asked the Assembly Commission to detail the number of schools that have participated in the Assembly education programme since the restoration of devolution in May 2007. (AQO 1439/08)

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: From the restoration of devolution in May 2007 until today, 125 schools have participated in the Assembly education programme. Several youth groups, further and higher education groups and adult learning groups have also participated in the programme, raising the number of participating groups to 218. The education programme of the Assembly has

been one of the success stories since we started operation in May 2007.

Mr Storey: I concur with the Member's comments about the success of the programme. Schools in my constituency are encouraged to participate and to become more aware of what happens in this Building. Can the Member expand on the geographical spread of schools participating in the education programme across the constituencies?

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Of the 125 schools that participated in the education programme, the vast majority — 112 — were from Northern Ireland; schools from England, the Republic of Ireland and Europe also visited.

The breakdown of the 125 schools from Northern Ireland was as follows: there were six schools from Belfast East, which is 5.36% of the total; three schools from Belfast North, 2.68%; seven schools from Belfast South, 6.25%; six schools from Belfast West, 5.36%; nine schools from East Antrim, 8.04%; five schools from East Londonderry, 4.46%; seven schools from Fermanagh and South Tyrone, 6.25%; three schools from Foyle, 2.68%; four schools from Lagan Valley, 3.57%; five schools from Mid Ulster, 4.46%; 20 schools from Newry and Armagh, 17.86%; nine schools from South Down, 8.04%; eight schools from the Member's North Antrim constituency, 7.14%; seven schools from North Down, 6.25%; one school from South Antrim, 0.89%; one school from Strangford, 0.89%; nine schools from Upper Bann, 8.04%; and two schools from West Tyrone, 1.78%.

Procurement of Goods and Services

3. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Assembly Commission to outline what consideration it gives, when contracting and procuring services and goods, to the arrangements that will be made for trades union and staff representation; and to detail the processes that are put in place for monitoring and reviewing these conditions, to ensure that agreed terms and conditions for staff are adhered to by the provider of the services or goods.

(AQO 1438/08)

Mr Moutray: The Assembly Commission does not specify that an organisation selected as a provider of goods or services must have either trade union or staff representation. When selecting a service provider, the Commission considers the relevant competencies required to meet service provision. It cannot exclude a contractor who does not have a trade union. Each company has the ability and flexibility to decide how to achieve desired industrial relations. However, the Commission recognises that a high standard of industrial relations is necessary, so it includes a clause in the terms of all contracts to ensure that staff are not treated in a discriminatory or unfair way. The Commission

also considers staff turnover rates during the procurement process, as that is a robust and effective method of measuring employee satisfaction.

The staff relations of a contractor can also be measured by how well the contract is performing. It is unlikely that a supplier with inadequate staff relations will be able to perform the contract consistently to a satisfactory level. Furthermore, contractors are formally evaluated in contract review meetings — such as the recent support services contract review — which are held twice a year.

If a contract manager becomes aware of a contractor failing to comply with either statutory or contractual obligations, the matter will be treated seriously. If the situation is not remedied, the contractor might be found to be in breach of contract.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for answering on behalf of the Commission, and I am delighted to hear the response. I previously raised an issue with the Commission regarding the cleaning staff in Parliament Buildings, and there was an understanding that the cleaning staff are not entitled to trade union representation. I am also delighted that the conditions and contracts are reviewed.

Parliament Buildings: Visitor Numbers

4. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Assembly Commission to detail the estimated number of visitors to Parliament Buildings since the restoration of devolution on 8 May 2007. (AQO 1303/08)

Mr Neeson: Following the restoration of devolution on 8 May 2007 until 31 December 2007, 34,345 people visited Parliament Buildings and 7,528 people came along as part of the Assembly's education programme. Therefore 41,873 people visited Parliament Buildings in 2007.

Mr Hamilton: Those figures underline that Stormont is a tourism asset, and a record number of people have visited in spite of Stormont's poor visitor facilities. The Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat Review Report — in which the Commission was involved — outlined the need for a newbuild near Parliament Buildings to deal with office, staff, press and education accommodation issues. I ask the Commission to consider the inclusion of a dedicated visitor centre when it deals with the recommendations of that aspect of the report, so that we can tap into the tourism potential and maximise it.

Mr Neeson: The existing facilities in Parliament Buildings are restricted by space constraints, and the Commission is considering what additional accommodation provision is required for the Assembly. There is a proposal to increase visitor facilities in line with the Commission's new vision to engage the public and

provide outreach services. The Commission expects to have extensive visitor, education, Committee, exhibition and public space available in any extended Assembly facility.

Work to begin quantifying the requirements is under way, and any decision to take forward such a project will be informed by an engagement and outreach strategy, which is currently being developed. The extended accommodation — the new building — has been considered as part of the recently completed review, and the Commission is clear that it wants any additional accommodation to be located in close proximity to Parliament Buildings.

Plans for any newbuild are at the preliminary stage, and construction is not expected to commence until 2010-11 at the earliest. From a purely constituency point of view it will be of interest to Mr Hamilton that the number of visitors from Strangford during that period was 755, and a further 141 pupils participated in the education programme.

Parliament Buildings: Outreach Strategy

5. **Mr McElduff** asked the Assembly Commission to detail what initiatives it will undertake to attract a greater number of visitors to Parliament Buildings; and what plans it has to develop its outreach strategy.

(AQO 1369/08)

Mr Neeson: Initiatives to attract more visitors to Parliament Buildings will form an integral part of the engagement and outreach strategy that is being developed. As part of that process the Commission has already agreed that the education service will recruit a third education officer, on a temporary basis, to assist with the development of an outreach education programme.

The education service is hosting an information afternoon on 29 January 2008 for MLAs and party staff to encourage them to participate in the development of outreach services and in the education programme. Leaflets and sample education packs will be available for Members to take away and distribute to interested constituents and groups to encourage them to visit Parliament Buildings. Members will have received copies of those leaflets in the post this morning.

Furthermore, an engagement and outreach strategy working group, led by the Director of Research and Information, has been formed. The group comprises representatives from core business areas in the Assembly. Members, and other interested parties, will have the opportunity to engage with the group.

In addition, the Commission has undertaken work to consider what additional accommodation is required for the Assembly, which includes exploring options for the provision of visitor and outreach facilities. The

Commission expects to have an extensive visitor, education, Committee, exhibition and public space available in any extended facility, and that should attract more visitors.

Mr McElduff: I thank Sean through you, a LeasCheann Comhairle, for his extensive answer.

Visitors to this building have a very positive experience. However, there is greater identification with the building among people in counties such as Antrim and Down than there is among those in County Tyrone, and the statistics bear that out. That is why I want to see an outreach strategy in Tyrone, Fermanagh and in those counties in which people, in the past, would have been less inclined to visit Stormont.

I would like to hear more detail about a multi-element strategy aimed at outreach. I am pleased that the education service is going to have a third officer. However, who is responsible for writing to senior citizens consortia in the way that the education service writes to schools to inform them about the availability of the services here? It would not be the education service. Is anyone filling that gap at the moment, or is it being left to individual MLAs?

Mr Neeson: Mr McElduff has raised a number of points. Developing outreach services is a major priority of the Commission because it is important that the public take ownership of the Assembly and identify with it.

I anticipated that the issue about the west of Northern Ireland would be raised. The education service has sent a mailshot to all schools inviting them to visit Parliament Buildings, and education officers have attended meetings with the Western Education and Library Board to encourage schools in that area to visit Parliament Buildings. Schools furthest away from Belfast would benefit from an outreach service, though it is recognised that visiting Parliament Buildings and seeing the Assembly in action would be an ideal experience for everyone.

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

The Assembly Commission would also like to see all MLAs play a full role in promoting the work of the Assembly, which brings me to the final point — how do we attract more elderly groups? That issue must be looked at as part of our investigation into extending and improving outreach, and it will be taken on board.

4.15 pm

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Deputy Speaker.*]

ADJOURNMENT

Disabled Parking and Footpath Access for Wheelchair Users in Dundonald

Mr Deputy Speaker: All Members who wish to contribute to the debate will have approximately 10 minutes in which to speak.

Mr McNarry: I bring this issue to the House in a voice of exasperation and frustration as expressed on behalf of wheelchair users in Dundonald: frustration in that, despite their representations to the Department for Regional Development and the police over several years, sympathy is not a substitute for positive action; exasperation in that, in their predicament, they are angry at themselves and express disbelief at people who do not stop to consider others — people like myself who, until the difficulties were fully explained and demonstrated, would have parked partly on the footpath, against the law, to make a quick stop, which inevitably, I admit, took longer than anticipated.

Able-bodied people enjoy freedoms and take for granted going for a walk and doing spur-of-the-moment activities such as casually walking into a shop for a newspaper, an ice cream on a warm day, or even a postage stamp. Those are all normal activities to which most people seldom give a thought. In Dundonald, specifically along the Grahamsbridge Road, Church Road, Robbs Road and Comber Road, the footpath route for the wheelchair user can be a nightmare of a dangerous obstacle course.

Parking on the footpath denies access for the wheelchair user. Their freedom to pass safely and use the footpath properly is taken away from them. There is no room for the wheelchair to squeeze past vehicles, which vary from a car, to a van to a lorry, parked partly on the road and partly on the footpath.

The same applies to a mother with a pram. Try negotiating the footpath with a pram and then try to configure what manoeuvrability a wheelchair user would have in contrast. Do you manoeuvre the wheelchair over a high kerb to get onto the road in order to go round the offending vehicle? How dangerous an exercise will that be? Do you go back along the footpath to the point first accessed and travel along the road in the wheelchair, knowing that usually there will be five or six cars, vans or lorries parked in groups at

intervals? It is Sod's Law that at least one vehicle will be parked on a bend.

Those dilemmas, which put the lives of wheelchair users at risk, as well as causing difficulties for road traffic, are typical events not only in the towns and villages of my Strangford constituency, but others across Northern Ireland. In Dundonald, nothing has been done to make life easier for the wheelchair user, and that cannot continue because it is not acceptable.

I want the Department and the police to co-operate and mount a spring and summer exercise to help the wheelchair user, which should include a campaign of information and awareness, posters in shops, visits to the building development sites and a leaflet drop to local homes. The spring and summer are great days for wheelchair users to get out and about. Let us try to make their days more enjoyable. With a bit of will and effort by the Department, the police and the local community, we can all improve accessibility for the wheelchair user in Dundonald.

Parking in the village is a lottery for the disabled, and the inadequate number of disabled-parking spaces in Dundonald makes it even more a matter of pot luck. A disabled driver cannot benefit from double parking, parking on a footpath or, indeed, from dropping off a passenger and returning to collect him later. On several occasions, I went to the village to check for myself how difficult parking could be for the disabled. I immediately noticed how difficult it is for anybody to park legally in the village.

A frustrated, wheelchair-using, disabled driver illustrated the difficulties of parking by describing to me how he sets about organising — can you believe it — the collection of a prescription. Incidentally, wheelchair users and disabled drivers are not moaners but proud, independent-minded people who wish to go about their business without a fuss and to do normal things as best as they can. For this person, collecting his prescription involves driving around in search of a space, giving up, and then phoning the pharmacist to arrange a time for a staff member to leave the shop in order to hand over the prescription. In order to collect the medication when it is ready, the same exercise must be repeated. Come on, colleagues — it is 2008, and, in Dundonald, people must resort to such arrangements in order to get their medication. That is not on.

All that disabled drivers and wheelchair users are asking for is to be able to maintain their dignity, to be given a fair chance of acting as normally as possible, and not to be a burden on others. Incidentally, I say well done to the local pharmacy staff for helping, and understanding the frustration and predicament of, their customers. However, it would be far better if the wheelchair user were able to park, get into his or her wheelchair, and make his or her own, unobstructed

way to the chemist's shop, and to derive immense satisfaction from being able to do so. My plea is that we should address that situation in Dundonald. Where there is a will, there must be a way. I ask that we find that way and, in doing so, help those good people. I have identified an undisputed need; the task is not massive, but the outcome will be immense. Even two more spaces would make a difference, although, in reality, at least six more are required.

I appreciate the Minister for Regional Development's presence. I understand that it has been a busy day for him and other Ministers. Here is an issue to get to grips with; to disentangle from bureaucracy, red tape and the normal paperchases; on which immediate results can be recognised, acknowledged and supported. If the Minister does that, many people will be extremely grateful.

For the sake of wheelchair users and disabled drivers in Dundonald, I hope that the Minister appreciates the urgency of this initiative for next spring and summer, and that that will prompt him to move positively and deliver good news for people who deserve to have life made easier for them. Having brought this matter to the House's attention, all that I ask is for the Minister to please get on with it and let the public know the outcome.

Mr Shannon: I support my colleague David McNarry. Recently, the lack of provision for disabled people on the roads was brought to my attention and, for that reason, I have been asking questions about disabled-vehicle legislation and the lack of disability discrimination legislation in the Province. That was brought to my attention not only by concerned disabled constituents but by a group of carers who have found that their lives have been made much more difficult by the fact that, in the Province, we have sadly fallen behind in the provision of facilities for disabled members of the community.

There are many examples of that lack of facilities. In fact, a website is dedicated to helping the parents of disabled children find out which facilities are equipped to ensure that their day out is fun, rather than a struggle due to a dearth of essential amenities. I was pleased to discover that many places in Strangford are listed on the website as areas of interest. However, it was not so good to see how those attractions were regarded by many members of the community. I wish to cite a couple of examples. I thank the Minister for attending the debate.

The following is an extract from the Parents' Stories website concerning Xtreme Bowling:

"Located in Dundonald Icebowl, this is bowling with a twist. Its in the dark with glow in the dark lanes. White clothes and teeth also glow. Special ramps can be used for those who have difficulty holding or throwing the ball."

However, the review continues:

"Dundonald Ice Bowl is not very wheelchair friendly, the ground outside is uneven and there isn't a proper dropped kerb for wheelchairs at the entrance. Also the doors in the entrance are the old heavy kind and hard to open. There is a cafe inside but it has steps up to it. The ramp up to the cafe is at the left hand side. There is a disabled toilet (locked) in the skating rink."

That is by no means a glowing recommendation, despite the fact that I have heard many glowing reports of bowling there — excuse the pun. The fact is that the facilities are not friendly for all who wish to use them. I do not intend any slight on the Ice Bowl, which is an excellent facility. However, perhaps a wee bit more care is needed in order to be disability friendly.

I recently received information from the Baywatch Campaign, which concerns disabled-parking bays and the blue-badge scheme. It was found that 21% of people park their cars in a space, regardless of whether there is a disabled-user restriction. That figure has been reduced by 3%, but it shows, nonetheless, that some people — drivers in particular — have complete disregard for disabled people.

Some 16% of bays were difficult for disabled users to access, and the campaign expressed disappointment in the poor parking provision of public bodies. Some people will even go as far as using a blue badge that belongs to someone else. It is a disgrace, for example, that a woman with a disabled child had to park far away from her destination because someone who was in a rush took the space that was designated for someone with mobility needs. That is totally unacceptable.

It seems that urgent work must be done to halt the slights on members of our community who have disabilities. It is very clear that there is a problem in my constituency and in the Province as a whole, never mind simply Dundonald. However, this debate is concerned with Dundonald. Nevertheless, it is important that all Members of the Assembly take on board the fact that there is a very real need for reform and change. It is my hope that this Adjournment debate will kick-start that critically needed change.

The Disabled Drivers' Association (Northern Ireland Group) is a self-help organisation that is run by people with disabilities for people with disabilities. It has slightly fewer than 1,000 members in Northern Ireland. The Disabled Drivers' Association is concerned with all aspects of mobility that affect drivers and passengers with disabilities. It has made several suggestions in the consultation on the draft accessible transport strategy, and I support its recommendations:

"The Disabled Drivers' Association sees the involvement and consultation with people with disabilities an essential strategic objective of the Accessible Transport Strategy.

The Disabled Drivers' Association is concerned that the commitment of the Government to build-in accessibility for people with disabilities as a condition of spending public money is spoilt by the statement 'where possible, proportionate and cost-effective'.

We hope this clause will be removed as it makes the commitment very weak and half-hearted.”

The Disabled Driver’s Association feels that there is no specific policy in the draft accessible transport strategy to address the pedestrian environment in Northern Ireland, which directly involves its membership. It is essential that a policy be established to improve access to the pedestrian environment for disabled people.

With the encouragement of park-and-ride schemes, the Disabled Drivers’ Association feels that accessibility for disabled people to use such facilities should be a factor in the future design of any new scheme.

4.30 pm

The Disabled Drivers’ Association also recommends:

“action from the ATS to support this campaign, which will highlight the importance of disabled parking bays to the general public and awaken an awareness of the implications of abuse.”

The association states that the Department has been very successful with its belt up campaign, and hopes that that will be expanded to the abuse of disabled-parking bays. Some of the association’s recommendations could well be the start of a new time of equal access for disabled people in the Province, which cannot come soon enough.

I urge the Minister to respond positively to the issues that have been raised. Start getting it right in Dundonald, and we can start getting it right elsewhere.

Mr McCarthy: I find it amazing, to say the least, that in this day and age disabled people in Dundonald are being discriminated against and cannot park their cars or even use a wheelchair freely. I listened to a broadcast this morning and I could not believe that people in Dundonald have allowed that to be the case for so long.

In defence of the Department for Regional Development, any time that I, as a public representative, have approached the local office for help regarding disabled-parking bays, the officials were always helpful. It took time to go through the process, but the issues were addressed. I am surprised to hear that in the case of Dundonald this issue has been going on for so long. Perhaps the people of Dundonald do not have as good local council representation as we have in our neck of the woods.

I have a family member who uses a wheelchair, and there is no doubt that it is frustrating when one goes onto the street and finds the way blocked by a car. In fact, people can get really angry when a car is parked partially on a footpath and they have got to find their way off that footpath and onto the main road where there is traffic, which puts every one in danger.

The general public — and drivers in particular — should take responsibility for their actions. I know that

drivers can be inconsiderate: Mr McNarry mentioned the fact the he occasionally parks on the footpath when he is going into the post office. We are all human, but that could be the time when someone in a wheelchair comes along and requires access.

I am sure that the Minister will ask officials in the local office why this has been allowed to drift for so long. I am glad that the Minister is present, and I hope that he can get a quick resolution to this problem for the people who are affected by it in our constituency, and, in particular, Dundonald.

Mr Hamilton: I congratulate Mr McNarry on securing the debate on what is an important topic. The acuteness of the problem in Dundonald is accentuated by the fact that it is such a sizeable settlement and one that is very much growing. Mr McNarry referred to the “village” a couple of times during his opening remarks. That is how local people, us included, refer to Dundonald. However, it is actually a major town, and we sometimes forget that because of its closeness to Belfast. It is the second largest settlement in the Strangford constituency and, therefore, is deserving of the attention that he calls for today. I hope that the Minister can respond favourably.

I want to take the Minister further into the constituency, along the A22 Comber Road, but he may not be able to get down that road today; my understanding is that it was flooded in three places this morning. Perhaps, as he travels down it, that is another problem that he can look into. Mr McNarry will know of the situation in Castle Street and Mill Street in Comber where there have been long-standing problems with access for disabled people and also with the standard of the pavements and kerbs.

The people of Cookstown pride themselves in having the widest main street in Northern Ireland; the people of Comber have to face the scourge of having the narrowest main street. That brings attendant problems: to say that Castle Street and Mill Street are “Victorian looking” does a great disservice to the many outstanding Victorian engineers who helped to build our country. The state of the footpaths and kerbs is appalling, and that problem is accentuated in the minds of local people by the constant appearance of yellow spray paint along the streets, which shows just what a problem there is. That presents hazards for elderly, infirm and disabled people.

Northern Ireland Water is due to undertake extensive work in that area, and the much-anticipated and much-welcomed installation of Phoenix Natural Gas is also due to begin soon. I am not asking the Minister to improve the street only to have it dug up again at a later date. As elected representatives, we have all encountered that frustration.

I support the sentiments of the debate about Dundonald; I ask the Minister to ensure that the work of Northern

Ireland Water and Roads Service on Castle Street and Mill Street in Comber is dovetailed and co-ordinated.

I thank the Member for securing the debate and for allowing me the opportunity not only to support him but to raise the issue of Castle Street and Mill Street in Comber.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It seems that the boundaries of Dundonald have been pushed out a bit.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for securing this Adjournment debate.

I have noted the comments made by the various Members who contributed to the debate and the concerns that they have expressed. I welcome the opportunity to discuss parking and access for people with disabilities in Dundonald and Castlereagh. I have asked my officials to take a note of the Hansard report, so that if I fail to pick up on any of the points that Members have raised, I can write to them later. Specifically, I will ask my officials to write to Mr Hamilton about the points he raised about streets in Comber. I do not have that information to hand to answer him now.

By way of background to this issue, and in case Members are not familiar with the range of concessions that are available through the disabled persons' badge scheme, I will briefly summarise what is available to blue-badge holders, who travel either as drivers or passengers.

Badge holders may usually park on single or double yellow lines for up to three hours, except where there is a ban on loading or unloading, or within 15 m of a junction. They may also park without a time limit, irrespective of the parking times imposed on other users, and free of charge without time limit in on-street pay-and-display bays. Additional parking facilities can take one of two forms: either the provision of disabled-parking bays close to town centres and local facilities; or the provision of disabled parking near an individual's home or place of work. Currently, there are no general disabled-parking bays in Dundonald village.

In Mr McNarry's contribution today, and in his interview this morning, he discussed the general disabled-parking provision in Dundonald village. Officials from my Department's Roads Service have no record of a specific request for such provision, but I have asked them to review current parking arrangements to see if a facility for disabled drivers can be provided. They are happy to do that. Roads Service is happy to discuss the specifics with the Member or any of his constituents. If Members want other sites to be considered, they should let me know, and I will arrange for those to be examined.

I am aware of the importance of providing parking for disabled people, to provide access to shopping,

healthcare and other essential services. My Department funds the work of the Inclusive Mobility Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC), which is the lead partner in the Baywatch Campaign, which seeks to end the abuse of parking bays that are provided for the use of disabled people. It challenges public attitudes and encourages service providers to do more. We have had some of that commentary in relation to today's debate.

In December 2007, I was pleased to reaffirm my support for the Baywatch Campaign, when I was invited to launch 'Providing Accessible Parking: A Good Practice Guide'. Recently, the Baywatch Campaign conducted a survey into the misuse of disabled-parking bays: misuse had fallen from 25% last year to 21% now. Mr Shannon referred to those figures. Of course, 21% is unacceptable: nonetheless, the trend is in the right direction. I hope that that will continue. Today's debate will add to the public's awareness of the issues.

Enforcement of accessible parking regulations is crucial for on-street and Roads Service car parks. My Department has the power to deliver a clear and consistent message that abuse or misuse of the blue-badge scheme will not be tolerated. I encourage all public- and private-sector parking suppliers to adopt a similar approach.

With regard to applications for a disabled-parking bay outside someone's home or place of work, the Department uses several criteria to assess that person's specific need because provision of underused bays can have considerable effect on residents. Although bays are normally provided for drivers who have a disability, they may, in cases of special hardship, be provided when a passenger is disabled. Two disabled-parking bays are provided in residential locations in the Dundonald area. I understand that since December 2003, my officials have received 14 requests for disabled-parking bays in the Dundonald area. For various reasons, none of them has met the requirements for the provision of a disabled bay. My officials will continue to assess any further requests for bays outside individuals' homes or workplaces in the normal manner.

The Department takes the needs of disabled people seriously and aims to provide drop kerbs in all new works and in footway reconstruction works in all town centres, particularly where a shop mobility scheme operates, as well as in urban areas in order to link town centres with residential areas, and in the vicinity of on-street disabled-parking bays. In the Dundonald area, several recent works have helped disabled people's mobility, including improvements to the East Link Road, the Old Dundonald Road, the Upper Newtownards Road, the East Link Road junction at the Ulster Hospital, the pelican crossing at the Comber Road near Cumberland Road and the provision of a new pelican crossing on the Comber Road at Grand Prix Park.

Drop kerbs and tactile paving are being provided in association with the resurfacing scheme that is on-site on the Comber Road. Similar works are also planned for several other sites around Dundonald. With regard to the difficulties that are presented to wheelchair users in Dundonald from vehicles that park either totally or partially on the footways, I understand that both the Upper Newtownards Road and the Comber Road, which run through the two main commercial areas, are subject to urban clearway restrictions. As such, vehicles are prohibited from parking on the footways at all times. I have asked my officials to ensure that appropriate enforcement is carried out at those locations. In other areas with no marked restrictions, enforcement is a matter for the PSNI.

In conclusion, I hope that I have dealt with all Members' concerns. As I said at the start of my speech, I have asked officials to take a note of the Hansard report of the debate. If I have missed any points that Members raised, I will write to them with clarification.

Adjourned at 4.42 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 22 January 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: I advise Members that I have received correspondence from the nominating officer of Sinn Féin, Mr Pat Doherty, dismissing Mr Gerry McHugh as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges and nominating Mr Willie Clarke to that post.

I have also received correspondence from Mr Willie Clarke, in which he states that he is prepared to take up that post. I am satisfied that the correspondence meets the requirements of Standing Orders and I, therefore, confirm that Mr Willie Clarke is now Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council — Transport Sectoral Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Regional Development that he wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) transport sectoral meeting.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following report on the fourth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in the transport sectoral format, which was held in the Knightsbrook Hotel, Trim, on 12 December 2007.

The Executive were represented by the Minister of the Environment, Arlene Foster MLA, and me. The Irish Government were represented by the Minister for Transport, Noel Dempsey TD. Arlene Foster has approved this report and I will make it on her behalf. The Council noted and welcomed the progress made since the previous meeting in September 2007, and the opportunity to meet to further discuss opportunities for cross-border co-operation in strategic transport planning and road safety.

At the NSMC transport sectoral meeting on 14 September 2007, it was agreed that a three-tier management structure for the A5 dualling project would be in place by October 2007. I am pleased to advise Members that the cross-border steering group — the first tier — met on 22 October 2007 and agreed that representatives from my Department's Roads Service, with officials from the National Roads Authority, will form the second tier — the A5 technical group. This group will deal with cross-border interfaces and will oversee the management of the project. The third tier of management — the project team in Roads Service — has also been appointed.

Furthermore, I advise that consultants were appointed on 31 October 2007, and work on stage 1 of the preliminary route corridor assessment is under way. It is anticipated that that will be completed by late 2008, and stage 2, the preferred route assessment, by mid-2009.

I confirm that consultants were appointed to the A8 Belfast to Larne dualling project, with work under way in an anticipated timescale similar to that for the A5 project.

The Council noted and welcomed the continuing progress on the Irish Government's proposals to replace two cross-border bridges at Annaghroe and Knocknaginny on the Tyrone/Monaghan border. Monaghan County

Council is appointing consultants to develop the design and co-ordinate the consultation process.

It is important to ensure extensive public consultation, and I confirm that my Department's Roads Service will play its part in improving the approach roads in the North, and will work in close co-operation with officials from Monaghan County Council to ensure that works are co-ordinated.

The Council noted the continuing progress on the Irish Government's proposal to construct a bridge at Narrow Water to link County Louth and County Down. I welcome the continuing progress on that proposal, and that the Department of Transport has granted €390,000 to Louth County Council to undertake a feasibility study. The outcome of the consultants' work must be evaluated carefully before decisions are taken on the project. It has, therefore, been agreed that officials from the North and the South will share information from the study, as well as from the Roads Service's study on the Newry southern relief road.

The Council received a joint presentation from NIR (Northern Ireland Railways) and Iarnród Éireann, setting out an initial consideration of options for improving the frequency, and journey time, of the Belfast to Dublin Enterprise service. In addition to investments already planned for rail infrastructure, the preliminary evaluation set out proposals for the replacement of current rolling stock with an expanded fleet. Ministers asked the two companies to expand on the work undertaken to date, and to prepare a business case for consideration at the next Council meeting in transport sectoral format. The business case will incorporate a clear statement of the costs and benefits of the various options for improving and upgrading the Belfast to Dublin service.

The Council welcomed the ongoing co-operation between the Departments, North and South, and the two rail companies, especially on rail safety and inter-operability. I have asked my officials to continue to work closely with counterparts in Dublin to ensure compliance with relevant EU directives on those issues.

Moreover, the Council welcomed the major investments made in recent years by both companies in the improvement of railway infrastructure and safety.

The Council noted that a report on cross-border community-based rural transport has been considered by both Departments. Although Ministers recognised the potential benefits of those types of service to communities in cross-border areas, they realised that regulatory resource and organisational constraints must be addressed. The Council has agreed that a pilot cross-border exercise should now be considered, and has asked officials to work together to consider such a pilot and to report progress at a future NSMC transport sectoral meeting.

The Council noted that a mid-term review of the Northern Ireland road safety strategy for 2002-12 was under way, and that an announcement by the Minister of the Environment on the way forward was expected early in 2008. Moreover, it received a presentation from the Road Safety Authority on the new road safety strategy for Ireland for 2007-12, which aims to reduce the number of road deaths to no greater than 60 fatalities per million of the population by the end of 2012.

The Council also welcomed the co-operation between the authorities on a range of issues, including advertising and publicity, the mutual recognition of driving disqualifications and penalty points, and road safety in border areas.

The Council agreed that the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in the transport sectoral format should take place in May 2008. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Ross: I thank the Minister for his statement. Coming from east Antrim, the A8 road is an important issue for me. Will the Minister confirm when it is anticipated that the dualling of the A8 will be complete?

Mr Murphy: The A5 and A8 roads projects, which are jointly funded by the Executive and the Irish Government, are substantial. It is intended that those projects will be delivered more quickly than any project has ever been delivered on these islands. The appointment of the consultants to identify the route options has begun. Those options will be zeroed down by mid-2009 to a preferred route option for each scheme. The issues that might then arise will set the tone.

For example, if there is limited opposition or if the land-acquisition issues are relatively simple, the process can be finalised quite quickly. However, if there is significant local opposition to the preferred route — and it is much too soon to say at this stage what that route will be — a public inquiry could be started, thereby stretching out the process.

Although I cannot give a definitive date for the completion of the work, I assure the Member that the intention is to deliver both schemes as quickly as possible. Obviously, we intend to consult throughout the process, thus minimising both any opposition to, and any of the normal difficulties that arise with, the statutory processes that are involved in road building. We will attempt to ensure that the projects are delivered much more quickly than is normal for road-building projects such as these.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá ceist agam don Aire.

I thank the Minister for his statement, and I have a question for him.

Has the Minister engaged in consultation on speed management and signage, given the fact that a high

percentage of our road fatalities occur not only on rural roads but in border areas? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for his question.

The primary responsibility for road safety rests with the Minister of the Environment. I know that she is conducting a review on road safety here in the North and intends to make an announcement about that in the coming weeks. There is an excellent degree of co-operation on road-safety matters between the roads authorities in the North and the South.

I am not sure whether the Minister of the Environment's review has addressed standardising speed-limit signs; currently, such signs are displayed here in miles per hour, and across the border, they are displayed in kilometres per hour. However, I do not doubt that, given that such co-operation exists with the South, when the Minister of the Environment examines those issues and reviews the road safety strategy here, she will discuss them with her counterparts. However, whether it will be possible to progress them will become more apparent in the fullness of time.

Mr McCallister: I know that the Minister does not think that Narrow Water bridge and the southern relief road are competing projects. However, I dispute that, given the somewhat limited resources that are involved. Will the Minister guarantee that if the Narrow Water bridge project goes ahead, no Northern Ireland money will be spent on either the feasibility study or construction?

Mr Murphy: The short answer is no. The feasibility study is being conducted by Louth County Council, and the Irish Government have grant-aided it €390,000 for that purpose. Therefore, we are not required to contribute to that study. The Minister for Transport in the South and I have undertaken to examine the results both of the feasibility study on the Narrow Water bridge project and the study that is being conducted on the southern relief road. We have also undertaken to appoint officials who will co-operate with each other to conduct both studies. It is, therefore, much too early to give any guarantees about what might arise once those studies have been completed. We are not required to contribute to the feasibility study, but given that we have not yet received the results of those studies, I cannot guarantee anything.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the Minister's statement, which covers a range of issues, including road, rail and road safety. I welcome in particular the focus on the Belfast to Dublin rail line, which is long overdue for an upgrade. I hope that the initial consideration and the preliminary evaluation that are mentioned in the statement will proceed quickly.

When can we expect the Belfast to Derry rail line to be the subject of discussion in the North/South bodies, given that development on the Republic side of the

border is moving very fast? Indeed, this week, it was announced that train services to Sligo are doubling in frequency. It is clear that the missing link is the area between Derry and Letterkenny.

Mr Murphy: I have no difficulty with discussing the Derry to Belfast rail line at the North/South sectoral meetings. The Southern Government have not raised with us the issue of rail provision in Donegal, and they have never discussed it with us under the North/South arrangements. I am happy to ask my officials to table rail services in the north-west generally as a topic for discussion. Like the Member, I am aware that there are substantial plans in the South for rail provision and improvement that go as far as Sligo. However, as he says, there is a missing link between Sligo and the north-west. I am happy to ask my officials to have that matter included on the agenda for a future transport sectoral meeting.

10.45 am

Mr Lunn: I note the Minister's comments about improved frequency and journey times on the Dublin to Belfast rail link. However, one of the big concerns recently has been reliability. Were there any discussions about the reliability of the service? Also, has any consideration been given to extra stopping points on the service? I am thinking particularly of Northern Ireland's second city, Lisburn.

Mr Murphy: Extra stopping points and a decreased journey time between Dublin and Belfast would work against each other. It would be very hard to decrease the time of the journey, or increase the speed, if we were to add extra stopping points along the route. The focus is on bringing the journey time down to 100 minutes from the current 125 minutes, which is just over two hours, and on increasing the frequency.

In relation to reliability, there does seem to have been an increasing number of stories about breakdowns on the service. That is worrying. I heard someone from Translink this morning pointing out, quite rightly, that all the days on which the service runs on time do not make the news. When it does not — when there is a breakdown or other problem — that makes the news. Nonetheless, when we are trying to attract more people onto public transport and to improve rail services — not just between Dublin and Belfast, but any rail services that we have responsibility for — there is an onus on us and on Translink to ensure that those services are as reliable as possible. That is something that I will continue to raise with Translink so that disturbances and breakdowns are kept to a minimum.

Mr I McCrea: Can the Minister provide an update on the expected introduction of free public transport for the over-60s? Are there any implications for co-operation with the Irish Republic?

Mr Murphy: We have made a bid for moneys to be included in the Budget. Without pre-empting the Minister of Finance and Personnel's Budget statement, I am quite optimistic that that bid has been successful. There has recently been some public comment on the timescale: it is as I outlined it to the Regional Development Committee and as the Committee accepted. There are 87,000 people in the age bracket between 60 and 64 who may be eligible to avail themselves of free public transport, and it takes some time to go through all the necessary assessments and the consultation process to get the scheme ready. We have always said that it will happen in the latter half of this year. That has always been the timescale; there has been no delay. That is what was originally stated, and we intend to hold to it.

Obviously, all-island transport for over-65s is a different arrangement, and it has a different schedule. The South does not have free public transport for anyone under 65. It is something that we intend to talk to the Southern Minister about. It crosses a number of Departments in the South; it is not just a matter for the Department of Transport. As it stands, we expect to have the scheme available for people in this jurisdiction between the ages of 60 and 64 by the end of the year. That does not apply to transport throughout the island, and that is something that we need to discuss with our counterparts in Dublin.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Can the Minister give a timescale for the commencement of the Narrow Water bridge project? Has there been any discussion about the development of new railway infrastructure on an all-Ireland basis?

Mr Murphy: I am afraid that I cannot give a timescale for the Narrow Water bridge project. The feasibility study is in the hands of Louth County Council. A similar study, on the relief of traffic around Newry, is being conducted by Roads Service on the Northern side, so we have asked the people conducting both studies to co-operate.

Therefore, only when we learn the outcome of both studies can we assess how the Narrow Water bridge project will proceed. Only then will we be able to outline a time frame for the project, indicate its cost or deal with any implications that the studies throw up.

To date, our discussions on railway matters have only concerned the Belfast to Dublin rail line. They have not been about the creation of any other railway lines. Given our limited resources, our main aim is to improve the current rail network. We want to improve the frequency of trains and duration of journeys, and we want to raise those to a standard that will attract more people to public transport, and to trains in particular. That has been our focus, but that is not to say that, should a desire be expressed to talk about it, I would not be happy to discuss the provision of new railway lines at North/South Ministerial Council

sectoral meetings. However, provision of new railway lines has not been discussed at those meetings to date.

Mr Craig: Given that a large proportion of our tracks is speed-limited for safety reasons, will the Minister outline what action has been taken in Northern Ireland to meet EU directives on railway safety?

Mr Murphy: Officials in my Department have liaised closely with colleagues in the Department of Transport and the Irish Railway Safety Commission on matters of mutual concern. Those discussions have focused on ensuring compatible implementation of legislation, which includes our meeting EU requirements on railway safety.

NIR and Iarnród Éireann share the operation of the Enterprise service between Belfast and Dublin. Staff from both companies work closely to ensure its smooth operation of service. Officials from both Departments sponsor regular four-way meetings that involve both Governments and both train operators. Those meetings cover current legislative and operational matters. The most recent meeting took place in December 2007, and we are very much focused on ensuring that our railway safety measures are compatible with the necessary EU directives and legislation.

Mr Elliott: Is the Minister aware of the significant opposition that there is to proposals to restore the two bridges on the south Tyrone and Monaghan border? I am pleased to learn that there is to be a consultation period, but when will that consultation take place?

Mr Murphy: There may be opposition, but there is also a substantial degree of support on either side of the border for those bridges to be reopened.

Monaghan County Council is in the process of appointing consultants to co-ordinate the consultation process, and I anticipate that those consultants will liaise with my officials in Roads Service to develop proposals that will maximise that process's benefits. As the Member said, there may be some who are not so supportive of the project, so there is an onus on us to ensure that there is consultation. As I have said, responsibility for the consultation lies primarily with Monaghan County Council, but it is liaising with Roads Service. No time frame for the consultation period has been outlined as yet, but I am sure that the Member will be kept informed.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Minister's statement. Is there any indication of when the planning stages of the major A5 project might end and work to improve the road's infrastructure might begin?

I also wish to make a point about the reliability of the Dublin to Belfast rail link. On 4 January, it took a constituent of mine five hours to travel from Dublin to Portadown. The train broke down outside Dundalk for one and a half hours. Although there may be fewer problems with reliability than there are with delivery, nonetheless, for those passengers, that situation was

totally unacceptable. More worryingly, however, one of the train's passengers who spoke to a guard was told that the train had a water leak when it left Belfast, so it was no wonder that it broke down on its return journey. What mechanisms are in place for dealing with such problems, and what discussions have been held? Finally, what investment, especially in rolling stock, is planned for this year and envisaged for next year?

Mr Murphy: I shall give a similar answer to the one that I gave to Mr Ross's question about the A8 to Larne. The intention is for work to be completed as quickly as possible. The A5 scheme is one of the biggest road-building schemes ever to be undertaken in one fell swoop, certainly on this island and possibly on both islands.

The consultants have been appointed and the management structures have been put in place to manage the project. The intention is to assess some of the options and determine the preferred route option by the end of the year. However, that will depend on any local issues that may be raised. This will be a 70- or 80-kilometre stretch of dual carriageway, which will pass by several towns, therefore there may be issues involving land acquisition or local opposition, which, if they result in public inquiries, will lengthen the process.

At this stage, it is very difficult to say exactly when the work will commence. Members can be assured that it is our intention to complete the work as quickly as possible. I understand that the road has been broadly welcomed by people in the west. However, whether that welcome will translate into local opposition, as the road passes people's farms and towns, will be another matter.

As regards the breakdowns, I accept that inconvenience for passengers is very frustrating. Such things are not helpful at a time when we are investing in public transport — certainly in the rail network — and are trying to encourage more people to leave their cars at home and use public services. As I said, Translink's spokesperson said this morning that public attention is quite often drawn to breakdowns and not necessarily to the daily successes of providing a punctual and uninterrupted service, and that the bad-news stories are more likely to be heard.

Nonetheless, the onus is on Translink and Iarnród Éireann to ensure that the service is as reliable as possible. Both companies presented a paper at the last sectoral meeting on their plans for improving rolling stock, service frequency and journey times on the Belfast to Dublin route. They were asked to prepare a business case, so I cannot say what rolling stock will be improved until that is produced.

However, all that work will be undermined if the service is not reliable. It is worrying each time we hear about breakdowns, and I will be talking to Translink about ensuring that the service is as reliable as possible.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he assure

the House that the proposed increase in frequency of services on the Belfast to Dublin rail link will service Newry? Are there any plans to introduce a commuter service that will bring passengers from Newry to Dublin before 9.30 am? Currently, such a service does not exist.

Mr Murphy: The intention is that the frequency of journeys between Belfast and Dublin will be increased and that journey times will be reduced. Translink and Iarnród Éireann made a presentation at the meeting, indicating their ideas on how that could be achieved. Obviously, that will create demands that are not provided for in budgets; therefore, both organisations were asked to provide a business case that they would bring back to me and to Noel Dempsey, the Minister for Transport in the South. That work will address a range of issues.

As regards Newry, I am sure that the Member will be pleased to know that work will be commencing shortly on the new railway station there. Like me, he has used it often, and he will know that it will be much welcomed in the area and that it will be a welcome acquisition to the Belfast to Dublin railway line in particular. We look forward to hearing a much more detailed presentation from both railway companies at the next transport sectoral meeting.

Mr Moutray: Will the Minister state whether the expanded fleet and replacement of rolling stock on the Belfast to Dublin rail line will be part of an extended service to passengers on that route?

Mr Murphy: Both companies made a presentation at the sectoral meeting, and they argued very much that to enhance the service, increase service frequency and cut journey times, they would need to make improvements to the line, some of which, around the Lurgan area, have been scheduled and budgeted for. However, improvements such as enhancing rolling stock or buying new rolling stock have not been budgeted for, and we asked both companies to prepare a business case. When that case is produced, my Department and the Department of Transport in the South will have to consider it and decide whether we can make a case to our respective Executives to see whether we can secure support.

The railway companies have come up with that idea. They will have to make a supporting business case so that the plans stack up. The issue may come back to the Assembly, and in the future, I may seek the support of Members and the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

11.00 am

Mr Beggs: I welcome the appointment of consultants to progress the dualling of the A8 from Larne to Belfast. When does the Minister expect planning approval to be given to the project? What funding will be available?

The Minister states that discussions have taken place about the replacement of rolling stock on the Belfast to Dublin railway line. Was the Larne to Belfast line, which

forms part of the trans-European network, discussed? Was the replacement of those trains, which pre-date the Enterprise by several decades, discussed? Will the Minister ensure that the experiences of European travellers and local commuters on the Larne line will be improved before there is any further expenditure on the Enterprise?

Mr Murphy: The timescale for the A8 will match that of the A5. Consultants were appointed to consider several route options, a process that they intend to complete this year. By the middle of the 2009-10 financial year, they will have preferred route options. That will be followed by the required statutory processes and, possibly, public inquiries. Beyond that, it is difficult to predict how quickly the project can be progressed. I can assure people who are asking questions about the speed of the project that it will be completed much quicker than similar projects in the past.

The Member, other Members from East Antrim and councillors on Larne Borough Council have previously raised the issue of rolling stock on the Larne line. At the transport sectoral meeting, the railway companies' presentation focused on the Belfast to Dublin line, and the Larne line was not discussed. In this day and age, people expect better rolling stock on the Larne line, and I assure all Members from East Antrim that I am committed to replacing that stock as soon as possible so that passengers experience more comfortable journeys.

Mr O'Loan: The Minister for Regional Development and the Minister of the Environment have a close interest in road safety. The recent deaths of three young people near Strabane make us focus on the issue. The statement mentions targets in the South to bring road deaths down to 60 per million of population a year, and the North is running slightly above that figure. Does the Minister agree that the North should set more demanding targets for 2012?

I am disappointed that there are not more details about actions on road safety. Can I ask both Ministers, when they attend the next transport sectoral meeting, to ensure that they arrive prepared and leave that meeting able to implement significant actions to deal with the three issues that could reduce the number of road deaths and accidents: safer roads, safer vehicles and improved driver behaviour.

Mr Murphy: Road safety targets are primarily matters for the Minister of the Environment, but I am a member of a road safety group that includes that Minister and the PSNI. Efforts to reduce the number of road deaths exercise not only members of that group but all people. The events of the past couple of days bring that issue home to us.

Last year, there was a reduction in the number of fatalities on the roads here. However, that is cold comfort to those who lost people on the roads. Every effort must be made to continue to reduce those numbers. The Minister of the Environment is due to make an announcement on a review of the road safety strategy.

The level of co-operation between the road safety authorities, North and South, is excellent. The issues of penalty points and driving disqualifications need to be progressed, but given that two jurisdictions are involved, technical difficulties can hold things up. However, the will to co-operate is there. I have attended two very productive NSMC sectoral meetings on road safety, and I have no doubt that they will help in the development of strategies to reduce the number of road fatalities across the island.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister outline the regulatory, resource and organisational constraints that are likely to preclude cross-border community-based rural transport initiatives?

Mr Murphy: Those who provide rural community transport on both sides of the border have been making the case for some time that they face certain anomalies. The Member represents North Antrim, but he will know that, in border constituencies, the nearest centre of population and the nearest services are often in one jurisdiction or the other — not where a person happens to live. There have been ongoing difficulties in respect of people's ability to avail of rural transport services in the border areas; often, they cannot avail of the closest services.

The North/South Ministerial Council agreed to carry out a study on that matter. The results of that study have been received by both Departments, North and South. We have asked those who conducted that study to set up a pilot scheme — the location for which has not yet been identified — so that we can begin to operate cross-border rural transport provision. We hope that that pilot scheme will demonstrate how we can make progress and deal with all of the anomalies and technical irregularities that create obstacles in the way of proper transport provision in the most marginalised areas in both jurisdictions.

We hope to make further progress. The study has been useful, and has identified a number of issues for both Departments to try to address. Some regulatory matters will overlap into the remit of the Department of the Environment. The pilot study will bring progress to a phase at which we can see action. We can then work very quickly to overcome some of the obstacles.

The purpose of rural transportation is to provide services for those who live off the beaten track, who cannot avail of public transport, and who do not live near the rail networks or regular bus routes. The provision of rural transport reduces social exclusion and marginalisation in those areas. We have made progress to some degree, and the pilot project should lead to further progress. We hope that we will then be able to provide a seamless rural transport service across the border area.

Mr Hamilton: There is free public transport across Ireland for over 65s. Was that issue discussed at the

Minister's meeting, and what is his assessment of the success of that scheme?

Mr Murphy: The all-Ireland free transport scheme for over 65s pre-dated my coming into office, and it was not discussed at the meeting. That scheme is not the responsibility of the Department of Transport in the South; it is the responsibility of the Department of Social and Family Affairs.

It is generally felt that that scheme has been quite successful across the island. The extension in the North of free travel to those aged between 60 and 64 will not necessarily extend to the rest of the island. We will wish to include that issue on future agendas of transport sectoral meetings. However, there must be input from the Department of Social and Family Affairs in the South.

Perhaps the experience of the 65-plus scheme will be useful when making an argument to extend free travel right across the island for those aged between 60 and 64.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his comments about the A5 road upgrade, which is very important to the west of the Province, and I thank the Minister for the work on stage 1 of that project. Stage 2 is to be completed by mid-2009. Can the Minister confirm that his Department is fully committed to seeing that scheme through to fruition? Are the required finances available to ensure that that happens?

Mr Murphy: Yes. That scheme has commenced, and we are committed to it. There was a very significant contribution from the Dublin Government towards that project, and towards the A8 Belfast-Larne scheme. The money that we anticipate will be required has been budgeted for as part of the roads strategy, and our commitment is to complete that scheme as quickly as possible.

Mr Newton: Like others, I welcome the Minister's statement. I note that he indicates that there will be a joint road safety publicity campaign with the Republic. Will he indicate what the budget for that campaign might be, and how it will be broken down?

Mr Murphy: Again, without passing the buck, I would say that that is primarily a matter for the Department of the Environment. Advertising across the island makes sense because the TV networks are available across the island.

I cannot answer the Member's question regarding the budget for the publicity campaign. However, I am sure that either my Department or the Department of the Environment will be able to provide him with that answer in writing.

A number of factors contribute to road safety. Some of them, such as road structure, are my responsibility, while others relate to education, information, detection and punishment. The road safety group in the North,

which is chaired by the Minister of the Environment, involves me and the PSNI, and I believe that co-operating and learning from good practice across the island will add to our ability to reduce the carnage on the roads. That is surely in all of our interests.

Mr Shannon: Some concern has already been expressed in the Chamber about the rolling stock, which the Minister mentioned in his statement when he was talking about the Dublin to Belfast rail link. Will he provide an indication of the cost of expanding and upgrading the current rolling stock? The Minister also said that the next transport sectoral meeting will take place in May — will he tell us whether the costs will be available in time for that meeting; and, more importantly, will the budget that will be necessary for the upgrading also be in place?

Mr Murphy: The Member's question relates to the case that was proposed by the railway companies at the transport sectoral meeting and involved improving the Belfast to Dublin service. Part of that case included acquiring new rolling stock. No costs were presented at the time, so both companies were asked to prepare a business case, which I hope will be ready for the May transport sectoral meeting, when the case can be assessed. My Department, through its own budget, is investing in upgrading rolling stock across the rail network in the North, and that will continue apace. However, the Member's reference to improved rolling stock relates to the aforementioned case.

It has been proven that when investments have been made in public transport, in railways, in tracks, and in rolling stock, the service has improved and passenger numbers have increased. We want to attract more passengers to public transport, particularly to rail transport, in order to benefit the environment and reduce our carbon footprint, so we will continue to make the case for investment. The Department for Regional Development has a substantial investment to make in relation to rolling stock, some of which will go towards improving the Larne to Belfast service.

If the business case that is being prepared by the two companies makes it on to the agenda for the next transport sectoral meeting, I will be happy to share details with Members when the statement is made in the aftermath of the meeting.

Budget 2008-11

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

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): It is almost 40 years since a Finance Minister elected by the people of Northern Ireland presented a Budget in a stable political environment. Today, I am able to do that with a sense of optimism for the future.

Although it is only eight months since power returned to Stormont, I believe that today's announcement is yet another sign that devolution is working. In October, I said that the draft Budget came with a proud stamp that read "Made in Northern Ireland". In the next three years, it will be the Executive's task to ensure that they deliver for Northern Ireland.

11.15 am

Today, I am pleased to be able to present the Executive's unanimously agreed Budget proposals. In October, I announced a draft Budget that delivered the highest ever level of public spending to Northern Ireland, froze domestic regional rates for the next three years and capped industrial rates. It was a draft Budget that was good for householders and good for business. It represented delivery of the priorities that the people of Northern Ireland voted for in March 2007. It demonstrated a break with the past and a clear intention to build a brighter future for Northern Ireland.

Over the last three months we have listened to the people of Northern Ireland, and I am pleased to announce that the key cornerstones of the draft Budget that I presented in October remain in place. I am therefore happy to confirm that domestic regional rates will be frozen in cash terms over the next three years, that non-domestic regional rates will be frozen in real terms over the next three years and that industrial rates will be capped at 30%. When that is contrasted with the rate increases in recent years under direct rule, no householder in Northern Ireland will fail to recognise the benefit of the return of devolution. Let those who say that devolution makes no difference explain that logic to the average household, which will be £1,000 better off than it would have been if direct rule had continued.

While the key tenets of the draft Budget remain intact, the consultation process has been invaluable in helping us refine our plans. Today, I will set out our response to the consultation process, and I will be in a position to make some additional allocations. Those will reflect the fact that the Executive have listened to the views expressed in the consultation process and demonstrate that it has been a meaningful process.

That consultation process has been important in shaping not only the final Budget allocations, but for Departments in determining their priorities. During the past 10 weeks we have had a vigorous, often robust, debate among politicians and the general public about our public spending priorities. That is important in a democracy. It has been a useful, if sometimes difficult, process, but I believe that the final Budget is the better for it.

With the return of devolution and the capacity to help shape the direction of policy, the Budget consultation has generated considerable public and media attention. That is only proper as in the life of the Assembly there are few more important issues than how we decide to spend public money. Therefore it is important that we hear the views of a wide range of individuals and organisations on those key issues. It is also essential that, having listened to those differing views and perspectives, Ministers in the Executive reach final agreement on the best outcome for our community. That is what we have now done, and I am pleased to present our conclusions to the Assembly for consideration and approval.

Today, I have published our final Budget proposals and the document has been made available to Members. The First Minister and deputy First Minister have also published final versions of the Executive's Programme for Government and the investment strategy for Northern Ireland. Next week, they will seek the Assembly's endorsement of those key strategic documents, and I will also seek the Assembly's approval of the associated spending plans in the Budget.

When I presented our draft Budget proposals to the Assembly last October, I set out the wider prospects for public expenditure over the next three years. We have experienced a decade of significant growth in levels of public expenditure in Northern Ireland, reflecting the growth that has also happened in the rest of the UK. Levels of public expenditure will continue to grow in real terms over the next few years; however, that rate of growth will be at a much lower level.

That presents us with both an opportunity and a challenge. We have the opportunity to maintain levels of investment in key public services, while introducing a new focus on ensuring that we deliver value for money for those in the community who rely on those services. The challenge is to ensure that we focus our expenditure and efforts over the coming years on the key priorities that will make real and sustainable improvements in our prosperity and quality of life.

The final Programme for Government published today confirms that growing the economy will be the Executive's top priority for the next three years.

In addition, we recognise the importance of delivering a major programme of investment in public

infrastructure; promoting tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being; protecting and enhancing our environment and natural resources; and delivering high-quality and efficient public services. The Budget must ensure that the resources available to the Executive are allocated to activities and programmes that support the delivery of these priorities.

The final Budget proposals that have now been agreed by the Executive maintain this focus on our key priorities. I am also pleased to be able to announce some additional allocations to assist with these priorities. These allocations also reflect the key themes that arose during the consultation exercise and demonstrate that the Executive have indeed listened.

I pay tribute to the significant and important work done during the consultation period by all of the Assembly's Statutory Committees. The Chairperson, Deputy Chairperson, and members of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, and their staff, played a particularly important role. They commissioned the views of all the other Committees and compiled them into a co-ordinated report on the Executive's draft Budget, which was published on 8 January.

During the consultation period, the Committee also hosted an information seminar for all MLAs and relevant Assembly officials on the annual Budget process. It tabled the motion for the take-note debate, held in plenary session on 27 November, invited me to provide it with a high-level briefing on the draft Budget, and took evidence from my officials on a wide range of strategic and cross-cutting budgetary issues.

I should add that, in addition to supporting the work of all the Committees on the draft Budget, the Committee for Finance and Personnel also found time to examine the draft Budget for my own Department. This was a very significant programme of work, carried out over a very short time that included the Christmas break. We can all be grateful to the Committee for its efforts. I must also pay particular thanks to all of the officials in my Department who have worked tirelessly on the Budget for many months.

The co-ordinated report on the draft Budget is a very useful document. Its value should endure beyond the conclusion of this first Budget process in the Assembly. It provides many valuable insights into a wide range of departmental and cross-cutting issues. I urge my ministerial colleagues, Assembly Members and, indeed, departmental officials to consider the material in the report carefully as we move forward, particularly in implementing programmes and policies that will be supported by the resources allocated in this Budget.

Alongside the important work carried out on the draft Budget within the Assembly, officials attended a number of public consultation seminars at four locations across Northern Ireland. Officials also

attended a public consultation event organised by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, and met the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, the Consumer Council, the Federation of Small Businesses and the Equality Coalition. Presentations were also made to a meeting of the Economic Development Forum and to a conference on neighbourhood renewal. A number of Departments also arranged consultation events, focusing on their own spending programmes.

Advertisements were placed in the main regional newspapers, requesting written responses and comments on the Executive's proposals in the draft Programme for Government, Budget and investment strategy. There has been considerable interest in these proposals, and over 9,500 written responses have been received. These range from signatures on a petition to comprehensive commentaries. The Executive will publish a detailed analysis of the consultation responses.

Of all the issues, funding for the arts was the main theme in terms of the quantity of responses, reflecting a well-organised effort by the arts sector to highlight its concerns, and I pay tribute to that sector for its efforts.

Mental-health services, and those for people with a learning disability, were also raised as matters of concern. These concerns were raised by relatives of those with mental-health problems or learning disabilities, as well as by professionals working in the field. I must confess to being lobbied at home on these issues.

Petitions were also received with respect to libraries and the implications for local sports funding of the 2012 Olympics in London. There were also concerns regarding the allocation of funding for services for children and young people, which has been raised with me directly by groups representing the interests of children. In addition, representations were made to Ministers, among others, regarding the level of funding for victims.

The Executive's priority of growing a dynamic innovative economy was broadly welcomed, but some concerns were expressed that insufficient resources had been earmarked for investment in skills and promoting innovation.

Capital expenditure on social housing is an important issue. There were concerns that insufficient funding had been allocated in the draft Budget to enable us to achieve the target in the draft investment strategy to complete up to 10,000 social and affordable houses over the next five years. Many other issues were raised which are too numerous to mention specifically in this statement. However, all responses to the Budget process have been noted and considered.

The Executive's response to the issues raised by the Members and Committees of this Assembly, and during the wider consultation exercise, has to be set in the context of the resources available and allocated to

departmental programmes. In announcing our draft Budget proposals last October, all the resources then available over the next three years were allocated to departmental programmes, apart from some £50 million of capital remaining to be allocated.

As I will explain later, some additional resources have become available for allocation now. However, in scale, those resources are very much at the margins of the total allocations that were earmarked for Departments in the draft Budget. Therefore, the only way to have allocated substantial extra resources to any single Department now would have been to reduce the allocations that had been proposed for other Departments. In light of the significant pressures identified by all Departments, the Executive decided not to pursue that option. Therefore, the main focus for our response to the consultation exercise lies in the discretion that each Minister and Department have to deploy their available resources in pursuit of the Executive's strategic priorities and objectives as set out in our final Programme for Government.

As I have said already, I urge each Department to consider carefully the departmental and cross-cutting issues identified during consideration of the draft Budget by our statutory Committees, as well as the issues identified in the public consultation exercise.

I will now explain how the Executive propose to allocate the limited additional resources that have become available, dealing first with current expenditure allocations. It has been possible to generate some additional resources, partly as a result of more optimistic regional rate revenue projections, and a lower than previously forecast subsidy requirement to Northern Ireland Water. In addition, I have decided that a portion of the costs of rolling out the central reform programme, which had previously been held centrally, should now be released to make additional allocations to Departments.

Overall, some £20 million, £30 million and £30 million in additional funding became available in each of the next three years respectively for allocation to Departments compared to the draft Budget position. The Executive have decided that that additional funding should be allocated in response to some of the key issues identified by the Assembly Committees, MLAs and groups and individuals during the consultation exercise. Departments may also wish to reprioritise the allocations made at the draft Budget stage to supplement that additional funding.

The needs of those with mental-health problems or learning disabilities are well recognised by society. Too often in the past, however, they have been ignored when it comes to the allocation of funding. In light of the findings of the Bamford Review, and the responses from the consultation process, the Executive have

agreed to increase the allocation to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety by £10 million in each year of the Budget period.

More generally, in light of the significant challenges faced by our health and social care services, the Executive have also agreed a package of measures to provide the Health Minister with greater flexibility in the management and deployment of resources already allocated to him during the year. We have agreed that the Health Service should have the first call on the first £20 million of resources that become available during annual in-year monitoring processes. The Health Service will also be able to retain any further efficiencies it can deliver, beyond the existing 3% target, for immediate reinvestment in front line services to patients.

11.30 am

The provision of high-quality health and social care services for everyone in the community remains a key priority for the Executive. That is why the draft Budget proposals allocated over half of available resources to the Health Service alone. Over the next three years, the Health Service will have the largest share ever of total departmental spending in Northern Ireland. However, the Executive recognise the significant challenges that face the Health Minister as he seeks to respond to the needs and expectations of the community for its health and social care provision, and as he takes forward the reform of healthcare provision. The package reflects the Executive's concern to ensure that the Minister has the resources and flexibility to do that, within our affordability limits.

During the consultation exercise, funding for services for children and young people was also highlighted as an issue of concern. The Executive recognise the importance of that type of investment to supplement the significant levels of expenditure on mainstream education provision. Therefore, we have decided to allocate an additional £3 million next year, followed by a further £5 million in each of the following two years, to help address the issues and concerns that were raised.

The Executive recognise the importance of the arts sector, not only because of the entertainment and relaxation benefits, but because of the significant contribution that it can make to the tourism sector, and to wider economic growth. Therefore, the Executive have agreed an additional allocation of £2 million to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in each of the next two years to address the concerns that were expressed during the public consultation process about arts funding, as well as sports and library funding.

The needs of victims remain of great significance to us all, and concerns were raised about the adequacy of the funding that was earmarked for their specific requirements in the draft Budget. Therefore, the

Executive have agreed to increase the level of funding for victims by £1 million next year, by £2 million the following year and by £3 million the year after that.

I will now deal with the position on capital expenditure in the final Budget proposals. When I announced the draft Budget proposals in October 2007, I highlighted that the Executive wanted to maximise the receipts from the disposal of surplus assets so that they could be reinvested in public-sector infrastructure.

Last autumn, the Executive set up the capital realisation task force, which was asked to make recommendations that would remove present barriers to more efficient and economically effective use of the Executive's assets by realising significant additional value that can be focused on enhancing Northern Ireland's infrastructure. The task force was asked to report its initial findings by December 2007 so that those could be incorporated into the final Budget position. The task force report made a number of key recommendations, including the identification of the potentially significant value that is to be released from assets over the next 10 years, which is in the region of £900 million. That figure is in addition to the £1.1 billion that has already been identified.

The task force report identified a range of potential opportunities to reinvest the proceeds of up to £295 million of asset disposals over the next three years of the Budget period. Further work remains to be done to analyse the scope and feasibility of those potential disposals. That has informed the Executive's decisions on capital allocations over that period and takes into consideration our ability to realise those proceeds in the current market conditions, and our capacity to reinvest those proceeds.

The report also made recommendations to improve the financial management and control of public-sector assets. That does not mean selling assets and spending the proceeds to address short-term priorities. It is about effective stewardship by the Executive and the development of assets to their full potential, which will involve all key stakeholders. That is to ensure that we get the maximum benefit from all the assets at the Executive's disposal in the support of public services.

When I presented the Executive's draft Budget, I said that the provision of additional social and affordable housing would be a priority for the use of any extra spending power that we could produce for capital investment. As I have noted, the fact that that was a prominent issue during the consultation exercise reflected concerns that insufficient funding had been earmarked to achieve the target of providing up to 10,000 new social and affordable houses over the next few years.

Therefore, I am pleased to announce that the Executive have agreed to provide to the Minister for

Social Development additional capital allocations of £70 million, £75 million and £60 million over the next three years to support her in delivering 1,500, 1,750 and 2,000 new units across the Budget period.

During the consultation process, concerns were also raised about ensuring that sufficient funding had been earmarked to make the necessary improvements and modifications to the Fire and Rescue Service's stations and equipment. In response, we have allocated an additional £14 million over the next three years for that purpose.

The Executive have allocated an additional £40 million over the Budget period to allow the Department for Regional Development to continue to progress several major road schemes. They include the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson dualling scheme, improvements to the A32 route from Omagh to Enniskillen, the A2 at Broadbridge and Greenisland, and the A32 Cherrymount Link Road scheme in Enniskillen.

When I presented the draft Budget proposals to the Assembly in October 2007, I highlighted the fact that the Executive's total Budget will rise to almost £11 billion by 2010-11 and, therefore, we will have more money to spend in real terms than ever before. However, we also face many new demands on those resources.

The challenge for the Executive has been to strike the right balance in attempting to meet the many legitimate demands for those resources, and we have responded to that challenge in the interests of all the people in Northern Ireland. However, we must look forward to the next stage of development and seek to create a culture of — and a focus on — delivery, rather than on simple spend.

In that context, the Executive are committed to the delivery of their Programme for Government and its associated objectives and targets. Those include meeting objectives for public services in important areas, such as investment in children and young people, rural communities, transport infrastructure and the housing needs of the community. The Executive are also committed to investing to increase the competitiveness of the economy and to improve the health and well-being of everyone in Northern Ireland.

To ensure the delivery of those objectives, the Executive have taken several significant decisions on public expenditure. For the first time, the current expenditure on health and social services will exceed £4 billion a year, thereby providing the highest ever level of investment in those crucial services. Spending on education will increase by almost £400 million a year by 2010-11, compared with 2006-07.

The Executive have prioritised action to support the growth of the economy, and we supported that by increasing the allocations to the Department for Employment and Learning by 35% in 2010-11,

compared with 2006-07. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will receive a 21% increase in its allocations.

Alongside those allocations, the Executive confirm the largest ever allocations for capital investment in new public-sector infrastructure. In gross terms, the allocations will exceed £2 billion a year by 2010-11, and will support the most ambitious programme of investment yet in hospitals, schools, housing, roads, public transport and other public services.

At the beginning of my statement, I emphasised that the Budget has been prepared to support Executive Ministers in delivering the Programme for Government. The financial allocations that were agreed by the Executive reflect our best judgement of how much each Department needs to achieve our central objectives.

The Executive will carefully monitor the delivery of the Programme for Government. If it becomes apparent that additional resources are needed to support the delivery of any particular objectives, we will review the allocations to all Departments accordingly.

The targets set out in the Programme for Government are not only the responsibility of the relevant Minister but of the Executive as a whole. If Ministers need help to deliver on our joint commitments, we must work to ensure that they are given that help.

If Northern Ireland is to succeed and prosper economically, the private sector — not the public sector — will be responsible for that success. Public spending alone will never allow us to create the type of society and economy that we all wish to see. The dependence on the public sector that assisted us during the past 40 years of conflict is now an obstacle to our future development. That is why it is important to use public spending in a way that will not simply deal with the challenges that we face today but will help us to build the economy that we want for the future. The reality in a global economic world is that any national Government — never mind a regional devolved Administration — have only a limited influence on the state of the economy. We would do well to live by the Latin maxim so often applied by doctors: *primum non nocere* — first, do no harm.

We should create an environment in which business can prosper, and wealth can be generated for our entire society, but we must be careful that our interference does not threaten the prosperity that we all wish to see. There is no more important element of that prosperity than a stable political environment that will encourage investment from abroad, development of business locally and will help to keep many of our young people at home.

The return of devolution in circumstances in which it is likely to last is the best guarantee for future prosperity for the people of Northern Ireland. A return

to direct rule and to years of political instability would be a recipe for economic failure, never mind the longer-term impact that would have on our society.

The Executive can help the economy by taking positive action — rather than by simply removing obstacles — in the area of innovation. When I presented the draft Budget to the Assembly in October 2007, I emphasised the importance of innovation in promoting economic success and social progress. I also stressed that it was imperative that we ensured a co-ordinated, cross-departmental approach in making expenditure allocations to promote innovation across a wide range of sectors. The enhancement of the level of innovation activity in our economy is a critical pillar in the drive to promote regional productivity. The application of innovation is a necessary precondition for improving competitiveness. However, we must ensure that we assist and promote only innovation that offers up commercial opportunities. That assistance must be carefully targeted. I am, therefore, pleased that I can now provide the Assembly with details on how a major programme of investment in innovation will be delivered over the Budget period.

In addition to the £25 million made available by the Treasury after the restoration of devolution, a projected investment of €60 million will be made by the Government of the Republic of Ireland to support collaborative projects and linkages targeted at innovation projects. A further £27 million has been earmarked from the Executive's resources to put in place a package of assistance that will promote commercially relevant innovation.

The funding programme, which will total £90 million, has been allocated to a number of Departments to assist in improving research capacity, to foster greater international collaboration, to promote new and emerging technologies and to stimulate research activity over the period of the comprehensive spending review.

The Department of the Environment will receive additional funding of £103,000 over the next three years to contribute to the delivery of the Queen's University-led omnivore project, which seeks to develop a prototype engine that will optimise the combustion of a range of biofuels and fossil fuels.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will receive an additional £5 million for the creative industries seed fund.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will receive an additional £7 million for research into renewable energy and the promotion of research and development in agrifood and rural enterprises.

The Department of Education will receive an additional £11 million for projects, including the development of schools that specialise in STEM —

science, technology, engineering and mathematics — subjects and the development of the curriculum for STEM projects.

11.45 am

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will receive an additional £13 million to allow greater linkage among hospitals in Northern Ireland and remote access to international advice and expertise. There is also funding for research partnerships with the United States and the Republic of Ireland.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will receive an additional £14 million to fund projects, including the promotion of investment in innovation among local firms, the commercial exploitation of research projects in the renewable-energy sector, and research into renewable technologies.

The Department for Employment and Learning will receive an additional £40 million over the next three years to fund projects, including additional PhD science studentships, cross-border university research, and support to help the further education sector to deliver the skills base that is required to attract mobile investment projects.

This final Budget statement represents another important milestone for the new Executive. It reflects the agreed priorities of the Executive, and sets out spending plans for the remainder of the Assembly. That is no mean achievement in a four-party coalition. The Budget marks a clear change in direction — away from the direct rule trend of ever-greater burdens on the householder, and towards an ever-greater obligation on the public sector to deliver.

Although it is an important step in the right direction, the Budget alone will not change the nature of Government in Northern Ireland. The success or failure of this Administration will not turn on the division of resources among Departments, but on what Departments do with the money that they have been allocated. In three years' time, people will not ask how much a Department received, but what it has done to improve the lives of people in Northern Ireland. Over the next three years, the same focus that was applied over the past 12 weeks to argue for greater resources must be channelled to deliver the Executive's priorities.

Over the past few months, there has been discussion and debate about the allocations that the Executive would make. However, the time for consultation is over, and the time for delivery has arrived. With more money allocated than ever before, and a local Administration setting the priorities, people will justifiably expect public services to improve.

Few will accept the lazy but often-used excuse of insufficient resources for inaction or failure. Fewer still will tolerate the argument that they should pay even

more to balance the cost of waste and inefficiency in Government. We must replace the culture of apportioning blame that has developed over the long years of direct rule with a new one of taking responsibility. Northern Ireland must shake off the direct rule mindset; the attitude that the financial coffers are bottomless, thanks to the Exchequer, and that an overly large public sector is justifiable in a region that is smaller than Yorkshire.

As resources are limited, and always will be, the Executive have not been able to fund every initiative that they wanted to. However, the Budget has put Northern Ireland on the right trajectory for a brighter future and has provided a platform for economic growth that can improve the lives of everyone who lives here. A greater focus on wealth creation is essential if Northern Ireland is to prosper and be able to provide meaningful career opportunities and twenty-first century living standards for its citizens.

Prosperity depends on commerce, and what we can sell or trade with international customers. I am putting building blocks in place for a new and confident Northern Ireland that is attractive to overseas investors because of its integrated approach to business. That is why I want our second- and third-level education systems to more closely match the needs of the economy by increasing our proficiency in skills that are relevant to our economic needs.

We are at the beginning of a new era of hope for Northern Ireland. Unemployment is at its lowest ever level, and we have the chance to establish this region as a forward-thinking, business-led and thriving marketplace. With proper planning and strategic thinking, we can build a prosperous future for the Province.

Today's additional allocations demonstrate that we have listened to the consultation process and responded accordingly. The building blocks are in place to allow us to create the type of society that we all wish to see.

No individual has all the right answers, and if we are to maximise the potential in this new era, we should seek to harness the talents of the whole community. All sectors, from business to the voluntary and community sector and from academia to the media, have a role to play and a contribution to make. The people of Northern Ireland are not observers but stakeholders in this society and, although we all may have different jobs and responsibilities, we can transform our society by working together.

After decades of division and conflict, the Executive are moving forward on an agreed basis; from 40 years of conflict, we are emerging to a brighter future. Decades of lost opportunity cannot be put right overnight, but the Budget — and the family of documents that accompany it — signals a powerful

and positive beginning to that process. We should not merely hope for a shared and better future; we must work together to create it. I commend the Budget to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his detailed statement. Members will wish to offer comment and advice on issues that they feel should have been accorded a higher priority, and that is part of the process and debate that will follow. However, it is important to congratulate the Minister and his officials on successfully concluding the various and, at times, complex negotiations with Departments that have culminated in today's announcement being unanimously adopted by the Executive.

I welcome the Executive's emphasis on economic growth, particularly their commitment to equality impact assessments. The innovation fund will also be welcomed across the House. The Committee's report on the draft Budget called for a new regional economic strategy, supported by a cross-cutting implementation plan, to rebalance the economy and address the productivity and income differential. How will that be taken forward, particularly in light of the disappointing outcome of the Varney Review?

Mr P Robinson: I thank the Committee Chairman for his kind remarks and for the support that he, along with the Deputy Chairman and the Committee, provided during the Budget process. Reference has been made to the regional economic strategy. The draft regional economic strategy is a direct rule document. Officials are revisiting the draft regional economic strategy to reflect the Executive's priorities in our Programme for Government, investment strategy and Budget.

Following the disappointing outcome of the Varney Review, the Chief Secretary of the Treasury and I have agreed Varney II. Work will proceed on that for the next three months, and there is a commitment that a report will be published before the economic conference in the spring. It is hoped that Varney II will assist us during that conference. There will be Northern Ireland input into Varney II. When the Programme for Government, investment strategy and Budget have gone through the Assembly process — and on completion of the Varney Review II — the Assembly will want to finalise and consult on the new draft regional economic strategy.

Mr Storey: I concur with what has been said about the Minister in relation to the Budget. I thank the Minister for his comments about the Finance Committee members and staff and the important role that they played in bringing together the views of the other Committees and compiling the co-ordinated

report on the Executive's draft Budget, which was published on 8 January. I also pay tribute to the Finance Committee's staff.

The DFP Committee called on the capital realisation task force to consider offering an incentive to Departments by allowing them to keep a share of the proceeds of disposals of excess assets. Will the Minister comment on how he sees that measure being implemented in the future?

Mr P Robinson: I thank the Deputy Chairman for his remarks, and for once again drawing attention to the work of our officials and staff. All too often, politicians are happy to come into the Chamber with the finished product. However, that finished product, whether in respect of Committees members or Ministers, is the result of a lot of very hard work by our officials, for whom this has been a very difficult and trying period, during which they have had to work into the early hours of the morning to provide us with the appropriate material.

The capital realisation task force has done remarkable work in a very short period of time. We tasked it with providing a report by December so that we could take its findings into account in the final Budget document. It has provided us with not only an analysis of areas where there might be a greater disposal of assets, but it looked to the future and how we might structure something of the nature of the capital realisation task force on a long-term and ongoing basis, and what role it might play.

The Executive have considered that matter and, in principle, support the report that they received from the capital realisation task force, although they want to refine it a little before anything is published. We have made real progress, and Ed Vernon's report identifies almost £1 billion of additional assets, which is a very considerable addition to the capital funding that we will be able to provide for Departments, even though we have taken a fairly prudent and cautious approach until we work our way through each of the areas of asset disposal.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the Minister's statement. The Budget process involves making difficult decisions, and in the absence of the £1 billion funding package that was promised, those decisions are even more difficult. Moreover, the Varney Review has failed to deliver.

The Budget assumed a 3% efficiency saving across all Departments. How confident is the Minister that all Departments will be able to deliver that?

The water regulator and Northern Ireland Water have expressed concerns about the suggested 40% efficiency savings, and there is uncertainty in respect of funding for water. Will the Minister tell the House

what the effect will be on water rates or the delivery of services if that saving is not achieved?

Mr P Robinson: The Member is beginning to sound like a certain television reporter who manages to find a cloud somewhere on the horizon, no matter how good the story is.

On the recommencement of devolution, we secured a package well in excess of £1 billion and we have now identified £2 billion of assets for disposal. Remember that during previous dispensations, assets went back to the Treasury, but Northern Ireland is now receiving those funds directly on top of asset disposals. Of the aforementioned £100 million, we are using £25 million for innovation purposes in this Budget, but £75 million was used to alleviate the pressure of water rates on householders.

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

We also have hundreds of millions of pounds through EYF, along with a wide range of other benefits, not least of which is the change that we secured for the RRI in correcting the position that was adopted by the Ulster Unionist Party when it was introduced, which caused rates in Northern Ireland to rise by 60% in the past five years. The change that the DUP secured has allowed rates to stabilise, taking the pressure and pain away from the ratepayer.

12.00 noon

Mr Beggs raised the matters of efficiencies and targets in respect of water. Ultimately, whatever the area of activity, each is a matter for individual Departments. I do not tell Ministers how to achieve the 3% efficiencies in their Departments — they will all publish their efficiency programmes, which will be transparent in order that the Assembly and the public can consider them. Every Department can achieve at least that level of efficiency, and more can be achieved. For example, the Appleby Report identified another 10% of efficiency savings that could be made in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

There is a balance to be struck. Some Departments may find 3% hard going, whereas it may be easier for other Departments. The performance and efficiency delivery unit was set up to examine whether there is scope for Departments to make further efficiencies — we do not want to simply allocate a blanket figure and apply pressures where they cannot be borne.

Mr O'Loan: Given that there have been modest increases in revenue funding and quite significant increases in capital spend, it is clear that there has been some response to the concerns that were raised about the draft Budget. My colleagues will probe the Minister

about several matters, including social housing. However, I will ask a broad question about it.

Since the publication of the draft Budget, there have been significant changes to the financial landscape. Indeed, the Minister has referred to those. No doubt there will be further changes to that landscape over the next three years and pressures will arise. Will the Minister give a personal commitment to deliver the Executive's target of 2,000 houses in each of the next five years? That amounts to a total of 10,000 social houses.

Funding for the Youth Service is an issue that has been raised repeatedly with me in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area, but I saw no specific reference in the Minister's statement to that issue. In response to the many concerns that have been raised throughout Northern Ireland on the matter, will he confirm — and explain why — that he has given no extra funding to the Youth Service?

Mr P Robinson: I emphasise the point that I do not allocate funds: the Executive allocate funds. I make recommendations, which the Executive either accept or reject. I am happy to say that they accepted them.

It perhaps took me a bit longer than the Member to say that there have been modest changes in current expenditure but significant changes in capital expenditure. He is correct. No one should consider the draft Budget, the draft Programme for Government or the investment strategy to be like the law of the Medes and Persians and to be unchangeable. Any Executive must be able politically to react to changes in circumstances.

The targets that have been set in our draft Programme for Government are the objectives of the Executive as a whole, not of the Minister who happens to have to deliver those targets. The burden, therefore, is on the whole Executive to reach the targets that they set down in their draft Programme for Government. I am committed to doing that.

The Member mentioned social housing, and I shall describe the process behind the decision that was made in that respect. The Strategic Investment Board produced the plans for capital spend over 10 years, and the Department of Finance and Personnel then examined the first three years of that spend and identified how it would fit with the Budget. When I looked at the three years, I was struck by the fact that a low amount was allocated for social and affordable housing. In fact, I commented publicly on that in the Chamber. I indicated that if we could secure funding from the capital realisation task force, my priority would be to put those funds into social and affordable housing. I have made good on that commitment, allocating over £205 million to social and affordable housing. That already puts us in advance of the targets that have been set in the draft Programme for Government and the investment strategy.

The Member is correct: none of us can say whether land prices will rocket or whether the cost of construction will change remarkably. They could both go in either direction, although the trend is usually upwards. The Executive may have to revisit those issues if targets are not being met. That will be dealt with through in-year monitoring, which will be a matter for the Executive. If targets cannot be achieved as a result of insufficient funds, I will recommend that we allocate funding from the in-year monitoring round to ensure that they are met.

I have given that personal commitment to the Minister for Social Development and to other Ministers who have expressed concerns about their targets, and I understand that Ministers wish to ensure that they do not fall short of the targets. The commitment is there and will, of course, form part of the settlement letter that each Department receives from the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Dr Farry: I congratulate the Minister on his Budget and on getting it through the Executive. While I hate to break up the cosy consensus, I have to say that the Budget is flawed. It does not invest in a shared future or seek to find efficiency savings from a divided society. It prioritises a low-tax society ahead of investing in the economic drivers, and it does not address the matter of our underfunded public services.

Will the Minister confirm that, notwithstanding the extra £14 million that will be spent on health by 2011, we will remain £200 million short of what would be required to keep up to speed with health funding in the rest of the UK? That point is not about ignoring the need for efficiency savings; it is about investing in the health services that other parts of the UK are getting and that we are being denied. Those figures are from the Economic Research Institute for Northern Ireland.

Will the Minister also confirm that the new money for mental-health provision is insufficient to implement the recommendations of the Bamford Review and to address the underfunding in mental-health provision compared to other regions of the UK?

Will he also confirm that the new money for arts — an area in which we should be investing — still fails to bring Northern Ireland near to the UK average?

Finally, does the Minister agree that the new money for housing does not address the issue of the implementation of the Semple Review?

Mr P Robinson: I feel that I should give the Alliance Party a lesson about the role of opposition. I, and my colleagues sitting around me, have exercised such a role for many decades. However, it should not be a matter of becoming involved in opposition just for the sake of it. At this stage in Northern Ireland's development, it is every individual's responsibility — whether in the Executive or not — to put his or her shoulder to the wheel in order to help Northern Ireland advance and prosper.

In yesterday's Executive meeting, a colleague — not a party colleague — indicated that, if we are to ensure that we are all part of a team that is attempting to promote Northern Ireland in order to better the lives and living standards of the people, it is important to achieve a greater buy-in from other Members of the Assembly. The "I do not care what he says; I am setting out to oppose it" attitude taken by the Alliance Party does it no credit whatsoever.

Perhaps, in North Down, there are money trees that we can pick to provide new money. Members may point out that more money is required here, here and here — indeed, 9,500 responses informed me where more money could be spent — but no one has told me where less money could be spent. We have a finite resource, and we must therefore spread that resource as best we can in order to ensure that we get the best return from it for the community, and that is what we have done.

I would have loved to give an extra £200 million to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety or millions more to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure — and he would have loved to receive it. There is no Minister in the Executive who could not have used more money. In reality — and this is as important to the Executive as it is to the Member in his household budget — resources are finite, and we must spend according to the amount of money that we have.

The Executive believe that, in order to achieve an economy that will grow and allow everybody to enjoy the prosperity that will flow from it, those Budget allocations are the best fist that could be made of the available resources. We have spent a lot of money in the expectation of improving the Province's social infrastructure.

The Member said that nothing has been done to invest in a shared society. I believe that all of that investment will help to create a shared society and that the existence of the Assembly and the Executive will create a shared society and a way forward.

The Member's pessimism is not shared by the public. The Alliance Party should guard against allowing itself to be left even further behind, because it is out of kilter with the public's mood. The public want to move forward — the Alliance Party wants to drag us back.

Mr Hamilton: I join others in welcoming the Minister's Budget statement. I am sure that he welcomes Dr Farry's characterisation of the Budget as one that prioritises low tax. Today, the Minister spoke, as he often has, of his support for more social and affordable housing. As someone who represents a constituency in which the social-housing problem has been exacerbated through having some of the highest house prices in Northern Ireland as well as some of the longest waiting lists, I welcome the additional funds that have been

made available for social and affordable housing in today's Budget.

The Executive have set quite a challenging target of constructing 10,000 new social and affordable homes. Does the Minister believe that the final Budget allocation for social and affordable housing will allow that target to be reached?

Mr P Robinson: All I can say is that that would appear to be the case based on the costings that we have. However, as I said in reply to Mr O'Loan's question, if we have to review the situation because of some change in circumstances, we will do so. We aim to meet all of our targets in the Programme for Government. The target for social and affordable housing is important, and it is not simply a case of saying that the responsibility has been handed over to the Minister for Social Development and that it is up to her to produce results. It is the Executive's responsibility to ensure that, at all times, the resources are there for her to do that.

The funds available in the Budget will not only meet the targets in the Programme for Government, they will exceed them. However, only time will tell, and the Executive must make a collective effort to ensure that that will be the case.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat. I too thank the Minister for his statement. Does he believe that the Budget is good for people west of the Bann, particularly those in areas of high deprivation, such as my constituency of West Tyrone?

To put my question in context; historically, areas west of the Bann, including Tyrone, Omagh and the Glenelly Valley, have suffered. We hope that, with devolution and the new dispensation, those areas will benefit. Does the Minister believe that there will be inward investment in places such as Strabane and Omagh? Finally, some houses in my constituency do not have mains water, which is shocking in the twenty-first century. I have spoken to my colleague Conor Murphy about that matter, but I do want to mention it on this important day. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr P Robinson: No one would expect me to say anything other than I do believe that this is a good Budget — and that is in spite of a misspelling in one of the earlier iterations of the draft Budget, which ended up as the daft Budget.

This Budget changes the nature of expenditure in Northern Ireland from direct rule to devolution. It will be good for the whole of Northern Ireland. However, as it represents the strategic high-level allocation of moneys, I hope that Ministers from the various Departments were listening to the Member because the way in which budgets are allocated within Departments will make the difference in the distribution of funding across Northern Ireland.

The Programme for Government ties the Executive as a whole, as it would wish to be tied, to ensuring that prosperity is shared equally across Northern Ireland. I hope that it is the aim of every Member to ensure that no one is left behind as the quality of life in Northern Ireland improves.

12.15 pm

Mr Weir: I too congratulate the Minister on his statement. It was very important that it highlighted the need for Departments to respond to:

“an ever greater obligation on the public sector to deliver.”

As the statement indicates, it is to be hoped that, in three years' time, people will remember how individual Departments had delivered for people, not the Budget allocations. Given that the emphasis is very much on delivery, when will the Minister be in a position to make a further announcement about the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU), which will increase in importance over the next few years?

Mr P Robinson: During my briefing to the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel yesterday, they took the opportunity to raise the issue of PEDU. I indicated that I had developed the concept since it had first been mentioned. Originally, I had considered PEDU in the context of efficiency, but the more I scrutinised its potential role, the more I believe in the importance of performance and delivery.

My Department has already undertaken a considerable amount of work on PEDU's remit. We have worked on the panel that will oversee PEDU's work and tried to identify the small core of staff that will comprise the unit. I hope to say more about PEDU during next week's Budget debate.

Mr Kennedy: Like other Members, I welcome the Minister's statement and compliment him on its presentation to the House. He seems to be a Minister of Finance and Personnel who is on the move to greater things. He may move even more speedily than he, or anyone else, realises.

I also welcome the increased allocations to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department for Employment and Learning. I congratulate my party colleagues Sir Reg Empey and Michael McGimpsey on their determined efforts to enhance the resources allocated to their respective Departments.

In the amended Budget statement, additional resources have been allocated to children and young people. Will the Minister assure Members that those moneys will be specifically targeted, cohesively and meaningfully, to address the needs and priorities of less-advantaged young people? Will he indicate and outline the Budget changes that will help to deliver the Executive's

challenging targets to reduce child poverty? Will he be more specific and clarify the purpose and intended use of the welcome additional funding for victims?

Mr P Robinson: I welcome the Member's gracious comments. However, it would be wrong if I were to take away any of the lines that might be available to individual Ministers for their own departmental announcements. Although I could say more on victims and children's and young people's issues, I think that the appropriate Ministers should make their own announcements.

The Member referred to the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). I want to caution Members of all parties, including my own party and the Member's party. Members are inclined to support Ministers from their own party, much like a football team. Let me be clear: the Executive have collective responsibility for all Departments. It is as important to a Democratic Unionist as it is to an Ulster Unionist that individual Departments — Health, Social Services and Public Safety; Education; Regional Development; Culture, Arts and Leisure; Agriculture and Rural Development; and so forth — are well funded and that their Ministers have the resources to do their jobs properly. Let us not attach party labels to Departments.

I would like to have given additional resources to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. However, I have done the best that I can in accordance with affordability limits. DEL, DETI (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment), DHSSPS and other Departments have benefited from innovation funding, an announcement that had not been made in the draft Budget. Although that is effectively new information to the Assembly, it does not represent a change in resources. Money from the Republic and the Treasury was identified that could be used collectively for innovation purposes, as were funds of our own. The overall balance in the Budget is right. However, if, throughout the course of the Budget period, variations must be made as a result of in-year monitoring, additional funds that are identified will go towards innovation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members will be aware that the Business Committee usually meets at 12.30 pm on a Tuesday. After consultation with party Whips and the Speaker, it has been agreed that the current item of business will continue until 12.50 pm, after which the Business Committee will meet immediately.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his statement and for the work that has been carried out on the Budget by officials in his Department and others, and, indeed, by the Committees, which, as I said at the time of the draft Budget, had to proof and improve the original

document. The Assembly has heard some of the benefits of that proofing and improvement today.

I fully empathise with the Minister's point that Members must be party-blind when they approach ministerial and departmental matters. Therefore, rather than my focusing on the Department for Social Development, I ask that the Minister deal with a couple of other matters.

As Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I welcome the visibility that is now demonstrated when it comes to innovation funding. The Committee highlighted that the lack of such visibility in the draft Budget was a problem. The Minister has said that innovation funding will be targeted, and he has discussed the considerations that will be employed to do so. I want to know who will undertake that targeting, because the jury is out as to whether existing agencies with their current capacity will be best placed to carry out the significant targeting of innovation funding.

I notice that many of the Department of Education's reform programmes are specified in the Budget. Post-primary reform and proposals to the Minister of Education are not specifically mentioned. However, clearly those reforms will happen in the Budget period, as they are meant to. Are they provided for in the Budget? Have the Executive agreed that those reforms will happen or not?

Mr P Robinson: The SDLP leader and I have been in politics for many years. I am sure that, from time to time, we have shared the same frustration when responding to a consultation exercise, knowing full well that no matter what submission one makes to that consultation, there will be no change in its outcome. It is refreshing that the Executive have been prepared not simply to conduct the fullest of consultations, as I outlined in my Budget statement, but to respond as positively as they could within the ambit of their resources.

The Member identified two particular issues. DETI has benefited from the innovation-funding package. My task is to allocate funds at strategic level. It is then the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's task to identify how to proceed. Broad themes have been identified in the innovation-funding package, and various Ministers who have been allocated that funding will respond on the basis of those themes. Ultimately, DETI targets, and who delivers on them, will be matters on which the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment must decide. I expect that he will be in close contact with the Committee when he works out how he wishes to proceed.

It was as much the case when I was in local government as it is now that all that any Budget ever does is to provide the best judgement that an individual can

make of what expenditure is likely to be during that Budget period.

That is all that we can do with regard to education. What the end process will be is still not clear, although the Minister of Education has indicated that many of the reforms that she has in mind are cost-neutral. However, the view of many Members is that to change the ages of schools will have a considerable impact, particularly on the capital budget for schools. Those are issues that the Executive will have to take into account and, in doing so, must take into account the parameters of the Budget.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Department for Social Development has received a considerable uplift in the Budget. Although there are several references to young people, which is commendable, there is little or none to older people, who often feel that they are socially excluded. Will the Minister give Members some idea of what resources for the elderly are provided in the Budget?

Mr P Robinson: There are many elements to our society as a whole, and they are sourced through various Departments. I do not think that any study has ever identified the amount of funding from each Department that should be allocated to the elderly — perhaps such a study should be considered. Clearly, people have worked hard during their working lives, and deserve to expect their latter years to be peaceful and prosperous. We want to make life as easy for them as for every other citizen. However, I cannot provide the Member with statistics because there is no data upon which I can draw.

Mr McQuillan: I congratulate the Minister on delivering his statement to the House and on delivering efficiency as a key aspect of the Budget announcement. Will the Minister clarify how confident he is that all Departments will achieve the targets?

Mr P Robinson: In consultation with all of the Ministers, we discussed the issue of 3% efficiencies and 5% savings on administrative costs. I detect that most Ministers feel that they can bring forward plans for the 3% efficiencies. Some Ministers indicated difficulty with regard to administrative costs and, in particular, the possible impact of a reduction in administrative costs on the delivery of front line services.

The Department and I have indicated that we will continue to work with Ministers over the in-year period to remove any pressure with regard to administrative costs, and that we will consider cases where there is a genuine need for reclassification. Every Minister can, at least, produce 3% efficiency savings. In the overall Budget, that will free up approximately £790 million, providing us with a significant amount of money to be used in resources for Northern Ireland. There would

have been limited use of the Budget process if we did not have the flexibility created by the efficiency programme.

The next stage, in involving PEDU, will be essential to progressing beyond 3% efficiency savings. If Departments have a difficulty in producing the 3% efficiencies, then that is the kind of purpose for which PEDU was established. PEDU is not there to wrestle and fight with Departments; rather, it is there to assist them. It is there to help all Government Departments to realise a level of efficiency, performance and delivery.

Mr F McCann: A LeasCheann Comhairle, I welcome the Minister's statement. The additional allocations to the Department of Social Development — of £70 million, £75 million and £60 million, over the next three years — will be a major boost to the social housing sector. Earlier, a Member asked the Minister if he would prioritise the social housing sector should any further resources become available over the lifetime of the Budget. Will the Minister inform the House whether the current review of the Semple Review's recommendations fits into the provision of social housing and the creation of an affordable housing sector from a resource and financial perspective?

12.30 pm

Mr P Robinson: I advise the Member to keep out of the way of the Minister of Education and the Minister for Regional Development for at least the rest of the day, because I suspect that they might feel that they have a call on some additional resources as well.

Targets have been set in the draft Programme for Government, and we aim to meet them. Thus, the first call on resources will be to ensure that the targets are met. The capital realisation task force has identified an additional £295 million in funding; we have used about £200 million of that money, so some additional capital funding may become available after we have done our work and ensured that we can deliver on those disposals. I certainly hope that during the CSR period, there will be some additional capital resources to allocate in-year. I am sure that, depending on where the Departments are with their targets, there will be no shortage of Ministers coming forward to outline how well they could spend available resources.

Mrs I Robinson: The Minister will be aware of my personal desire to ensure that mental-health issues are given higher priority, and I welcome the funding that is being made available to the Health Department. If the Assembly supports the draft Budget in next week's debate, are we guaranteed that the funding allocation for mental health will be directed solely to the mental-health sector? So often in the past, mental-health budgets have been dipped into to such an extent that the mental-health sector no longer receives any money. Can the Minister indicate how this allocation compares

with the bid that was made by the Department for each of the next three years?

Mr P Robinson: I had hoped that there might be a change of breakfast conversation in the Robinson household as a result of the Budget allocation, but the only change seems to be that the question is now whether there will be delivery. The amount that has been allocated is of significant assistance to the Minister of Health in providing him with the resources that he needs for the sector. However, the amount is not ring-fenced. The Executive's view was that funds should be allocated to that sector because it was clear from the consultation process that people identified it as having the greatest need.

I have consistently said that although I believe that many areas of health are perhaps over-funded, this area is underfunded, and there is empirical evidence to support that view. Although the Executive have allocated money for that purpose, it is for the Health Minister to state what his plans are, and I am pretty sure that he is aware of the importance of mental-health issues, not only to the Committee, but to the community in general. Therefore, I can give no guarantees. It is a matter for the Minister of Health, but I am pretty sure that he will want to be as responsive to the public consultation as the Executive, as a whole, have been.

Mr Cree: I also thank the Minister for his statement, and I acknowledge the fact that the Budget has been well improved since last October.

The Minister will be aware that OFMDFM's central administration costs have doubled since 2001. In light of the pressing responsibilities facing OFMDFM, not least with regard to victims and child poverty, is the Minister confident that such expenditure is the best use of public moneys, or is this an example of an area in which the Department could save money?

Mr P Robinson: There is not one Department in Northern Ireland that could not spend less on administration, so I do not particularly identify OFMDFM as a guilty party. Again, there is no desire on the part of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to waste scarce resources on unnecessary administration. I am happy for PEDU to look at the administration costs in OFMDFM, just as it will consider the costs in other Departments. However, OFMDFM has a considerable task to perform.

OFMDFM is not simply a private office and backup for the First Minister and deputy First Minister; it has considerable functions. For example, the Department has responsibility for the range of issues that is dealt with under the equality agenda, and it has an economic unit and information services. It is not as though it is similar to either the Prime Minister's office in Downing Street or the equivalent office in Dublin. The Office of

the First Minister and deputy First Minister is a very different creature.

The substantial increase to its costs has come about largely as a result of the fact that comparisons are being made to a time when the Assembly and Executive were not up and running. It is clear that the Department has additional costs whenever we have an operational Assembly and Executive. The fairer comparison is to a period that is similar to this, when a working Executive have existed. Unfortunately, the instability of previous arrangements has meant that there has not been a prolonged period during which an Executive existed to which we might compare this one.

Mr P Ramsey: Will the Minister of Finance and Personnel give his opinion on the fact that a great concern still exists across Northern Ireland about water charging? Assumptions are being made and unknowns discussed as we progress from strand one to strand two of the review.

More importantly, however, from my perspective as a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, is the fact that art and sport make significant contributions to society, health and well-being. Almost 50% of those who responded to the consultation on the matter advocated a more proportionate spend for those areas. Given those facts, why is Northern Ireland still so far behind the Republic of Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England where per capita spend for sport and art is concerned?

There will be a double whammy in the next couple of years for lottery money for good causes, with the result that there may be job losses in front-line services. Given those facts, what will the Minister give to those groups that are dependent on that money, and what comfort can he give to those people who are waiting for funding?

Mr P Robinson: I want to be clear about the latter issue: public funding is not used to substitute the lottery when it does not come up with the goods. Lottery money was additional funding, and the fact that its organisers have decided — wrongly, in my view — to punish regions throughout the United Kingdom by making heavy funds available for the London area, does not mean that any of the regional Administrations will be able to pick up the slack.

Lottery funding is an important area of activity. Given that I think that the Member is the longest serving member of Sport Northern Ireland, he and I have a great deal in common in wanting to see as high an allocation as possible for sport. The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure has produced a sports strategy that the Executive will want to implement. The Budget makes significant allocations to the area, not just in the form of resources, but through the capital allocations that are part of the investment

strategy for sport. Therefore, as far as the Executive are concerned, sport is an important area.

In relation to water charges and costs, the Executive were in a difficult position in that the first report from the group that is advising the Minister for Regional Development was available, but we did not have the second report in order for us to take its findings into account. Perhaps I am an optimist, but I would have hoped that the second report could have identified areas in which savings could have been made and that it could have provided us with some easement. However, we will consider those issues when the Executive subcommittee receives the report in the next few weeks. Therefore, I do not think that we have the final picture on water. The other matters that are connected to water are more detailed and are therefore more in the province of the Minister for Regional Development.

Mr Craig: As a member of the Committee for Social Development, I, too, give a warm welcome to the Minister's statement. It goes a long way to alleviating the fears that we have all had about social housing.

I note that the Minister has allocated £205 million to social-housing build over the next three years. I also note that his detailed report includes the use of private finance initiatives to help meet the target of building 10,000 homes. Does the Minister believe that there is a very important role for private finance in meeting those targets? Does he agree with me that the cash injection into the social-housing market will help to stabilise the construction industry, which is facing a slowdown?

Mr P Robinson: Let us be clear: £205 million is being made available in addition to what was in the draft Budget. One thing that encouraged me to recommend that level of additional investment was the fact that the Minister for Social Development had gone the extra mile and commissioned Baroness Ford to review housing matters and ascertain where additional funds could be made available to improve the contribution that could be made from the Department. I have seen a preliminary report from Baroness Ford; the final report has not yet been submitted. On the basis of that preliminary report, I can assert that some valuable work has been done that will assist the Minister.

To summarise, the funding level in the draft Budget and the additional allocation that has been announced in today's statement form only part of the overall picture. On top of that, we want the Minister of the Environment to work with the Minister for Social Development to examine how the planning process can help — whether through article 40 of The Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, or through some new legislation — to ensure that large developments include some percentage of social and affordable housing.

Clearly, private finance can assist in many cases. There is also the issue of affordable housing and the work of the co-ownership schemes. There are many areas of activity where additional funds can be factored in, not least some of the areas that have been identified in Baroness Ford's review, which it would be wrong of me to mention. The Minister for Social Development will wish to spell out those matters to the House when she has the final report from Baroness Ford.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What future opportunities will be created for the sectors that will be disappointed with the Minister's Budget allocations? I am thinking primarily of the women's sector and the community and voluntary sector. Will there be any future opportunities for those sectors?

Mr P Robinson: I want to be very clear about the nature of today's exercise. The Department of Finance and Personnel examines the various spending areas for each Department and makes allocations to those areas. Within those spending areas, there is complete flexibility for Ministers to make allocations. Any Minister can identify a particular need, whether in one of the interests that the Member mentioned or in any other area, and allocate to that area of activity.

I do not want to micromanage any Department at that level. I have made allocations at the higher, strategic level to Departments' spending areas. The principal work of getting down to allocations, grants and funds for various groups and organisations is a job for the other Ministers. Therefore, the Member's job is not finished; she still has to urge the Ministers who are responsible for those Departments to ensure that the interests that she mentioned are made a priority within their individual spending areas.

Mr Lunn: There is much in the Minister's statement that should be welcomed. However, that does not mean that we, as the opposition, should not be able to highlight deficiencies and draw attention to what is missing. My colleague Dr Farry's question effectively went unanswered — the Minister seems to have a problem with being called to account in that way. I can assure him that the Alliance Party will continue to fulfil its role as the opposition and mount an effective challenge to the Executive.

12.45 pm

Specifically, I ask the Minister for his reaction to the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland's comments that his approach to local taxation could threaten the parity principle.

Mr P Robinson: I assure the Member that I have no problem whatsoever with being called to account. I am happy to make myself available to the House's Committees and to the Assembly. Indeed, if party delegations wish to meet with me to discuss issues, I am happy to meet with them. Therefore, I have no

difficulty with being called to account. That is what democracy is all about, and devolution is all about being able to deal with issues in a manner in which they were never dealt with under direct rule.

The Member mentioned the parity principle. We must be very clear that, already, considerable disparity exists in many areas of activity in the United Kingdom. I do not know whether the Member watches much television, but, in a recent edition of the 'Politics Show', he may have seen a feature on the disparity that exists between people who live on either side of the border between England and Scotland. That feature demonstrated what devolution can do in one area of activity as opposed to another.

I have never had a difficulty with the parity principle. All that I want for Northern Ireland is for our standards to be no less than those that are available elsewhere in the United Kingdom. If they are better, I will not complain.

Ms Purvis: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I welcome the new Budget allocations. A former Chancellor in another place was called the "the prudent Chancellor". Our Chancellor, to use his own words, could be called "modest and prudent".

In response to an earlier question, the Minister said that many of the consultation submissions told him where to spend the money — and lots of it — but very few told him where to spend less money. Will he confirm whether any submissions suggested areas on which he should spend less money? For example, did any state that he should spend less on roads or on Invest NI? Moreover, is the policy that he is pursuing — forgive me, but Latin is not one of my fortes — less *primum non nocere* and more *laissez-faire*?

Mr P Robinson: The Member is trying to maintain her "Red Dawn" image with those questions. If any contributions to the consultation process sought less money, the Department or someone else must have withheld them from me, because I did not see any. That said, and I do not know whether officials were being mischievous, but, on some occasions during consultation meetings when additional resources were being asked for, people were invited to indicate, if there was to be more spend in one area, whether they would like to identify an area in which there might be less spend. There were many suggestions, but health was the main area in which people believed that there should be less spend. However, I suspect that that happened largely because people had a particular cart that they wanted to wheel.

As far as my being "modest and prudent" is concerned, I have never been called modest before. Undoubtedly, the Member has shown some considerable insight in properly labelling me. I am not worried by labels. By that I mean labels that are attached to the Budget, not personal labels. During the draft Budget period, I heard it being called neoliberal, neo-Thatcherite and right wing. Quite honestly, all that I consider is whether the

allocations that have been made make sense for conditions in Northern Ireland.

I believe that the Budget is in the tradition of the Ulster radical. It recognises that we must do many things for ourselves in order to grow our economy, but, at the same time, it recognises that we must do those things in a caring fashion. The Budget includes a dimension in which considerable funds must be made available to the public sector.

Although, in this Budget, we have gone for economic growth, we are still mindful that there are areas in the public sector where there is a need for more funding, and we have done that. In my view, this is a well-balanced Budget.

Mr Ross: I welcome the Minister's statement and the Executive's priority of building a strong economy, which can only underpin a peaceful society and is the right approach to take. Of course, if we are going to do that, it will be important that we have a well-educated workforce.

I agree with the Minister's focus on innovation. He said that the allocation for the Department for Employment and Learning has increased by 35% when compared to 2006-07. Particularly welcome is the additional £40 million over the next three years to fund projects including additional PhD science studentships, research and support for the further education sector. Will the Minister outline what impact he envisages that this will have?

Mr P Robinson: Innovation funding is very important. As an Executive, we have identified as our priority the growth of our economy. We have further decided that we need to look particularly towards areas such as financial services, the business sector and ICT for the way forward. If we are going to groom people for jobs in those areas, we have to ensure that our colleges and universities are producing people who have the right talents and skills for the jobs that we want to create in Northern Ireland.

That component is essential: the skills have to be available. I believe that we can achieve that baseline in our society. I do not want to pour cold water on some of the subjects that are being studied in colleges and universities, but some students are emerging with degrees in subjects that are of little earthly use to anyone and bear no relationship to the kind of jobs that are available, never mind those that we need to create in Northern Ireland.

The Minister for Employment and Learning's task is at the front line as regards trying to create the growth in our economy that we need — it is about getting the skills in place for the better jobs that we want to create.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister. The Assembly will, by leave, suspend, and will reconvene at 2.00 pm with the motion on public-transport funding.

The sitting was suspended at 12.52 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Public Transport Funding

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item of business on the Order Paper is the motion on public-transport funding.

Mr Moutray: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is there a quorum in the House?

Notice taken that 10 Members were not present. House counted, and there being fewer than 10 members present, the Deputy Speaker ordered the Division Bells to be rung.

Upon 10 Members being present —

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 to make a winding-up speech. All other Members 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 to make a winding-up speech.

Dr Farry: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that public transport is currently underfunded compared to other regions; acknowledges that public transport could reduce traffic congestion and carbon emissions, and play a key role in reducing poverty and social exclusion; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to redress the imbalance in public transport and roads spending.

The purpose of the motion is to draw attention to a major imbalance in funding between the allocation for roads and the allocation for public transport. That imbalance carries major consequences for the local economy and the global environment. As the opposition in the Assembly, it is part of my party's role to identify such fundamental flaws in Government policy. We are committed to rebalancing the economy, and are ambitious to modernise society.

The challenge for the Assembly, and, in particular, for the Minister for Regional Development, is first to recognise the scale of the problem, and then to commence the process of trying to rebalance the departmental budget. Failure to address the problem will only contribute to continuing stagnation.

About two thirds of the transport budget in Northern Ireland goes to roads, with less than a third left for investment in public transport. That is the opposite of

the situation in many other countries and regions in Europe, and it is not sustainable.

That imbalance is a legacy of the Northern Ireland regional transportation strategy, which was inherited by the current Executive. However, rather than getting better, the imbalance is set to get worse. Over the lifespan of the current Budget, 70% of transport revenue funding will be allocated to roads, and 30% to public transport.

In the current financial year, in which allocations were set by direct rule Ministers, 60% of capital resources are invested in public transport. That is encouraging, but, over the lifespan of the investment strategy for Northern Ireland, 81% of resources will be invested in roads, and only 19% will be invested in public transport. Investment in transport will move from a ratio between roads and public transport of almost 1:1 in year 1, to 3:1 in favour of roads over the first three years, and then to 4:1 overall. Instead of progressively investing more money in public transport over the 10-year period of the investment strategy, the situation will get worse. That is worrying, and it goes against the trend around the world that recognises the need to address climate change and redirect resources accordingly.

The regional transportation strategy sought to encourage moves away from car use, and it is important to recognise that there has been a positive upturn in the use of public transport in recent years. The new trains have made a difference, the new Metro bus service has made major improvements, and park-and-ride facilities are filling up. However, to capitalise on those changes requires a change of direction, which I fear is not being provided.

I pay tribute to the work that Translink is doing in difficult circumstances. The motion is not meant as a criticism of Translink or the work that it is doing. Although the use of public transport has increased in recent years, road use has increased at an even greater rate. Therefore, the recent investment in public transportation is good, but it is not enough, and it is not being followed through.

It is difficult to make like-for-like comparisons with the rest of the UK, not least because funding there is split between central Government — or the devolved Administrations — and local government. However, last year in Scotland, 70% of the revenue budget for transport was allocated to public transport. The opposite was the case in Northern Ireland.

In England, funding was split 50:50 between roads and public transport. The differentials in capital investment between England and Northern Ireland may well be less, but funding in Northern Ireland is substantially more skewed towards roads than most of our counterparts. Public-sector support for public

transport in Northern Ireland is the equivalent of around £14 a head. In parts of the south east of England, that figure approaches almost £200 a head. The demographics may well be different in Northern Ireland, but they are not that different.

Most European cities adopt a very focused approach towards public transport, including medium-sized cities on a par with Belfast. Transportation in most European cities is based around public transport, and the car is the exception, rather than the norm. There are good reasons why those cities have developed along those lines.

I understand that the Executive wish to improve the overall transportation infrastructure. Transport is underfunded in Northern Ireland, but the transport infrastructure is a key driver of the economy. The Varney Report shows that 38% of capital investment in the Republic of Ireland goes to transport, but that Northern Ireland currently receives around 16%. Expenditure on transportation capital is £324 a head in Northern Ireland. In Wales, that figure is £557, and it is well over £600 in England and Scotland.

The motion is not intended to decry investment in the road infrastructure, which is worthy and important. We are pointing to the underinvestment in public transport. There are real dangers in seeking to apply twentieth-century solutions to twenty-first-century problems. For far too long, public transport has been the poor relation. All of our competitors are investing heavily in their public-transport infrastructure, and there are obvious economic and environmental imperatives in doing so. Public transport aids and tackles social exclusion, and it helps labour mobility. That is important to a shared future — which Alliance Members must refer to in every speech.

As 28% of the population are economically inactive, public transport becomes an important economic consideration. It also addresses congestion, which, as everyone knows, carries a high economic cost. It is important to bear in mind that one cannot build a way out of congestion: a more creative approach is required.

I have often spoken about the large gap in productivity between Northern Ireland and the average in the rest of the UK, where the major economic concentration is in the south-east of England. The Northern Ireland economy is highly skewed towards Belfast: indeed, the greater Belfast area has the seventh-highest gross value added (GVA) in the UK. That is a major success story for the city of Belfast.

The Northern Ireland economy must be rebalanced, but it is important to recognise that imbalances in a regional economy are less significant than those in a national economy. The GVA figures identify Belfast as the economic hub and driver for Northern Ireland, and any investment in transport must recognise the importance

of the Belfast subregion and ensure that its transport system works.

Transport produces some 25% of carbon emissions in the UK, and the current figure for Northern Ireland is 27%. According to the Energy Saving Trust, 12 local authority areas in Northern Ireland have some of the worst carbon footprints in the UK. The Assembly has signed up to the Climate Change Bill [HL] that sets a target of achieving a 60% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050. Some Members would go further and aim for an 80% reduction, as our Scottish and Welsh counterparts are contemplating. However, the current balance in transport funding runs contrary to meeting even the 60% target, never mind the 80% target. The environment is at the forefront of the mind of communities around the world. Therefore, the Assembly must recognise the environmental impact of its transportation policy.

There is a clear logic to building new dwellings in the vicinity of transportation hubs. Two years ago, I spent a good deal of time in Arlington, Virginia, in the good old USA — a society that is supposedly dominated by the car. However, Arlington has a clear planning policy of building new housing beside metro stops, which makes good sense and tackles a major traffic problem.

The Assembly has many options: it can invest in a light railway or a fully fledged tram system for Belfast. However, there is some scepticism about what the current proposals for a rapid-transit system mean. It has been talked about for several years without coming to fruition. The Assembly also needs to debate broadening the provision of a rapid-transit system to more commuter routes, particularly to those in the south of the city where much of the congestion is concentrated.

The existing rail network must be consolidated: the 23 new trains have made a difference, but only 13 more trains are being contemplated, and many more are needed. The Assembly should debate putting rail halts at both Belfast airports: that is crucial to the integration of public transport. To people who fly into Belfast, particularly late at night, and see signs stating that the last bus will leave in 10 minutes, Northern Ireland seems very provincial. That is contrary to the impression that it wants to give of being a core part of the global economy.

The Assembly could debate the extension of free transport for those aged over 60 to people with disabilities and to students, or it could consider the provision of more general support for fares to make public transport more competitive. If the cost of public transport were deemed to be reasonable, more and more people would be attracted to it.

I have no doubt that many Members will make a play for the areas that they represent. In my North Down constituency, there are major traffic problems on the A2. Realistically, however, little can be done to

improve that road because there is not enough space for expansion, and tinkering with the traffic-light sequences would make little difference. North Down has the asset of a railway line, of which much more use should be made.

Overall, the Alliance Party's motion identifies an objective that is consistent with developing a shared future: a rebalancing of the economy and the building of integrated public services for all.

Mr Gallagher: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "exclusion" and insert:

"; further notes that due to the lack of public transport services across rural areas, for many people cars are the only means of transport; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to seek increased investment for improving both public transport and safety on rural roads."

I thank Stephen Farry and the Alliance Party for tabling the motion and instigating an important debate. As Members know, I am a member of the Committee for the Environment, and I have regularly spoken in the Chamber about environmental issues, not least the implications of climate change. It goes without saying that I agree with much of the original motion.

More must be done to encourage people to use their cars less and to make greater use of public transport. The benefits will be a reduction in carbon emissions, which are linked to climate change. The informed view, as well as the general view, is that a change in the climate is occurring.

2.15 pm

This morning, experts on climate change attended an event in the Long Gallery, and their views were not reassuring. By 2030, the implications of climate change, such as an increase in floods and a rise in sea levels, will have worsened. In fact, many people have encountered flooding this week that would not have occurred 10 years ago. Such disasters are on the increase, and they will worsen. Therefore, it is important that we take note of the issue and do our best to reduce carbon emissions.

The motion is problematic, because it calls on the Minister for Regional Development to take money from the roads budget and put it into public transport. I tabled the amendment because the motion is unfair to people in rural areas, where, first, the public-transport service is very poor — in fact, it is non-existent in some cases — and, secondly, the maintenance of roads in those areas is lagging behind. Expenditure on roads maintenance in rural areas has been in decline for years. We must tackle those issues together, and the amendment provides a way in which to do that.

In my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, there are no railways, and bus services are sketchy. Therefore, we should not ask the people who live there to accept a further reduction in expenditure on roads

maintenance. The roads-maintenance budget has been in decline for decades, and that has caused anger and frustration. Neglect of many rural roads, with their patches and potholes, has left many people in rural areas angry. They have had to replace tyres on their cars, purchase new wheel rims or suspension arms and endure hefty mechanics' bills.

The question that my constituents most frequently ask about roads concerns why they pay road tax. It is difficult to answer that question when the roads that those constituents use are not included in winter gritting programmes, and when they must cope with poor surfacing, potholes and other forms of neglect. We must deal not only with that issue but with the issue of safety on rural roads.

Over the years, there have been fatalities on all types of road, including rural and second-class roads. It is imperative that resources continue to be made available to improve safety on all roads, because some of them are in an extremely dangerous condition. Therefore, we cannot even begin to talk about taking resources for roads maintenance from the Department's existing budget and putting them into public transport.

I have made several requests to the Department for Regional Development for the erection of warning signs or road markings on dangerous sections of second-class roads, but I have learnt that its current policy does not permit that. That should be addressed without delay.

I appreciate that DRD has limitations on its budget and tries to spread its spending as equitably as possible. There are some rural transport schemes — they are small in number but still helpful. There are also schemes to help people with disabilities who live in rural areas. However, businesspeople and road users in the west have been saying for years that the cost of transport is the biggest disadvantage that they have to overcome. They all say that more investment is required in the roads network, for the reasons that I have outlined and because it is important in attracting investment and creating job opportunities in those areas. Therefore, more must be done to attract investment. In the west in particular, we do not have a decent roads infrastructure. The Assembly has held debates about the difficulties in getting firms to invest in the west.

The amendment is not meant to be divisive; it simply asks the Assembly to acknowledge that there is a deficit in the funding of roads in rural areas which must be addressed. The amendment calls for more investment in public transport and rural roads in areas where the car is the only form of transport. Most importantly, it aims to improve safety for all road users. I ask Members to support the amendment.

Mr Moutray: Roads and public transport are of the utmost importance as we set about making Northern

Ireland a successful entity capable of competing in the modern global marketplace. For many years, there has been a lack of investment in both of those areas in Northern Ireland. Due to the Troubles, resources were often directed towards other areas of need and our transport system was ultimately neglected. That has cost Northern Ireland in many ways, but has particularly disadvantaged the business community.

Our transport system falls short of the standards set throughout the rest of the United Kingdom, and lags behind that of our closest competitor — the Republic of Ireland. Poor transport infrastructure weakens the attraction of Northern Ireland as a place to live, work and invest. The Assembly must ensure an effective and efficient use of resources. I, and my party colleagues, would welcome investment in both roads and public transport.

As it has been for many years, the DUP is committed to ensuring that the people of Northern Ireland are provided with a fast, efficient, high-quality public-transport system so that passengers have a pleasant and safe experience which creates repeat usage and reduces social exclusion and poverty throughout Northern Ireland. Additionally, investment in public transport will reduce the number of vehicles using the roads, which will reduce carbon emissions and result in a healthier and improved environment for all.

As we have an ageing population, it is important to cater for the elderly and ensure that they are not socially excluded by a lack of public transport. The Assembly has committed itself to providing free travel for the over-60s, so we must endeavour to have a transport system that they can use when they require it.

Improvements in our public-transport system would result in a more pedestrian-friendly Northern Ireland, a reduction in illegal parking and a reduction in journey times through a decrease in road traffic. The key to a successful public-transport system is having the confidence of the public.

Late buses and trains, and poor journey times on main transport corridors, will not inspire an uptake in the use of public transport. Any investment should be targeted at tackling that problem. However, it is equally important that our roads are improved to provide an infrastructure that is capable of supporting a high-class public-transport system. Our roads infrastructure is crucial to encouraging investment in our constituencies and across the Province.

A modern and effective transport infrastructure will assist greatly in building a stable, strong economy, and it is an important factor for investors. It is, therefore, vital that we recognise the deficiencies in our public-transport system and roads network. Although we must consider the Budget constraints, we should endeavour to set corrective measures in place.

I welcome the strategy's aim to provide a modern rapid-transit system, as has long been advocated by the Finance Minister; the upgrading of key transport corridors, which will connect major towns and cities to regional gateways; the continued aim to replace old trains; and the improvement in communication networks, maintaining technological pace with the best in Europe by way of increased Internet connectivity speed, capacity and availability.

There is no doubt that investment is needed in those areas, and such investment will be welcomed in ensuring that the people of Northern Ireland are not subject to social exclusion and poverty. Furthermore, investment in those areas will reduce traffic congestion, resulting in a reduction in carbon emissions and contributing to a healthier environment.

It is important that we invest in our roads in order to provide an infrastructure that is able to meet the twenty-first century demands and assist in providing a high-class transportation system for all road users. However, we must be mindful that with a 7% annual increase in traffic and car users, it is important to provide a quality public-transport system in which customers will have confidence. They must have complete satisfaction in the quality and standard of the public-transport system.

I call on the Minister for Regional Development to administer his budget with caution regarding those issues. They go hand in hand, and investment will result in a more effective, modern, efficient and sustainable transport system that will facilitate the economic growth and social inclusion across the region and align Northern Ireland with the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt ar an rún.

Raymond McCartney and Willie Clarke are unable to attend this afternoon's debate, and they have sent their apologies. I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I am the roads safety spokesperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, and I agree that it makes sense to encourage the use of public transport, because that will help reduce the number of serious road fatalities and injuries. Furthermore, the use of public transport will help reduce carbon emissions, and that is particularly pertinent if we are serious about tackling climate change.

We do not use the transport system to its maximum effect; we must encourage people to use the buses and trains. The more profit that is gained from such use, the greater the investment into the transport system will be — investment that is not possible at present. Each Department has a limited budget; each has a slice of the cake, and each must prioritise. Committee

members had the opportunity to speak out about their Departments' priorities and goals.

The draft Budget stated that one of its aims is to:

"Maintain and develop the public road and rail network and improve public transport provision to deliver a modern, efficient and sustainable transport system that facilitates economic growth and social inclusion across the region."

Therefore, the debate has been brought to the Chamber at a time when the Executive have agreed that the issue is a goal for the Assembly over the next three years. I have every confidence in the Minister for Regional Development to do all that he can to deliver on the agreed strategy.

A major development and important goal will be a modern rapid-transit system that will serve the greater Belfast area and that, when integrated with improved conventional transport, will greatly alleviate traffic congestion in the city. Moreover, we must examine the rail system throughout the country. Many parts are either without a rail system, or there is a need to improve the existing network.

2.30 pm

I hope that the Executive, together with their colleagues and counterparts in the South, will not only look for investment but to improve the present network, especially in the central areas, to develop the north-east and north-west. We must open up public transport to as many people as possible throughout the country. However, they will only be able to avail themselves of public transport if they can access it close to their homes. It is not feasible to expect a commuter to travel from Enniskillen to Portadown in order to catch a train to Derry or Belfast.

I reiterate that there is no magic wand. The Minister can reduce spending in other areas if that is what we want him to do; and we have heard Mr Gallagher referring to the maintenance budget. Do the Members who tabled the motion want the maintenance budget reduced so that the money can be put into public transport? If that is the case, Members will be back in the Chamber in a month's time debating rural roads once again.

As I have said, the key is to encourage the public to use the transport system that is already in place, and to use the profits to improve that system. I encourage the Minister and his colleagues in the Executive, along with their counterparts in the South, to initiate some kind of funding to help improve the infrastructure, particularly the rail system, throughout the country.

In conclusion, the Minister for Regional Development is working within the budget that has been agreed by all parties to ensure that the key objectives of the programme are met. Sinn Féin has no problems with either the motion or the amendment. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr McCallister: I apologise to the Members who tabled the motion and the amendment on behalf of my colleague Fred Cobain, the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, and myself because I cannot stay for all of the debate due to Committee business concerning the Independent Water Review Panel's strand two report.

The Ulster Unionist Party strongly welcomes the central message in the motion. Evidence and opinion are growing on a daily basis that a successful and comprehensive public-transport system delivers benefits for the environment, communities and the economy. The Executive need to commit more effort and funding into delivering a public-transport system that is fit for the twenty-first century so that it can convey those benefits to the people of Northern Ireland. However, the Ulster Unionist Party supports the amendment tabled by Mr Gallagher because we feel that it better represents transport needs in Northern Ireland.

Although progress in Northern Ireland's public-transport system has been made over the past 10 years, with substantial growth in passenger numbers and improvements in the quality of our bus and rail network, we need to do more.

Northern Ireland is heavily reliant on the car. Statistics show that the number of cars has grown by 400% since 1960. We have the fastest growing car-ownership market in the United Kingdom, and research conducted by a traffic information service recently has highlighted that Belfast is one of the top 10 congested European cities.

Cars are major contributors to CO₂ emissions and local pollution. To deliver on UK-wide targets for reducing our CO₂ emissions as set out in the Programme for Government, we need to reduce Northern Ireland's reliance on the car. In addition, traffic congestion puts a major strain on our economy, and the CBI has calculated that delays are costing the UK £15 billion a year. Therefore, we can deliver for the environment and for business at the same time.

Indeed, the Institute of Directors and the CBI have both called for greater investment in public transport and traffic management in their responses to the Programme for Government and the draft Budget. The success of the Metro service in Belfast highlights what can be achieved by public transport. Figures show that the Metro system carries 32% of people making journeys in Belfast, but only takes up to 2% of road space.

However, having highlighted that Northern Ireland needs to reduce car use, many people without cars are stranded in their homes. Many people living in rural areas have no other means of getting around.

A substantial number of people do not have access to cars — just over a quarter of households in Northern Ireland. Those people often come from poor families, are elderly or disabled. Those worst hit usually live in

rural areas where regular bus services are out of reach. I welcome the Department's rural community transport initiative. However, more must be done to mainstream rural services and deliver for those who, without adequate public transport, become socially, and often economically, excluded.

The process must be linked to any appraisal of the planning process and to a planning system that incorporates public-transport issues. I welcome new moves on concessionary fares, but there is little point in concessionary fares if, in some areas, there is a poor service, poor access and a low uptake.

In the short term, the Ulster Unionist Party believes that priority targets should be set to improve rural Translink networks. Priority should also be given to increasing quality bus corridors in urban areas to facilitate improved services and encourage increased uptake.

The railway system in Northern Ireland is a shadow of its former self.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Member agree that the most significant piece of infrastructure that the Department can address — after the acquisition of new rolling stock — is the single-line section of the Dargan bridge in Belfast? Will he also agree that the doubling of the track at that bottleneck will enable Northern Ireland Railways to improve significantly the frequencies, capacity and journey times on both the Larne line and the line to Londonderry, as well as enhancing the attractiveness of both routes to potential commuters? It would also enable a Londonderry, Belfast and Dublin intercity service to be introduced properly.

Will the Member further agree that enhanced rolling stock on the Enterprise service is long overdue on that section of the Trans-European Network route, which has its Northern Ireland terminus in the Larne harbour station at the port of Larne?

Mr McCallister: I thank my honourable friend for his intervention, and I agree strongly with him. I go so far as to say that he is on the right track.

Development of the Belfast to Dublin railway line must be a priority as it could bring economic and tourist benefits to Northern Ireland. Having outlined our position, we believe that the motion, without the amendment, is pitting public transport against spending on roads. It is creating a false economy that suggests —

Mr Deputy Speaker: It suggests that the Member has run out of line.

Mr McCallister: I am glad that the Deputy Speaker is enjoying the pun.

Mr Irwin: In my constituency, rural transport is a key link for many people who live in the countryside. Indeed, increased services to neighbouring towns have been a real benefit to the elderly and to those unable to

afford their own form of transport. However, there is clearly a lot of room for improvement. I have listened to the views of those living in small villages and hamlets who feel forgotten with regard to public transport. In many cases, they are missing out, and it could be said that they are socially excluded due to the lack of adequate, regular, public transport.

Rural transport schemes are doing sterling work in trying to address those issues by providing transport for those less mobile and giving them a vital link. However, those schemes could be further assisted and their scope increased.

The free fares for the elderly scheme was a welcome development initiated by the DUP some time ago. Many people are using that scheme to their full advantage, and they have said that the scheme is a massive help as they do not have to worry about finding a parking space. Those unable to drive due to ill health or those unable to afford a vehicle say that free fares have enabled them to travel around more than ever before, which is encouraging.

Although I have focused on the issue of rural transport and the need for a greater degree of service for rural dwellers in small villages and hamlets, there is no doubting the role that public transport should be playing in the reduction of congestion and carbon emissions. However, getting people out of their cars and onto public transport is not a simple task.

The major catalyst to achieving that in the longer term is the creation of a reliable and wide-ranging public-transport system. Having said that, for many people in rural areas, cars are the only available forms of transport. Indeed, in recent years, rural roads have been neglected, with the result that improvements are required.

For people who travel to work on public transport, being late is not an option. However, that is the reality for many, and it is a major obstacle in encouraging people to travel by public transport. That situation can be improved only by investing more resources in the transport network.

If the number of cars on the roads is to be reduced in the long term, more commuters must perceive public transport to be a cheaper, faster and more reliable mode of travelling. That is a huge task.

I support the amendment.

Mr Dallat: I support the spirit of the motion, and, given that I live in a rural area, I believe that the amendment is important.

The recently emerged eastern European democracies have made heavy investment in their transport systems a priority. That policy was quite deliberate, because it put public transport at the top of the list of ways in which to regenerate economies, address social inclusion,

and tackle problems in areas that experienced social discrimination in the past.

By investing in public transport, we invest in the future of our economy and in the welfare of our people, particularly, but not exclusively, the young and the old. Given proper investment, the benefits of public transport can have an impact on everyone.

In rural areas, the Ulsterbus service covers 34.5% of the people whom it is supposed to serve, and it is predicted that that figure will increase. However, it will reach nowhere near the level that would allow all those who qualify for SmartPasses to avail themselves of the free transport system. That must be addressed.

For example, if I want to go shopping on a Saturday, the first bus from Kilrea to Coleraine leaves at 2.10 pm and the last bus leaves Coleraine at 3.30 pm. Unless I were Donald Duck on ice skates and had a shopping trolley that was capable of overcoming the laws of centrifugal force, I doubt whether I would get any shopping done.

It would be remiss of me not to mention road safety, which is critical. The sooner we get more people off the roads and on to either trains or buses, the sooner we will begin to address road safety and issues that are connected to it.

The draft Budget has set the goal of achieving one million additional public-transport passenger journeys by the end of the Budget period. Although that is highly commendable, how will it be achieved? Those figures will certainly not be distributed across rural regions, where public transport is a threatened species and where efforts to develop rural-transport initiatives are spasmodic. Excluding those initiatives that have been very successful, it is questionable at times whether such strategies contribute anything to rural transportation.

At the end of the month, the Committee for Regional Development will examine public-transport systems in other regions, and I look forward to that. Until we address that issue, we will not have kick-started the recovery in all its forms. It is in the interests of everyone to do so, particularly those who are socially and economically disadvantaged due to a lack of investment in road and rail services.

We often consider the Republic to be a good example of what happens when there has been investment in public transport. Railways that were abandoned in the dark days of the past are coming alive again, particularly in the west of Ireland. The recently modernised rail service to Sligo, which I mentioned this morning, now attracts double the number of passengers. That is a good example of how investment produces results.

Indeed, we can look closer to home, where past investment in new trains had a very positive impact on the number of people who used the rail service between

Derry and Belfast. Hence the programme for a decent intercity service must be moved up the list of priorities and proceed at all costs.

2.45 pm

I have nothing more to say except to thank those Members who tabled the motion. The motion appeals particularly to people from the north-west, because they feel that they have had a bad deal in the past, and they look to the new Minister to redress the imbalance. The Minister has the support of all the people in the north-west, including many from his own party, to do that.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am grateful to those who have participated in the debate and for the words of encouragement from the north-west. I am very conscious that people in the north-west have been let down by previous Administrations, including the previous Executive.

I am also grateful that Members have put forward a wide range of interesting views to what is a wide-ranging motion. The motion covers four areas: the level of funding in public transport compared with that in other regions; the contribution that public transport can make to reducing traffic congestion and carbon emissions; the key role that public transport can play in reducing poverty and social exclusion; and the balance of spending between public transport and roads.

In any discussion on transport provision and funding, it is helpful to begin by referring to the regional transportation strategy, which still steers us in our decision-making. The regional transportation strategy, which was published in 2002, provided a strategic framework for the planning, funding and delivery of transport throughout the North. It recognised the strategic importance of transport infrastructure and services to the future development and prosperity of the region. It acknowledged the context of historical underfunding of transport and set out proposals for balanced development of infrastructure and services over the 10 years until 2012.

I wish to make a broad point about the wording of the motion, which draws a distinction between funding for public transport and funding for roads. That implies that there are two distinct funding streams and that funding in one area provides no benefit to the other. That is not the case. As Members will know, buses are the principal means of public transport in the North. Although we are investing in improvements in the rail network, it is limited and is not available to large areas, and many Members have mentioned that fact. Therefore, to most people, public transport means bus rather than rail services. Some 89% of people who use public transport travel by bus, and buses run on roads. Investment in roads benefits bus users by improving journey speed. The investment that we have already made in improving

roads has improved bus travel, and it will continue to do so. For example, the dualling of the A6 will improve journey times for a substantial number of people travelling between Belfast and Derry. Likewise, the dualling of the A5 will bring similar benefits for those travelling by bus between Derry and Dublin.

I acknowledge the point made in Mr Gallagher's amendment that cars will continue to be a necessary means of transport in rural areas. We have been improving rural transport services, but those improvements cannot cover the full range of transport needs in the countryside. Therefore, I am committed to ensuring adequate funding for, and maintenance of, roads in rural areas.

The point was raised about underinvestment in public transport. The regional transportation strategy recognised that all aspects of transport had suffered from a lack of funding. Thanks to the regional transportation strategy, transport was recognised as a priority funding area, and substantial levels of funding began to be channelled into public transport and roads. We began from a low baseline, and we have been trying to rectify the deficits, while ensuring that other vital public services received adequate levels of resources. It is true that, according to some indicators, we do not yet compare favourably with other areas, whether in Britain or in the rest of the island of Ireland. For example, we still spend less per head of population on rail and bus subsidies than is spent in other areas of Britain.

However, let us look at the more positive measures. We have more bus provision per capita than in the rest of the island of Ireland, and, in line with our targets in the regional transportation strategy, our rail fleet is newer than that in any area in Britain. Our bus fleet is also being renewed rapidly. We are also seeing a reversal of the downward trend in the use of public transport, with numbers growing as a result of recent capital investment.

As the motion states, the development of public transport can contribute to the reduction of congestion and, consequently, carbon emissions. Good transport provision, which includes good public transport, is also essential if we are to tackle social need.

It provides access to employment and training, health and social services, education and shops. Lack of access to transport contributes to social exclusion and need. That was recognised in the regional transportation strategy, which aimed to target efforts and resources on factors that cause social need and exclusion among deprived and socially disadvantaged people.

Barriers of isolation and remoteness can be broken down by good public-transport systems. The regional transportation strategy has increased the overall spend on transportation. It assumed a total investment of £3.5 billion, which comprised maintenance of the pre-2002 baseline level of £2.1 billion and £1.4 billion

additional funding, although with the caveat that the final outcome would be subject to the normal budgetary processes. The result has been that transportation has been successful in attracting finance, particularly in the areas of road and rail.

With respect to the split between roads and public transport, the average ratio for spending from 2002-03 to 2006-07 was 72% on highways and 28% on public transport. The figure has varied from year to year, depending on the size of the schemes coming forward. In the current year, 61% has been allocated to roads and 39% to public transport.

I agree that there is a need to continue support for public transport and to address the historic underinvestment in transportation generally. However, I must balance the needs of roads against those of public transport. The roads network is particularly vital in rural areas and, as I mentioned earlier, there is interdependence between roads and public transport, in that the majority of people who use public transport travel by bus on the roads. Also, a range of measures funded from the roads budget, rather than the public-transport budget — such as the development of the quality bus corridors and park-and-ride sites — directly benefit users of public transport. Additionally, the vast majority of freight is transported via the road network: therefore, any improvement in the road infrastructure significantly benefits the economy.

With regard to public transport, the past few years have seen great progress. My Department has provided funding of some £93 million, from 2004-05 to 2006-07, to enable major projects to be completed on the railway network. As a result, 23 new trains have been operating since September 2005; large projects have been completed to complement their introduction, including the new train care facility at Fortwilliam; and major works have been completed to upgrade the core network of railway lines. A project to upgrade railway stations and halts in accordance with disability and discrimination legislation and Translink's new rail vision, is well under way and should be completed by the end of this financial year or early in the next. As a result of that work there has been substantial growth in railway passenger numbers, with a 12% increase across the network generally from 2005-06 to 2006-07.

DRD has also provided funding of £56 million between 2003-04 and 2006-07 to enable Translink to purchase over 500 buses. Those buses now operate across the region and have had a positive impact on passenger numbers, particularly in relation to the Metro service, where passenger numbers have increased by 15% over the two years to March 2007.

I am committed to continuing to invest in public transport. My Department submitted a wide range of bids in the Budget and ISNI II processes for a variety of roads and public-transport schemes. The draft

Budget 2007 has provided an allocation of £137 million for railways over the three years to 2010-11. That will allow NIR to commence procurement of 20 new trains to replace the remaining old stock, and to enhance services both around Belfast and to Derry. The £12 million scheme to improve the Ballymena to Coleraine section of the Belfast to Derry line will come on site later this year for completion by 2010. Significant works, costing some £40 million, are also planned over the next three years between Lurgan and Knockmore. Work will commence on the relaying of the Coleraine to Derry line towards the end of the current Budget period. That will also involve the provision of a passing loop and the installation of a new signalling system. The total cost of the Derry line works is expected to be in the region of £64 million.

The funding in the draft Budget will also allow for further development of the Translink bus fleet. A key provision in the Budget and ISNI II relates to the development of a rapid-transit system for Belfast. This new form of public transport offers enormous potential to deliver a step change in public transport in Belfast and promises to be a modern, efficient, environmentally-friendly transport system, fit for the twenty-first century. We are concluding our study of rapid transit, and will shortly take decisions about the routes and the technologies.

I have mentioned the regional transportation strategy a number of times and I do so once more. The strategy contains a commitment to undertake a mid-term review. Given that we are half-way through the life of the strategy, that needs to be undertaken now. I intend that it will adopt a three-themed approach, considering the progress of implementation to date; the changing environment since 2002; and the budgetary position.

The review will need to consider what adjustments or changes may be required to the regional transportation strategy's key outcomes, including emissions from traffic, traffic speeds at peak hours and the accessibility of transport services. It will also seek to deal with several developments that have taken place since 2002, which include the focus on climate change and sustainable development. It will, of course, re-examine the funding needs of roads and public transport and the most appropriate balance between the two funding streams.

My position is clear: I want to secure a transport infrastructure that is of sufficient standard to underpin economic growth. I want to continue to develop public-transport services that will also support the economy and promote social inclusion. Past, present and planned investment demonstrates my and the Department's commitment to those aims. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Gallagher: I thank Members who have contributed to the debate, which, as the Minister has just said, has been wide ranging. It covered key issues that none of us can afford to ignore any longer, such as

emissions, ever-increasing traffic congestion and the importance of a two-track approach that involves investment in both public transport and rural roads.

Members from various constituencies, some of which are not in the west, indicated that their communities share the same problems as those in the west, such the need to rely on cars in the absence of alternative transport. The important matter of road safety was, quite rightly, raised. I welcome the comments of my colleague John Dallat, who said that the Committee for Regional Development will take an in-depth look at road transport.

I thank the Minister for his presence during the debate. I welcome his comments, particularly his commitment to try to secure adequate funding for the maintenance of rural roads. However, I disagree with him slightly on one issue: I do not believe that the north-west was entirely ignored during the previous Assembly mandate. For example, I recall the welcome announcement of new rolling stock comprising 23 trains, which would benefit the north-west railway routes. That and other matters that come to mind, such as the Dungiven bypass, must be built on as we move forward.

I want to make particular mention of the importance of North/South co-operation on public transport. I am aware that Bus Éireann and Translink work together on some issues. However, greater co-operation would bring greater benefits to many people. For example, there is a regular bus service from Donegal that, at certain times, goes through either Fermanagh or parts of Tyrone, then on to Cavan and Monaghan. That is a good service. With the development of the new road between Dublin and Monaghan, Bus Éireann has introduced an hourly service to Dublin, which operates every day. I want to draw the Minister's attention to the possible examination of that matter by the North/South Ministerial Council, because it is hoped that that service could be extended in the future.

I hope that I have covered most of the relevant issues. Once again, I extend my thanks to all Members who contributed to the debate, and I ask that they support the amendment.

Mr Ford: The debate has been interesting, bearing in mind the large measure of agreement from all corners of the House, albeit with certain differences of emphasis. I want to deal with one of the key points that Mr Gallagher raised. The amendment suggested that, somehow, my party's original motion asked for spending to be rebalanced, specifically by taking money away from areas such as rural road maintenance and putting it towards public transport.

Specifically, we did not do that. There are other issues. Indeed, in the past, the Department has been creative with regard to where it has acquired funding for road developments. We only wish that it could be just as creative when looking for money for rail and

bus developments in the future. Clearly, there is an issue, which was raised by several Members during the debate, about the needs of rural communities that are not currently being met. It seems to us, as proposers of the motion, that the lessons that have been learnt from the provision of quality public transport are every bit as relevant in rural areas as they are in urban areas.

3.00 pm

Mr Moutray, speaking on behalf of the DUP, talked about the need to target investment to encourage confidence in public transport. It seems that that has been entirely proven. A few years ago, when there was serious investment in the Enterprise service, the number of people who caught the train to Dublin rose dramatically. With regard to issues in my own constituency, such as the Templepatrick Airbus, a small park-and-ride service has had to be expanded three times. By providing a quality regular service, people get out of their cars and use public transport. That is the key lesson — as several people said — that must be taken all the way round.

I was particularly interested in John McCallister's comments. It seemed that he agreed entirely with every word that Stephen Farry had said — and then said that he would support the amendment. He made some key points about the need to reduce reliance on the car and, in particular, about the needs of poorer families in rural areas. Those points were re-emphasised by the DUP's Mr Irwin. Possibly the best bit of Mr McCallister's speech was the intervention by Ken Robinson in which he said all that I might have said — and, possibly, even more — about the need for enhancement of rail services. Therefore, I presume that Mr Robinson, if not Mr McCallister, will support the original motion.

John Dallat made appropriate comments about the need to address issues such as road safety. It is absolutely true that public transport is significantly safer than private transport; however, although it is a key issue, road safety is not exactly the issue that is addressed in the debate.

I welcome the positive response that the Minister gave in his comments. I entirely take his point that the costs of bus lanes and park-and-ride have tended to come out of the Roads Service budget. Significant progress has been made regarding issues such as park-and-ride, and I mentioned the Templepatrick Airbus service. Can the Minister tell us when we will see a decent park-and-ride that will actually encourage people out of the cars on the M2? In that way, people, like John Dallat, will be encouraged to get on a train or a bus rather than drive through my constituency, causing pollution as they do so.

The idea of providing a 40-car space on the edge of the Sandyknowes roundabout and calling it a park-and-ride does not seem sensible. There have been some

ideas that are much more creative. I urge the Minister to ensure that his Roads Service staff are considerably more creative, in conjunction with Translink staff, on that matter. The recent investments in buses and trains are welcome. However, I should, perhaps, caution the Minister for Regional Development against criticising the attitude of the Assembly's first Executive to public-transport funding, since the then Minister for Regional Development is now the Minister of Finance and Personnel, and he may need to keep on good terms with him. I advise the Minister to be slightly cautious who he criticises.

Some of the points that the Minister made about the mid-term review of the regional transport strategy (RTS) are very welcome. We look forward to debates in the House as that strategy is implemented. The Minister made some important comments. Perhaps, he might have said a little more about issues such as climate change and CO₂ emissions, which are a crucial part of our original motion. However, he did make some of the points that we need to re-examine. It is clear that the RTS, at its half-way stage, is not up to date with some of the needs that we must address, including such issues as climate change and the need to meet carbon reduction targets — whether 60% or 80% — by 2050. At the moment, the RTS is not even on target to meet a 60% reduction in carbon emissions.

The Minister, quite reasonably, pointed out issues such as the economy. We must be careful not to overemphasise road building and economic benefits. After all, much of the talk about the widening of the Westlink, and the improvement of its junctions, was related to economic need. However, there is clear evidence that, by building roads, we simply crowd them with private cars. It is of no benefit to the economy to have a better road that is crowded with even more cars than would have been there under the existing road pattern. The Scottish Executive, in a study that was undertaken in 1999, concluded that:

“a ‘predict and provide’ approach, in which road capacity is increased to match forecast traffic growth, is environmentally unsustainable, unaffordable and self-defeating.”

In other words, building new roads to tackle congestion is like loosening your belt to tackle obesity.

We must ensure that we get the balance right for economic development, but we must be realistic about what will promote that. Unlimited road building, especially in the major conurbations and the larger district towns, is clearly not the way to promote such development. We must also bear climate change in mind at all times.

The Alliance Party believes that the creative and appropriate use of private funding will make it possible to expand the public-transport budget, as has been the case with the road-building programme on the Westlink

and the M1 and M2 motorways. If that occurred, we would not be cutting the budget for rural roads.

There must be real commitment, so that instead of vague generalisations being made about a Belfast light-rail plan — or whatever kind of rapid-transport system might be proposed for arterial routes — a system will actually be put in place in the lifetime of this Assembly. Over the years, there has been too much talk that has gone nowhere.

We must recognise that issues such as social exclusion and labour mobility will be addressed by people's having the ability to travel to work wherever they wish. We must recognise that the benefits that will be created from investment in public transport will enable a much wider use of skills. That will in turn help to develop our economy, and the assumption that that development can be achieved by building more roads that will only get clogged up will be unsustainable. It is rather unfortunate that transport does not appear anywhere in the key goals of the draft Programme for Government, which we will debate next week.

As members of the opposition party — whatever the Minister of Finance and Personnel may think of our rights — we certainly believe that key issues must be addressed. Those include the development of rail access to both the Belfast airports, and the introduction of a full and inclusive park-and-ride system at Templepatrick to help reduce traffic on the M2, which will benefit commuters from the whole of County Antrim as they travel to Belfast.

When new developments such as the Titanic Quarter are planned, consideration must be given to whether a light-rail or a guided bus system would be suitable. I have no doubt that at least one firm in Galgorm would be keen to take some more orders for guided bus systems. It is rather ridiculous that Ken Livingstone's commitment to make use of Wrightbus's skills has resulted in the company doing more for transport in London than it is for transport in Northern Ireland.

We must consider what can be done to make use of existing railway lines, and I am sure that the House would be disappointed if I did not mention the Knockmore line between Antrim and Lisburn. Reopening that line would create the capacity to serve a growing population between two key growth towns, through a secondary growth town, yet that railway line is currently unused.

Several Members mentioned transport poverty. Whatever we do to plan for private-car usage, the needs of a significant number of our population, both rural and urban, who do not have access to a private car will not be alleviated. An attractive alternative to the private car must be offered so that those who have cars do not need to use them every day. Belfast appears to be the only city in western Europe in which

Government planners assume that building roads is the solution to a commuter traffic problem in a city of 500,000 people. There is something fundamentally wrong with that approach. Nowhere else in Europe do people think that such an approach works, and it simply will not work here.

Some Members have expressed concern about the effect that the Alliance Party's proposal will have on rural populations. However, the motion in no way disadvantages rural people; rather, it calls for enhanced investment and a shift in balance, and it supports those rural people who do not have access to their own private car. I urge the House to support the motion.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes that public transport is currently underfunded compared to other regions; acknowledges that public transport could reduce traffic congestion and carbon emissions, and play a key role in reducing poverty and social exclusion; further notes that due to the lack of public transport services across rural areas, for many people cars are the only means of transport; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to seek increased investment for improving both public transport and safety on rural roads.

Apprenticeships

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 to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes to speak.

Mr Shannon: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern over the decreasing number of apprenticeships which are available in Northern Ireland's manufacturing industries and calls on the Department for Employment and Learning to address the current decline and to promote the provision and facilitation of apprenticeships.

I welcome the opportunity to speak about this issue. It is important to the people of my constituency and, I believe, to people throughout the Province.

Engineering manufacture is vitally important to the economy of Northern Ireland. Innovation, new technology and continuous improvement in engineering stimulate economic development. The manufacturing sector contributes around 25% of the gross value added to the Northern Ireland economy.

To be competitive, the sector must have higher-value-added jobs, which means that it needs people with higher skills — either new entrants such as graduates, technicians, and apprentices, or existing employees who have been upskilled. The jobs on offer are normally well paid, and the engineering manufacture sector is currently as buoyant as it ever was, with many companies crying out for professionally and technically skilled people. It must also be remembered that unemployment in Northern Ireland is at an all-time record low of 4%.

The Engineering Training Council (ETC) is the representative body for skills in Northern Ireland. It also represents the interests of the Sector Skills Council for Science, Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies (SEMTA). The ETC is employer-led and puts their needs at the heart of its skills agenda on the demand-side. The results of its surveys in November and December 2007 of a sample of 30 engineering companies situated across Northern Ireland and which employ nearly 50% of the total engineering workforce indicated that 75% of those companies are currently experiencing considerable skills shortages.

That conservative estimate translates to almost 250 highly skilled people being needed in the areas of fitting, machining, mechanical and electrical maintenance, electronics, design, and toolmaking. Each of the companies indicated that, in its view, the current trend in skills shortage will worsen.

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

I will use an example, because it is important to relate an issue to society: in the 'Jobfinder' section of the 'Belfast Telegraph' on Friday 18 January 2008, another six engineering-related companies advertised vacancies for a range of engineering-skilled workers. Therefore, in just one week's paper — albeit a significant paper — yet another 50 to 100 people have been added to the already considerable number of engineering-skilled workers that are currently needed.

Where do we find the workers that are needed? The answer is found — and has been found for years — in training people through apprenticeships. Many of the companies that need workers also recruit apprentices, and all of them have indicated that they cannot recruit the desired numbers of apprentices, and that the standard of applicant has been much lower than it had been previously. Where does that leave our future skills pool? It is definitely in the shallow end.

If oor haem-fit kumpaneess dinnae hae enough knak about, then whut soart o' hope dae we hae in tractin investmunt. Ther was a tiem whun kumpaneess wud cum tae heer becaus o' grants that wur gien oot.

Ther isnae oany langer this help — oot tha key help-oot — haein aroon a' pool o' profesnal an technicly knaky workers. As weel as a' guid system in place tae train an bring-oan sic profesnal — an technicly knaky workers.

If our indigenous companies do not have sufficient skills available, then what chance do we have of attracting investment? In the past, companies would come to Northern Ireland because of the grants that were available: that is no longer a key incentive. The key incentive now is to have an available pool of professionally and technically skilled workers and a quality system available to train and develop such workers. That is imperative for the future success of companies and individuals in the engineering manufacturing sector as well as the future success of the Province's economy.

Unfortunately, due to the skills shortages, that would not appear to be the case, and there must now be a considerable disconnection between the very difficult job that Invest Northern Ireland is trying to do in attracting inward investment and the lack of available and appropriate skills in Northern Ireland. It is crucial that we develop those vitally important engineering skills and the engineering apprenticeship programme; and critical to achieving that will be the provision of excellent careers advice.

Unfortunately, the new Training for Success apprenticeship scheme has not recruited anywhere near the desired number of apprentices at level 3, which is, from an engineering-sector perspective, the minimum level required to help address current and future skills shortages. Although I am talking specifically about skills and apprenticeship shortages in engineering, it

also applies to other construction trades. For example, in my area we do not have enough placements for apprentice plumbers. Those are just some examples, but other Members will touch upon other issues.

The truth of the matter is that if companies in Northern Ireland cannot find much-needed skills here, they are likely to explore the possibility of going elsewhere. A considerable amount of work needs to be done to resolve this potential crisis. Where do we start? We have to begin to see change.

3.15 pm

I have liaised closely with David Hatton from the Engineering Training Council, who is present in the Gallery. He has made representations to Assembly Committees on this matter and has supplied information to the Minister and to the Committee for Employment and Learning. His idea is to try to increase the number of apprentices. Other people from the Strangford area have also contacted me — that will not surprise anyone — to inform me that their boys and, in some cases, their girls, cannot secure apprenticeships either.

If we are to move forward successfully, collaboration and partnership is the key to a co-ordinated approach, led by the Engineering Training Council in its Sector Skills Council capacity, on behalf of employers. Further specific actions and initiatives must be identified by the Sector Skills Council in conjunction with, and supported by, DEL and Invest Northern Ireland. Such actions and initiatives need to be developed and implemented to meet the current and future skills needs of employers.

The six new regional colleges of further education have a vital role in helping to take that delivery forward. The Jobskills programme was a major initiative; however, its responsibilities have now been passed to Training for Success. The previous Jobskills contract allowed Engineering Training Services to deliver modern apprenticeships to NVQ level 3 — a minimum industry standard for skilled workers — and that was very successful.

However, under Training for Success, Engineering Training Services (ETS) was successful only in obtaining a contract for level-2 apprenticeships. Level 2 is deemed by the industry as semi-skilled, and is certainly not what is required, which is another issue that needs to be addressed.

Engineering employers are concerned that current level-3 providers have little or no experience in delivering employer-led apprenticeships. It is believed that the number of level-3 apprentices recruited this year is very low, therefore having no effect in eliminating current skill shortages.

Providers are contracted to deliver apprenticeships in a given council area; however, there may not be the

number of either employers or young people to sustain a cost-effective programme in such areas. The problems are obvious and must be addressed. It is important that the Minister now push for apprenticeships to be allocated in council areas.

The Engineering Training Council believes that a single provider should be identified to co-ordinate and manage a level-3 apprenticeship programme throughout Northern Ireland, encouraging employers to take ownership of the programme by offering them a package that includes promotion, recruitment, staff training and funding to pay for training costs. Furthermore, engineering centres of excellence should be identified to deliver appropriate training to support employers with foundation training and the delivery of technical certificates. ETS has the expertise and the previous track record in successfully delivering such a programme.

New initiatives, such as an adult apprenticeship engineering programme for the sector must be developed and implemented. A programme must be introduced to explore the possibility of upskilling existing workers to level-3 requirements, which will lead to greater skills and broader flexibility for employers.

Faster development of the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Network is needed in order to promote the importance of the engineering sector, to change the perceptions of those outside that sector, and to attract higher-calibre and more motivated young people to make engineering their first choice for a career. It is not a career for young men only; it is a career for women as well. I know young women who have chosen to pursue a career in engineering, and they are excelling.

A co-ordinated approach to engineering-apprenticeship training is critical because the outcome will have a major impact on the availability of skills. The current numbers of apprenticeships being trained to level 3 through the Training for Success programme is well short of the numbers required by employers. Last year, only 3,278 people were trained to that level, which is down from previous years. That position can, and must, be turned round.

The former Minister with responsibility for employment and learning, Angela Smith, set a goal of 10,000 apprenticeships in Northern Ireland by 2010. How is that to be achieved? The current Minister for Employment and Learning has stated that it is essential to retain and promote apprenticeships.

A chance exists to take on board what is needed and to implement it as a matter of urgency before we lose the drive that we currently have in the skills sector. Take heed of all those who know what they are looking for and what they are talking about, that is, those who are looking for apprenticeships. Stop the drafting of consultations and begin the grafting of workers and see

the change that it makes, not merely to the lives of individuals, but to the lifeblood of Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat. During last week's Adjournment debate on apprenticeships in the Foyle constituency, brought to the House by my party colleague Martina Anderson, I made a number of brief comments with regard to the position of the Committee for Employment and Learning on apprenticeships. I think that it is worth reiterating some of those comments during this debate.

I commend Mr Shannon for bringing forward today's motion. It allows us to raise some of the issues and have them debated in the House. The fact that this is the second plenary debate on issues concerning apprenticeships inside a week shows that this is a general area of concern for Members in all constituencies.

As I mentioned last week, my Committee is currently considering this issue via the monitoring of the Department's Training for Success programme, which has replaced Jobskills. We are looking at the early roll-out of the programme, and we will be making a report on our findings to the Assembly, hopefully shortly after the Easter recess.

To date, we have focused on assessing departmental views on the roll-out of the programme. We are now moving to the critical phase of establishing sectoral feedback. As Mr Shannon has pointed out, last week in Committee, we took evidence from two of the sector skills councils, covering the engineering and utility sectors. It is fair to say that mixed views were expressed. A number of comments were made that would support the message being highlighted in Mr Shannon's motion.

The regional chairperson of the Science, Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies Alliance, Mr David Hatton — whom Mr Shannon quoted — highlighted major concerns about apprenticeships in the manufacturing sector. He said that, in a survey of 30 local manufacturing firms undertaken before the new year, three quarters reported skills shortages. More worryingly, those firms believed that this trend would continue. Mr Hatton did stress that there are tremendous opportunities for skilled engineers and technicians, despite the recent news concerning job losses. It is therefore vital that appropriate skills training is in place.

The engineering sector is concerned that companies may be tempted to relocate if they cannot source appropriate skills. In addition, economic incentives to attract foreign investment will fail if the building blocks of skills are not in place. The Committee is due to take evidence tomorrow from the crucial construction sector, which I know has already been quite vocal with regard to problems arising from apprenticeships, and I urge Members of this Assembly, who do have a genuine interest in this area, to watch the Committee's

agenda. The Committee will be reporting formally on this issue once our monitoring of the programme has been completed. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr McClarty: I congratulate the Member for Strangford Mr Shannon for bringing this very important issue before the House today. At the last Assembly election, the Ulster Unionist Party committed itself to working in partnership with Northern Ireland business sectors, further education colleges and trade unions to promote industry-led apprenticeship schemes to provide businesses with skilled employees. This is something that my honourable friend the Minister for Employment and Learning is diligently working on, and I commend him for that.

While I support the motion, I am not convinced that it addresses all the key factors in a comprehensive manner. Though the motion does reflect concern about the manufacturing sector — and the importance of apprenticeships for a skilled labour workforce — it fails to recognise the economic context faced by the Northern Ireland manufacturing sector and the need to encourage apprenticeships in other sectors.

In recent years, the manufacturing sector has seen a significant reduction in the number of employees, not least as a result of outsourcing. The Northern Ireland census of employment outlines this reduction starkly. In 1993, for instance, there were 99,629 individuals involved in manufacturing in Northern Ireland.

By 2005, that number had reduced to 87,697. There is, therefore, a likely relationship between the falling numbers of apprenticeships and the economic context that is faced by that sector.

It is important to remember that the type and number of apprenticeships each year will be determined by the demand from business and industry. Furthermore, as the Minister for Employment and Learning outlined only last week, apprenticeships cannot solely be seen as the responsibility of his Department. Employers also have a significant role to play. By providing apprenticeships, firms build up a skills base that will be of long-term benefit both to themselves and to the wider economy. Moreover, schools careers officers have a responsibility to recommend and promote apprenticeships to their pupils. Unfortunately, some careers staff in schools appear reluctant to do that.

During the past year, the Department for Employment and Learning spent £51 million on vocational training, £12 million of which was specifically dedicated to supporting young apprentices and their employers. The balance of that money was used to prepare young people for work, and to help them progress to training as apprentices. Such investment was needed because many did not possess the basic skills required to begin an apprenticeship. I welcome that substantial investment; it is money well spent.

I shall conclude by mentioning Training for Success, which replaced the Jobskills programme in September 2007. The scheme offers workplace-based apprenticeships and a range of professional and technical training opportunities whereby young people train as they work, gaining industry-led qualifications in the skills sought by businesses.

Through the apprenticeships programme, it is hoped that individuals will find an interesting career, and that they will obtain the skills that will enable them to secure a job in their chosen field. Apprentices work with an employer from the beginning of their training in information technology, engineering, catering, construction, agriculture, hairdressing, joinery, plumbing and many other areas. A framework is followed so that individuals achieve the training and qualifications that are often required by employers.

Training for Success is an important and innovative scheme, which I would be keen to see developed further. Through such a scheme, we can begin to tackle the decreasing number of apprenticeships that are available in Northern Ireland's manufacturing businesses. I support the motion.

Mr Attwood: The SDLP would have preferred that the motion go further; nonetheless, the significance of the debate should not be understated. Along with other motions on the skills issue, the debate is essentially about how Northern Ireland positions itself in the global economy. If we want to learn how to do that, we only have to look to the Southern part of this island. As I have said before, we must examine what the Irish Government's national development plan has to say on this matter. The Irish Government say that although their lower rate of corporation tax encourages investment, it is the skills, innovation, and research and development base that is the key to sustaining their employment levels and the success of their economy.

Therefore, in the North, because we will not have the benefit of any variation in corporation tax, we must look to skills, innovation, and research and development to attract and sustain new employment in Northern Ireland and encourage indigenous employment opportunities.

3.30 pm

When considering the skills debate, we should also be mindful of the fact that, although members of the Committee for Employment and Learning and other MLAs have looked in great detail at issues to do with level-2 traineeships and level-3 apprenticeships, much of the debate in the South now concentrates on level-4 and level-5 apprenticeships. That reflects the fact that upgrading the skills base is essential to sustaining economic power. Over and above the debate on level-2 traineeships and level-3 apprenticeships, we must engage more fully on the issue of the greater skills that NVQ level 4 and NVQ level 5 offer.

How do we maximise the skills for the jobs that are available, and for those that might become available? Like other Members, I rely on evidence, such as that submitted to the Committee for Employment and Learning on 16 January 2008. Several Members have referred to the evidence of David Hatton from the Sector Skills Council for Science, Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies, and I shall add to what other Members' have quoted Mr Hatton as saying. In the Committee for Employment and Learning, when referring to a survey of engineering companies, which showed that many of them were experiencing skills shortages, he said:

"What does that mean for our future skills base? If sufficiently skilled staff are not available to our indigenous companies, what chance do we have of attracting inward investment?"

Given that an investment conference is expected before the summer, that issue must be at the forefront of our minds. What chance do we have of attracting inward investment if sufficiently skilled staff are not available to our existing indigenous companies? For the sake of evidence, Mr Hatton may have slightly overstated that issue. Nonetheless, we must be aware of his point.

At the same Committee meeting, Mr Hatton said that, given that a skills base does not exist in some — but not all — aspects of the Northern Ireland economy:

"there is now a considerable disconnect between the difficult job that Invest Northern Ireland is doing to attract inward investment and our lack of available and appropriate skills."

My view, and that of the SDLP, is that that disconnect between giving money to the DETI and Invest NI to attract jobs to Northern Ireland and not giving sufficient funds to DEL in order to deliver the skills for those jobs that might be attracted was a flaw in the draft Budget. I have no doubt that the Minister, in his reply, will advise the House whether the final Budget corrects the deficiencies that DEL's response to the draft Budget outlined and that Mr Hatton highlighted. Unless DETI and DEL adopt a joined-up approach to the issue of job skills, we may live to regret what transpires over the next number of years concerning the 6,500 jobs that the draft Programme for Government promised. Those jobs are so desperately needed in this part of Ireland.

Ms Lo: I welcome the opportunity to debate the issue of skills for industry. The Alliance Party supports the Training for Success programme to promote apprenticeships, but it must be targeted at the right areas. We should seek quality in apprenticeships, not just quantity. More importantly, at the end of their apprenticeship, young people should be able to find relevant jobs for which they have been adequately trained. We are not convinced that the motion can realistically achieve that, because of the decline in our manufacturing industries.

The 2006 skills strategy was welcome in that it sought to overcome the stigma of vocational training's somehow being a poor relation of academic education. However, the strategy did not mention manufacturing, which is a reality of the economic times in which we live. A weakness of the skills strategy is that it failed to identify which skills were required in the modern, post-industrial economy, and that is where the Department's focus must now lie.

Therefore the major task of the Departments is to identify important areas of employment in which skills are lacking rather than to promote the provision of apprenticeships for the sake of it. In addition to improving the supply of learning, including apprenticeships, the Departments must work with the employer-led sectors, skills councils and other stakeholders to reduce gaps and shortages in skills.

Northern Ireland was never good at everything, but it used to be good at some things; it enjoyed particular success in the shipbuilding, linen and agriculture industries. In the twenty-first century, the main industries for which people already have the appropriate skills must be identified. Markets to which Northern Ireland companies could export and demands that they could service must also be identified.

The Assembly must target and focus on the skills that have been identified as lacking in Northern Ireland, including the managerial, communication and IT skills that are required in every industry in the modern economy. The Executive pledged to make the economy their number one priority. In response, the Alliance Party specified the requirement to rebalance the economy, not only from the public to the private sector but from low-wage, low-tech jobs to high-wage, high-tech jobs.

Economic requirements are changing, and although apprenticeships are essential to meeting the challenge that that presents, they must be promoted in appropriate areas. Specifically, the Alliance Party wants the Executive to act in response to the Leitch Review of skills, which is being considered by an interdepartmental group that is chaired by the Department for Employment and Learning, and to agree the main industries and skills that must be targeted to meet the Assembly's economic objectives.

Mr Spratt: I support the motion, and I congratulate Mr Shannon on securing the debate and on bringing this important matter to the Floor of the Assembly. The Assembly has debated the Programme for Government, and all sides of the House will agree that its emphasis on the Province's economic development should be a priority for the Executive and for every MLA.

The Department for Employment and Learning has a massive role to play in ensuring that economic development is not simply an aspiration. By developing

a workforce with the necessary skills and adaptability, it will provide the resources from which firms can benefit greatly. Unfortunately, some companies in the manufacturing sector report skills shortages and are voicing their belief that there is little improvement on the horizon.

In light of that, it is worrying to see a downward trend in the number of apprenticeships in Northern Ireland's manufacturing industries. Granted, there has been a downturn in the manufacturing market: for example, the cooling of the housing market has had a knock-on effect on the construction industry. Yet surely those who are already serving apprenticeships must be protected, and pupils from schools throughout Northern Ireland who wish to enter the manufacturing industry must be provided with the opportunity and the incentives to pursue their chosen career paths.

Incentives to employers have played a part in firms taking on apprentices, and the funding framework of the Training for Success programme is central to that. However, today's motion concerns a downward trend in the number of apprenticeships. The impact of prevailing economic conditions on employers is a factor in the downward trend in the number of apprenticeships being offered by firms.

I urge the Minister for Employment and Learning to examine other ways to promote apprenticeships and to entice those in manufacturing to take on apprentices. Importantly, employers must allow those that they have taken on to serve their full apprenticeships. In the current economic conditions, perhaps extra incentives should be offered to employers. Everyone on the Committee for Employment and Learning and in the Assembly will welcome the Finance Minister's announcement today of an additional £40 million.

Shortly after the announcement, the Minister for Employment and Learning, Sir Reg Empey, issued a statement:

"As we all know, Northern Ireland has significant issues in the areas of adult apprenticeships, essential skills, careers and increasing the numbers moving from benefits into employment. We also need to nurture and retain our best talent if we are to compete on the world stage."

The Minister has continually promoted that issue, and I am pleased that he has re-emphasised it in today's statement.

This is the second debate in a fortnight that has raised concerns about apprenticeships. That surely highlights the strength of feeling among Members. The issue affects everyone and is Province-wide, from my constituency of South Belfast to Fermanagh and South Tyrone to Foyle and to Strangford. I am sure that the Minister will take on board the concerns raised today.

If Northern Ireland is to move forward and prosper economically, the necessary skills base is essential. I

urge the Minister to take on board the views from today's debate and from the previous debate. I have no doubt that he will do that, in conjunction with the Committee for Employment and Learning. The onus is on all of us to push the matter forward.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún. I welcome the motion and congratulate Jim Shannon for tabling it. I share his concerns about the decreasing number of apprenticeships in the North's manufacturing industries. I have deep-rooted concerns about the Department for Employment and Learning's Training for Success apprenticeship programme. Last week, I secured an Adjournment debate on apprenticeships in my constituency of Foyle. It addressed the privatisation of apprenticeship training schemes and the fact that many schemes have been centralised in greater Belfast.

The decreasing number of apprenticeships across the North is a matter of the utmost concern to us all. Of special concern is the skewed geographical breakdown in the figures, which clearly indicate disproportionality between the east and the west. In 2005-06, out of 320 trainee electricians across the North, only four were trained in Derry. That amounts to continuing discrimination and inequality, which disadvantages the people of the north-west. That goes to the heart of inequality, which the investment strategy pledges to address. Yesterday, many people came from Derry to Stormont to state that injustice and inequality. We have an obligation to answer that well-considered call for hope and justice, and to right the historic inequality that led to the civil rights campaign as far back as 1969.

The Programme for Government states that apprenticeships are at the heart of a commitment to use prosperity to tackle disadvantage and build an inclusive, stable society. Without trades and without the self-respect that paid employment gives people, it is impossible to address disadvantage, exclusion and the divided society that we are trying to change. If people have historically been excluded from society — left unemployed and untrained — they do not and will not share the aspirations of our Programme for Government, and they cannot and will not engage with those aspirations.

The motion demands that we address the underlying question: why has there been a decline in apprenticeships? The answer is obvious: we have left it all to chance, to incentives and to the marketplace. We have an investment plan, and there will be strategic investment of a huge £18 billion over the coming decade, but it cannot simply be left to market incentives and to business to make apprenticeships attractive to employers.

The Minister must take full responsibility for advancing, hands-on, apprenticeship training through this investment. The Executive must also set conditions for procurement to ensure that contracts are grounded

in ending historical and regional disparities and inequalities and display a social return on the investment.

3.45 pm

The strategic investment strategy is our investment strategy, and we must ensure that it does what it says it will do. We must not leave the marketplace to do it — as if by magic — in the belief that declaring our intent will be enough to make it so. That was not enough in the past and it will not be enough in the future unless the Executive ensure — in every strategic-investment sector — that procurement incorporates the number of apprentices, their location, their hands-on training and provides conditions that will foster community and self respect.

We can do it — the Stand up for Derry campaign enables all our communities to stand up. Sinn Féin supports the motion. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Ross: It is appropriate that Members are debating this issue on the day that the Minister of Finance and Personnel unveiled his very positive Budget to the House. I note that the Minister for Employment and Learning said, in the press release that Mr Spratt alluded to earlier, that he was disappointed with the original allocation that his Department received. In fairness, the Department for Employment and Learning did quite well, and the additional £40 million will be welcomed by the Committee for Employment and Learning and the Minister.

At the heart of the Programme for Government and the Budget is the commitment towards building a strong economy in Northern Ireland. The peaceful society that we enjoy today is underpinned by a strong economy, which is in turn underpinned by a workforce that has the necessary skills to maintain it. Although Mr Shannon mentioned the manufacturing and engineering industries in particular, there are others.

The Assembly has debated motions on numeracy and literacy skills, which are central to learning at all levels. The Federation of Small Businesses echoed the importance of those skills in its evidence to the Committee. Upskilling and learning are cross-cutting issues; and Mr Attwood referred to the disparity in funding between the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department for Employment and Learning. There are, of course, cross-cutting issues that affect the latter and the Department of Education.

Much of the debate in education is about maintaining academic selection in grammar schools. However, we must also ensure that children who are more suited to vocational courses are well catered for. This issue is important because of the focus that is being put on pushing young people to go to university to obtain a degree, and though I advocate maintaining academic excellence, one must bear in mind that academic courses are not suitable for everyone.

Mr Shannon asked why there are not enough plumbers and electricians — part of the problem has been that vocational qualifications and the learning of trades have been undervalued. Many employers are now seeking people who have professional and technical qualifications rather than academic qualifications.

I congratulate the Member for Strangford Jim Shannon for bringing the issue to the House and for recognising the importance of apprenticeships to the economy. The Minister for Employment and Learning has also recognised the value of apprenticeships and has pledged to double their number over the next three years through the Training for Success initiative. Much of that initiative was recommended by the Leitch Review. The Committee Chairperson said that the Committee is monitoring that initiative, and it is important that we give it a chance.

A number of companies in Northern Ireland have already won awards for their roles in taking on apprenticeships; for example Bombardier, and FG Wilson, which is in my constituency of East Antrim. There were problems with previous attempts to get more young people into apprenticeships, which Members mentioned, and there have been press reports about the exploitation of young workers. The Jobskills programme has been criticised for the money that it cost and the relatively poor number of participants who went on to get jobs.

Under the new system, an apprentice is employed and earns a proper wage. However, as the Committee Chairperson and Mr Shannon both said, there are already some concerns about this. One issue is that we should be moving towards an all-age apprenticeship system because the current system only accepts people aged between 16 and 24.

The proposed system presents some difficulties. Many manufacturers encounter problems when taking on 16-year-olds. For example, it is difficult to get insurance for them to work. There is also evidence that, because of the new structures, some employers are less than willing to take on apprentices. Under the new arrangements, employers must pay apprentices from the day on which they start, and they do not like having to foot the cost of their training when there is no guarantee that those apprentices will stay with them.

Mr Spratt said that it is important that apprentices see out their term of apprenticeship. There is evidence that some have not been able to do that, because they have lost their apprenticeship after serving one or two years. It is to be hoped that the contract system to which we are moving will deal with that problem.

The subject of apprenticeships is challenging. The Minister and the Department are moving in the right direction in how they treat apprenticeships and in how they deal with the way in which vocational courses are

viewed and valued. Society must value the academic and vocational routes; it must ensure that young people engage in learning and view apprenticeships as a way in which to enter a career and to further themselves.

Mr B McCrea: One of the advantages of speaking at this stage in a debate is that one has heard what other Members have had to say. There is a temptation to go over old ground, but I refuse to do that. Members talked about evidence: Mr Attwood talked about evidence from the Republic of Ireland; some Members talked about what will happen in their constituencies; and Members from the north-west made great pleas. However, my evidence comes from a different source.

I am one of the few Members who has a degree in engineering. I also worked in manufacturing for a substantial time, and I have employed, managed and used fitters. I have even been known to fix the odd machine. Members will know, because it is in the Register of Members' Interests, that I looked after the Northern Ireland Manufacturing Focus Group's campaign to prevent the phasing-out of industrial derating. Such experience gives one an insight into what is going on.

I am disappointed at the debate's superficiality. All we hear are platitudes from Members, who think that they are saying the right thing but who do not know the reality. Members talked about the situation in other areas and countries that should be examined, but let us look at the situation in Scotland, which is as valid a comparator as anywhere else. In the book 'Scottish Education', it is stated:

"In 1995 it contributed 8.5% of the UK's Gross Domestic Product. In March 1997, 74.7% of employees worked in the service sector; and 16% in manufacturing".

The book concludes that the pattern is the same in all industrially developed areas. It is not the case that one country is at a disadvantage or that some people are doing better than others. We must consider the global economy when considering how to move forward.

Not only is there a decline in the numbers of people employed in the manufacturing sector, but those who are employed in that sector in Northern Ireland and Scotland earn only 80% of the average wage. People who work part-time wonder how they will make ends meet.

One might ask why more people do not become apprentices, but why would anyone be an apprentice if he or she could earn more money by stacking shelves in Tesco? Why would anyone be an apprentice if he or she can work fewer hours somewhere and, as result, be entitled to benefits. That issue is systemic in our society.

There is an image problem with the manufacturing sector, and I speak as one who supports it. People do not view it as a career that they want their children to enter; they do not consider it to constitute a valuable career. They want their children to go down the academic

route, because to do so leads to a career that pays more. That is where the problem lies. Time and time again, students try to achieve qualifications that, in the main, are meaningless to employers. An employer may ask a new apprentice to weld a 45-degree angle, and in 10 minutes the employer will know whether he or she can do it. If the apprentice cannot do it, he or she is useless to the employer.

The proposer of the motion is to be commended for bringing it to the House. The serious challenge to be faced is that about 44% of our manufacturing workforce is not from these parts. Every three years, that number churns: people leave and people arrive. However, that will not carry on for ever. Now that countries other than Sweden and the United Kingdom are taking in those workers, it will soon be difficult to recruit trained and skilled workers. That problem will hit here within three years.

What do we want in this new economy? What type of people do we want to produce? According to this weighty tome there are two types of workers — generic workers and self-programmable workers. The key to tackling poverty, inequality and economic performance is to make sure that our young people have the necessary skills not to do but to learn.

That is why I commend the Minister for his Training for Success programme, because it is about creating the right attitude among young people so that they will believe that there is a viable well-paid future in manufacturing. If we get that right, we will get the right workers; that is what we should be encouraging. I hope that the Minister will address that point.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I thank Members for tabling the motion and for participating in it.

It is interesting that this is the second time that we have debated this subject in a week; it shows that people are beginning to realise the significance of the work for which the Department for Employment and Learning and its Committee are responsible.

There was a tendency some years ago to throw money at potential investors to attract them with grants. Those days are gone not only because of the European Union's insistence that different methods should be used, but also because employers no longer choose to locate purely for that reason. Employers choose a location only because they can make money there, and a Government giving them a great deal of money will influence their decision.

However, our experience has been that when the money ran out they went elsewhere. We found that throwing money attracted low-skill — rather than high-skill — companies that could move elsewhere when it suited them.

Tomorrow, as I promised, I will visit Limavady to meet the workers' forum of the former Seagate Technologies, officials from Limavady Borough Council, the local chamber of commerce and officials from my Department. Seagate is a classic example of a company feeling that it can move lock, stock and barrel to Malaysia or somewhere else because it can make more money there. We live in a changing world.

Apprenticeships have ensured the continuity of skills needed by our industries over the years, and they are needed in order to compete and grow in a vibrant, dynamic economy. However, some years ago they went out of fashion, and the large companies that used to supply skills to the next generation of the workforce through their apprenticeship programmes abandoned them, against the advice of many people. Sadly, many of those companies are no longer around, precisely because they ran out of the required skills and became inefficient as a result.

I am committed to apprenticeships for very fundamental reasons: they are one of the main vehicles by which we support business, industry, employers and our economy; they help large numbers of young people each year to move from education into the world of work; they provide young people with training to develop the technical knowledge and skills that they and their employees need; and they are also employer-led. That is the kernel of the matter.

Martina Anderson said that apprenticeships should not be left entirely to employers. However, at the end of the day, it is only in the workplace that apprentices learn their business or trade. We can try to simulate the workplace in a training scheme, but there is no substitute for experience on the job.

4.00 pm

The Department has made a considerable investment in apprenticeships; my colleague Mr McClarty quoted the figures. I assure Members that I will do what I can to ensure that as much of that as possible is maintained.

The apprenticeships target set by one of my predecessors still exists. Last year, there were some 6,000 apprenticeships, which included an intake of some 4,000 for the new scheme, and over 2,000 people who were on the previous Jobskills programme were making the changeover. There are still many apprenticeships, although there was a slight dip this year, which is largely the responsibility of employers.

The Public Accounts Committee heavily criticised our system, so we introduced the Training for Success programme. There have been concerns about the bidding process and about who won contracts and who did not win. I assure Members that the bidding process was robust; it was conducted by the Department of Finance and Personnel's procurement section. Opportunities

will arise for people to bid again in future competitions, and I wish the successful bidders well.

Mr Attwood referred to the position of Northern Ireland, the global economy and the Republic's national development plan and its concentration on innovation, research and development, and so on. He asked about the implications for the Department and the Budget. I appreciate the support that I have received from the Committee for Employment and Learning since the draft Budget was published and from a range of organisations that back our endeavours. It would not have been possible for the Department to have delivered on its Programme for Government targets had it not been for the significant uplift that it was given.

The Department is closely considering the marketing side of apprenticeships and trying to get the message across to employers that it is in their interests that we succeed. Some money is available in the innovation fund for adult apprenticeships and also for apprenticeships generally in key areas. The opportunity exists for us to do some work in areas that otherwise would not have been possible.

Although the Department's Budget allocation was not as much as it would have liked — that is true of every Department — what it has secured will at least enable it to make progress. I hope that the forthcoming economic conference will be a success, and I will work with other colleagues in Government to ensure that it is. However, I am conscious that, if we do get investors, we must be able to provide a workforce that will make them successful. It is a big responsibility that I am happy to take on.

Reference was made to the fact that 75% of engineering companies experience difficulties in obtaining labour. I am aware of the difficulties, although the figures ebb and flow. My colleague Basil McCrea made some interesting points. Part of the problem is that, if a company is successful, it tends to be a company that is paying its workers a rewarding wage. We must create the circumstances in which we try to minimise the oncosts, because there are many of them. Those issues formed part of the campaign that was led by Basil McCrea and others.

The prospect of the Varney Review II might open up the opportunity for us to do something. I have a long-standing belief that we should address the issue of excise duty, not only to get rid of prevalent criminal gangsters who operate so effectively but to deal with a significant cost base.

Reference was made to the disconnect between the Budget and Departments working together. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is in the Chamber, and I am sure that he would be prepared to confirm that his Department, my Department and Invest NI work together all the time.

We meet regularly, work together and discuss those issues, and, although we may have some distance to travel, I assure the Member that we are attempting to resolve any outstanding issues. We recognise that we are in the same boat, and, if we are unable to deliver services and the same message to any potential investor, we will harm no one but ourselves.

This debate has focused on some of the issues that people must grasp. It has been hard to get that message across, because although one can understand, and see, what is happening in Departments that deal with roads, health and so on, skills are not visible to the naked eye, and, when success is achieved, we do not value it as much as we should.

The week before last, I had the great pleasure of hosting a reception for young men who had achieved great things in the WorldSkills Competition. In 2005, we had gold and bronze medallists, and in 2007 we had a bronze medallist. No other region of the UK achieved that, and for Northern Ireland's size, those were mega achievements. A reception was held to recognise those young men as role models. It is hard to get the message across that that is the future. Those young men pitted themselves against the best in the world — and won. Mr Spratt, as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, is grateful that he travelled to Japan because he saw what happened.

We have the people who can deliver. However, they require the support of willing employers who are prepared to invest in them; tell them they are valued, and that there is something to gain. That is the message that we must convey to employers. Skills development must be a partnership because if there is a sudden upswing in trade, employers cannot expect trained labour to be waiting at the door — the supply is no longer there.

We in Northern Ireland are no longer interested in mopping up large pools of unemployment by feeding in low-skilled workers. In the Programme for Government, my colleague, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, is also raising his sights on the type of jobs he wants to be created. The aim is not just to create jobs; it is to create certain types of jobs with certain wage levels. We are making no real impact on moving off the 80% benchmark on which we have been stuck for a long time. Some surveys even indicate that we have slipped back a point or two. It will only be through skills development that we will be able to move off that figure.

The money for innovation that we secured in the Budget will allow us to address the problem of level-4 apprenticeships. I am as conscientious as Mr Attwood, and I have spoken at length to my counterparts in the Republic, and we will be working with them on several

innovation-fund projects, a significant proportion of the funds for which have come from the Irish Government.

We will also work throughout the United Kingdom. Last week, I was in London with the Minister for Skills, and we were looking ahead to 2011, when the WorldSkills Competition will be held there. A ministerial group is already planning for that event throughout the UK and is considering how to encourage more companies and employers to participate. It will only be when we value the young men and women who participate in such schemes and who do achieve, and when we can get employers to weigh in and push those people into such competitions, that we will have role models who will show people that, despite the difficulties, manufacturing is not dead.

There is good reason to believe that well-run and well-skilled manufacturing companies can still succeed in Northern Ireland, and there are several examples — although, sadly, not as many as there were. However, I, the Department and Members have not thrown in the towel.

We do ourselves down all the time. We talk about sunset industries and industries of the past. I value the past — as do we all — and we should be proud of it, but we should not talk ourselves out of a job, as we tend to do. Who benefits from that except our competitors? They are glad to hear us talking about sunset industries. If we say that manufacturing industries are a thing of the past, we are not providing much of an incentive to seek work in manufacturing for the young men and women who are listening and watching. Manufacturing is not a thing of the past.

Having put the economy to the forefront of the Programme for Government, we in the Executive must now deliver on that. As long as we maintain, and give succour, substance and support to employers, the apprenticeships will follow. However, we cannot do it alone. It can only be done in partnership with the employers, and they must play their role.

Mr Newton: I do not want to concentrate on whether the numbers are right or wrong, or whether we need more or fewer apprentices. There was a time when Northern Ireland had a vocational training system that was the envy of Europe. I refer to the Government training centres that were dotted throughout the Province, which provided training to apprentices who were later employed in industry. In those days, all sectors of industry were covered by statutory training boards — and the key word is “statutory”.

Although I do not want to replicate that system, our objective must be to establish a system that will deliver training to the same standard that we achieved in the past. We are working in a new context, with a devolved Administration in which Ministers can make their own decisions and develop their own strategies. The economic

vision for Northern Ireland is outlined as a high added-value, highly skilled, innovative and enterprising economy, which will enable us to compete globally and lead to greater wealth creation and better employment opportunities for all.

Underpinning that strategy is the Department for Employment and Learning's objective to ensure that our people have the right skills for future employment opportunities. We have a multi-layered strategy in place to deliver the skills agenda for the Department for Employment and Learning. There is the Province-wide Economic Development Forum, which comprises four subgroups to deal with innovation, enterprise, skills and infrastructure. That is supported by the Northern Ireland skills expert group, which has a regional remit. That, in turn, is supported by local workforce development forums, which cover Belfast and the northern, north-western, south-western, southern and south-eastern regions. There are 25 sector skills councils, which operate on a UK-wide basis to cover all sectors of industry. Underpinning the sector skills councils are sector training councils, which have a local sphere of activity.

I will not say that that is the wrong way to deliver skills planning, but it is a complex approach, which has no political input. That strategy is in its early days, and time will tell whether it will deliver the necessary outcome.

4.15 pm

I welcome the motion proposed by Mr Shannon; it is timely and necessary. However, I wish to consider apprenticeships in a wider context. Mr Shannon was guided by the manufacturing figures that he saw, but I wish to broaden the context. Northern Ireland is experiencing relative prosperity due to the political stability created by the reinstatement of the Assembly and the laying down of arms by the mainstream paramilitary organisations.

I welcome the fact that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has recognised in the Budget the need for the skills base to be strengthened and has agreed to increase the Department for Employment and Learning's budget by 35%.

A Member: Hear, hear.

Mr Newton: Hear, hear.

At this time it is not possible to say how many apprenticeships will result from the 20,000 jobs that may be created in the Titanic Quarter. That is relevant not just to people living in my constituency of East Belfast, but to the whole of Northern Ireland. The potential creation of 20,000 jobs in the Titanic Quarter will produce a number of apprenticeships.

The Minister has referred to the economic development conference that is soon to be held. All the research

confirms that there is an increasing demand for qualified workers in all skill areas. Earlier in the debate, reference was made to the fact that we are producing young people who are qualified to skill levels 1 and 2 and, indeed, to the fact that we need to build on that.

The key to solving the problem is to place greater emphasis on apprenticeships and to encourage more young people to consider them. For that to happen, school pupils must achieve good grades in academic and vocational subjects. If the number of young people entering apprenticeships does not increase, and if we do not encourage the young to enter them, there will be an adverse overall effect on the Northern Ireland economy.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Newton: Mr Deputy Speaker, if I give way, will the time be added on?

Mr Deputy Speaker: No.

Mr Newton: I will not give way if the time is not added on.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is not normal for Members to be compensated for giving way.

Mr Newton: However, in this instance, will you allow me that time?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will on this occasion.

[Laughter.]

Mr B McCrea: That was very consensual.

Does the Member agree that we must do more than just encourage young people to enter apprenticeships? They must see that it is in their economic interest to do so. We have considered paying pupils to stay on at school, and, in the same way, we must ensure that, when they consider their bank balances, entering an apprenticeship is not only the right thing to do, but is seen to be the right thing to do.

Mr Newton: The Member is obviously a mind reader — a clairvoyant. The next words on my page are “the way forward”.

All over Northern Ireland people need to be offered apprenticeship opportunities in projects such as the Titanic Quarter, Victoria Square and those that are outside Belfast.

People from less-well-off backgrounds need to be given equal opportunities in skills and training to help to develop the economy. Those who are currently unemployed, which is just fewer than 5% of the Northern Ireland population, need to be reintroduced to apprenticeship and employment schemes. Furthermore, those who do not want to return to further education in school should be informed about those schemes in Northern Ireland that develop long-term skills. Young people need to be made aware of the demand for skills,

of their relevance and of the opportunities — both economic and career — that apprenticeships offer. Young people also need excellent career guidance at school. That must underpin everything that we do.

Mr Ross made the point that this is a cross-cutting issue. Therefore, the young people need to be employed during the apprenticeship. Following the restoration of the devolved Assembly, and in the period of relative peace that we are now experiencing, there has never been a more promising economic opportunity. We all know that the investors who attend the investment conference will consider the skills base of Northern Ireland, as well as the academic qualifications of young people and the opportunities and incentives that are on offer.

Mr Shannon spoke passionately about the issue. I welcome the fact that he feels so strongly about it, as one should. It is an important matter for all our young people and for the overall economy.

As a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I am aware of the concerns of the Committee Chairperson. I am also aware of the concerns of employers. Department for Employment and Learning needs to produce the policy, strategy and delivery mechanisms that will ensure successful outcomes in this field.

Also in my capacity as a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I have been supportive of the Training for Success strategy, and I welcome the direction in which it is going.

Mr McClarty referred to the reduction in the number of apprenticeships in the manufacturing sector, and he is correct to do so in the semantic context of the debate. However, all Members have acknowledged the need to widen the debate and have recognised the economy's need for highly qualified and skilled personnel across all industrial sectors, not just manufacturing — although it is important.

I agreed with Mr Attwood when he referred to the Irish Republic's success. We must not be afraid to take lessons from the Republic of Ireland, which has recognised that a skilled workforce is a primary requirement of a successful western economy.

I disagreed with Anna Lo. I am not sure whether she meant to say that apprentices should get jobs after their training has ended: they should have jobs while training. Mr Spratt recognised that employers, especially manufacturers, must have incentives. It is vital that apprenticeships are incentivised in order to recruit employers —

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

Mr Newton: I will, Mr Deputy Speaker. I regret that Martina Anderson went down the road that she did; it

is inappropriate to talk about such negative aspects as discrimination.

I am glad that the Minister is committed to the apprenticeship training scheme; I was aware of that from the beginning. I am glad that there is an employer-led strategy rather than the previous supply-driven strategy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am afraid that I am merely an apprentice who has no authority to add time to the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern over the decreasing number of apprenticeships which are available in Northern Ireland's manufacturing industries and calls on the Department for Employment and Learning to address the current decline and to promote the provision and facilitation of apprenticeships.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [*Mr Deputy Speaker.*]

ADJOURNMENT

The 2006 Collapse of TriVirix and Recovery of State Funds

Mr Deputy Speaker: All Members who wish to contribute to the debate will have 10 minutes in which to speak.

Mr Attwood: At the outset, I thank the Business Committee for agreeing to the debate, not least because it is the first opportunity on the Floor of the House to train a spotlight on how Invest NI (INI) does business. I welcome the Minister to the debate. I get a sense from what he has said on the Floor and in correspondence that he is vigilant on the issue; however, I urge him to go further than he has in his correspondence to date.

It would be remiss of me if I were not, first and foremost, to acknowledge those people who lost their jobs when TriVirix collapsed in February 2006. More than 100 people were employed at its interface site — from both sides of the community — in an economic black spot in one of the most disadvantaged areas of West Belfast. The loss of those jobs has been felt deeply.

TriVirix's responsibility must be acknowledged. Several months after its collapse, the company was taken to a tribunal by the Communication Workers' Union. The tribunal found that TriVirix had failed to give notice of redundancies until 48 hours before they happened; failed to discuss its financial problems with the union; ignored requests for information and offers of assistance from the union; and sought to give its employees the impression that there was no cause for concern. That was an employment tribunal's indictment of how TriVirix conducted its affairs. Whatever I might say about Invest NI, it does not diminish how TriVirix treated its workforce and how right it was that an employment tribunal commented on how it had done business.

Before I discuss Invest NI, it is important to stress that £2.597 million of public money was given to TriVirix. As far as I am aware, not one penny of those public moneys has been recovered. I know that the Minister is attending to the matter. Will the Minister advise the Assembly whether he is in a position to confirm if, and when, moneys may be clawed back into the public purse after the collapse of TriVirix International? Is it still the case, as INI has contended, that approximately £1.5 million of the money that was paid to TriVirix International might yet be recovered? INI has put in

writing to me that that is a realistic assessment. Will the Minister confirm whether that is the case, given that the public, the trade union and the workers who lost their jobs will be anxious to determine whether TriVirix International will be called to account financially for the way in which it treated its workforce?

I turn to the way in which INI conducted its affairs with regard to the business of TriVirix International and its ultimate collapse. The Minister has written to me on those matters. However, I continue to have deep doubts. For that reason, I have four questions.

First, it has come to my attention — as a result of the Minister's letter — that in October 2004, TriVirix International was added to an "at risk" register by Invest Northern Ireland. Approximately 16 months later, TriVirix International collapsed. Why was TriVirix International paid the sum of £572,000 in grant aid in June 2005, seven or eight months after it was added to that register? Why, if a company was deemed to be at risk, were moneys handed to it? There may be an answer to that.

Secondly, eight weeks after handing £572,000 to TriVirix International, INI became aware that the business was in difficulties. INI, by its own admission, said that it had regular contact with the company; that it monitored the company's performance; and that it had accepted a revised business plan from the company before approximately £600,000 was released. How is it that, despite all the contact, the monitoring and the business case, eight weeks later, INI was told that the business was in difficulty? I find it difficult to reconcile INI's release of so much money with the company's being in difficulties eight weeks later.

Thirdly, it seems to be generally accepted that a business deal in which TriVirix International was to acquire another business, Medtronic Inc, was — to borrow a phrase — a lifeboat for that business. However, in Invest Northern Ireland's correspondence to me, it confirmed that the deal was intended to happen in June 2004 and scheduled to complete in the first quarter of 2005. It failed to complete, and INI conceded that TriVirix International's admission that the Medtronic deal was "loss-making" in any case. INI knew that the Medtronic deal was not completed and knew, as I understand it, that the Medtronic deal was so important to the success of TriVirix International. Why did INI release almost £600,000 to a business in those circumstances?

Fourthly, what did INI do, after August 2005, when it had become clear that TriVirix International was getting into difficulties? What did it do when it knew that a leading investor had concerns — a fact that INI has confirmed? What did INI do, bearing in mind that it knew that the Medtronic deal was in difficulty? What did it do between August 2005 and January 2006 to

exercise due diligence in respect of what was happening in that business? What did it do to keep the union involved and to keep the workers informed, so that they could, at least, have had some foreknowledge of the catastrophe with which they would find themselves faced in January 2006?

4.30 pm

It is true, to a degree, that INI was not given the full picture by TriVirix. As we know from the employment tribunal, TriVirix failed to give the full picture to its own employees. However, that is not the end of the matter. I have asked questions about what happened, and, to date, I have received no satisfactory answers. My sense is that INI either failed to probe diligently and deeply into the affairs of TriVirix to get the full picture, or TriVirix gave the information to INI, which failed to assess diligently that information to determine the future viability of the company. Either way, as an organisation that deals with significant public funds, INI's performance should be been of a much higher standard.

In conclusion, I ask the Minister to further consider the papers and the files that pertain to this case, and, if necessary, to come back to the Assembly with a further view on it. In any case, I now refer the matter to the Public Accounts Committee so that it can determine whether it has an interest in it.

Whatever about TriVirix, nothing should take away from the fact that West Belfast is open for business. Before Christmas, the Minister privately visited one of the best and most successful employers in west Belfast, Delta Print and Packaging Ltd, which employs close to 200 people and now has investments in China and India. The way forward is to invest in the likes of Delta Print and Packaging Ltd, because, unlike TriVirix, that company and its workforce will not let us down.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé buíoch de mo chara as iarthar Bhéal Feirste as an cheist seo a chur ar chlár an lae inniu.

I thank my colleague from West Belfast for securing this Adjournment debate. As he said, it gives us the opportunity to shine a spotlight on how Invest NI does its work. I also thank the Minister for his attendance.

Last week, I raised the case of TriVirix in a supplementary question. To recap: in 2005, TriVirix had an annual income of \$51.5 million. It was one of the top-100 fastest-growing companies in the USA. However, in February 2006, it suddenly pulled out of the Springvale site in West Belfast. Some £4 million of public money had been invested by Invest NI, which appeared to have been taken completely by surprise when the firm went into administration. A total of 119 people lost their jobs, which was a devastating blow for them and their families. The closure also dealt a major blow to morale and to the economy in West Belfast, which has long been starved of inward investment.

Before I go on any further, I wish to commend my former colleague, the former Assembly Member, the late Michael Ferguson, who worked closely with the staff and the trade union representatives to salvage something from the mess. I also want to acknowledge that it will always be a difficult endeavour, particularly in these globalised times, to attract inward investment and to ensure that such investment is proper, sustainable, and offers fair and decent wages.

However, the TriVirix affair raises serious questions about the methods used to encourage inward investment, including the scrutiny of the companies being brought into the North and the monitoring of how public money is spent after it has been given to them. The TriVirix debacle stands as a stark reminder of the inadequacy of those processes.

Last week, I was pleased to be given an assurance by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment that Invest NI has:

“implemented full recovery procedures to claw back all public moneys owed”

and:

“remains in regular contact with the joint administrators, who continue to review creditor control and who have indicated their intention to pay a dividend to creditors in the coming months.”

However, I will wait to see exactly how much will be returned, as the Minister was unable to give any detail regarding that in his answer to my question.

Therefore, there are many questions to be answered about how Invest NI handled the TriVirix affair, and I ask the Minister to consider all the issues involved in this disgraceful episode and to bring details and information to the Assembly.

I also have serious concerns about the performance of Invest NI generally, and specific concerns about its abject failure to locate employment in West Belfast, including the greater Shankill area. Invest NI has consistently failed to get the balance right in targeting investment in those areas, as well as in the border counties west of the Bann, including Derry. That is despite the fact that those are the areas that need the greatest investment as they have the highest levels of deprivation and unemployment.

Invest NI’s annual report for 2003-04 revealed that North Belfast and West Belfast together received less than one third of the financial assistance that was given to South Belfast and East Belfast — £12.6 million compared to £41.5 million. The five border constituencies of South Down, Newry and Armagh, Foyle, West Tyrone and Fermanagh and South Tyrone together received less assistance than South Belfast, which is one of the most affluent areas in the North.

The same report showed that the seven constituencies west of the Bann received only 10% of the assistance

that was given and were allocated only 10% of future planned investment. It is no accident that the areas that are receiving the lowest levels of Invest NI financial support and investment are predominantly nationalist areas. The correlation between those areas that are losing out on Invest NI support and areas of high unemployment and deprivation is stark. They match almost exactly. Therefore, there appears to be truth to the accusation that Invest NI is operating a disinvestment strategy rather than an investment strategy as far as those particular areas are concerned.

My concerns were reinforced last week when, in a written reply to a question posed by me, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment revealed that no first-time investors were secured by Invest NI for the West Belfast and greater Shankill area last year. Some money from Invest NI did make its way into West Belfast; however, it was a pittance compared to what is required. The Minister said:

“during 2006/07, Invest NI offered £39 million of assistance to projects within the four Belfast Constituency areas. This included £20.7m of assistance towards 16 inward-investment projects”.

Not one — *chan ceann amháin* — of those projects was located in the West Belfast or greater Shankill areas. The pattern continues, and it is totally unacceptable.

When Invest NI was established in 2002, we were told that the idea was that a single agency would be more flexible, would not have the baggage of the past, and would be more effective in tackling the major economic challenges confronting the North. There can be no doubt that Invest NI — let us be gracious — has secured significant investment in the North’s economy, including an increase in exports generated by companies funded by it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Will the Member link his remarks with the Adjournment topic, please?

Mr Adams: OK, a chara, thank you.

Invest NI is failing in its duty to equality proof its investment strategy, and it is failing in its duty to ensure that public moneys — as we have seen with the TriVirix affair — are properly spent, and it is clear that bad practice is continuing.

The TriVirix affair is an example of one type of failure by Invest NI. However, the wider questions point to other failures. Sinn Féin will continue to scrutinise Invest NI’s strategic approach to investment. We will offer praise where praise is due, but will expose Invest NI’s failings and hold its management to account when we believe that it is not working in the interest of all sections of our people. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like those Members who have already contributed, I welcome the opportunity to take part in the Adjournment debate, and congratulate Mr Attwood

for securing it. As the other Members have said, local community anger was roused in February 2006 when TriVirix pulled out of West Belfast and 119 employees lost their jobs.

West Belfast is a community that has, over the years, endured high unemployment and social and economic disadvantage. The TriVirix employees, who came from both sides of the political and religious divide, were treated badly by the company, which refused to keep them informed of what was happening, and would not help them in their search for other employment or future skills development.

Invest NI gave major financial help to TriVirix over a number of years. As the previous contributors have said, serious questions must be asked about the whole affair. How can Invest NI pump millions of pounds into an operation, only to see that company take those moneys and leave? Did Invest NI know that TriVirix was on the verge of closure when it put that money in? Surely any company in receipt of that level of public money must enter into an agreement to honour its commitments if it decides to pull out.

The situation leads us to ask other questions of Invest NI. Is the same level of commitment and finance that is provided to foreign direct investment given to SMEs? I know that foreign direct investment is important for the economy, but some smaller local businesses are also very important to the economy. In the same way, the setting of targets and outcomes for the social economy does not appear to have been given priority. Yet social economy projects not only provide essential front-line services to those who are most disadvantaged in society, but create employment opportunities for local people. There is a real need for the stringent monitoring of public moneys put into large companies, and a level of accountability must be built into the agreements that are made with them.

I will take this opportunity to put some final questions to the Minister. How many companies in West Belfast have been given a similar deal by Invest NI? Will West Belfast, and other constituencies in the North, have to face the same issues in future? Has the Minister commissioned a review of the TriVirix case, and if not, will he do so now? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): I am not sure what time is available to me.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Ten minutes.

Mr Dodds: I hope that I will have enough time to deal with the points that have been raised. I thank Mr Attwood for securing the Adjournment debate. He has been assiduous in following up the matter regularly, and I have listened with interest to the points that have been made. I welcome the opportunity to set out the position of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on the matter.

As Mr Attwood said, I wrote to him recently with further details of the case, to which he has referred in the debate. Any announcement of business closure and associated redundancies, whether large or small, is, of course, a blow that is to be regretted. I do not need to remind Members that, as others have mentioned, behind every statistic there is an individual, family or community that bears the trauma of this type of event and the terrible uncertainty that comes with such bad news, particularly when it comes without much warning, as happened in this case.

Members will know that the events in question occurred under direct rule and under a different Minister. Therefore, I do not have access to the papers directly related to the case. However, I assure the House that I and the Department take that responsibility seriously. Along with colleagues in the Department for Employment and Learning, we will continue to do all in our power to support and assist individuals to find alternative employment at the earliest opportunity in any circumstances that arise, such as the collapse of TriVirix.

4.45 pm

However, in order to provide those employment opportunities, we must face up to the realities of modern business and competitive pressures that know few boundaries and that are increasingly sophisticated and relentless, whether in pursuit of market share, capital or human resources, or a combination of all three.

Those factors were borne out by our recent visits to the United States, and I am sure that honourable Members who joined that delegation at a senior level made those points to their colleagues. Therefore, if we are to deliver on the key economic objectives of the draft Programme for Government, we must continue to encourage our local and foreign-owned businesses to become more innovative in everything that they do, whether in research and development, the approach that they take to marketing their products or services, or the training and education of their employees. It will only be through the success of businesses that embrace that ethos that we will, over time, be able to reposition our economy as one that supports better jobs, better salaries, higher value products and services, and one that creates more prosperity for everyone.

Under my direction, Invest Northern Ireland will continue in its efforts to secure more overseas investment in the face of stiff competition from other regions. INI will also help and support developing local companies to export more and become more export-orientated. We must utilise our limited resources effectively by adopting a targeted approach to the type of investments that we want, which bring the characteristics that I have just mentioned.

I, along with my wife, Diane, who represented West Belfast in the Assembly at the time, deeply regretted the closure of TriVirix in 2005, which resulted in the loss of 113 jobs. As a specialist-contract manufacturer of precision medical equipment, the business operated in the high-value medical-devices sector, offering innovative solutions to its customers. TriVirix supported a range of highly skilled jobs, such as electrical and electronic engineers and software developers. That is why its loss was such a blow.

I remind the House that TriVirix was a venture-capital-backed start-up business. Despite a failure to achieve key performance targets, the company's business proposition remained compelling to its funders over a number of years from its inception. That was demonstrated by the fact that the US parent company, TriVirix International, successfully raised five rounds of venture-capital funding, totalling around \$57 million, or £34 million.

Invest NI did not — as some have said — fund the organisation. One must consider the amounts that were injected by private investors, including £2.7 million from two Northern Ireland venture-capital companies, Crescent Capital and Enterprise Equity. Almost half of the £34 million — £15 million — was invested in the Belfast operation by the US parent company. The most recent of the venture-capital funding rounds occurred in December 2004, when approximately \$8 million, or £4.2 million, of private money was invested. Along with the support of the US board and lead investors, and with the ongoing transfer of manufacturing operations to Belfast from the sister plant in Copenhagen, the prospect of up to 45 new, highly skilled jobs being created led to significant business confidence being generated.

In June 2005, after the company made an eligible grant claim and satisfied the conditions in its letter of offer, Invest Northern Ireland proceeded to approve grants totalling around £595,000. However, Invest Northern Ireland had been withholding those grants for 12 months, pending resolution of the dispute over company rent arrears and the need to satisfy the conditions in the relevant letters of offer. As I understand it, both matters were dealt with and, at that time, TriVirix settled rent arrears of just under £176,000. That was handled by way of an offset of the grant that was due to TriVirix in June 2005.

I must correct something that the Member for West Belfast Mr Adams said. Invest Northern Ireland offered £4.3 million for assistance; however, only £2.1 million of that was paid to TriVirix by way of grants and loans between November 1999 and June 2005.

Subsequently, in March 2006, a loan of £85,000 was provided to the joint administrators to maintain the business as a going concern while a buyer was being

sought for the company. Invest Northern Ireland was made aware only in late August 2005 of the lead investor's increasing concerns about the company's trading performance, and it learned of the resignation of Trivirix's chief executive officer in September 2005.

However, as late as 17 January 2006, the independent consultant, who had been appointed by the lead investor to review the business, informed Invest Northern Ireland that there was still a possibility of implementing a recovery plan and that he would be making a submission to the US board on 25 January 2006 for a multimillion-dollar funding package.

The closure of the company is regrettable. Members should, however, acknowledge the benefits to the local community over the six and a half years that Trivirix was located in West Belfast. It was one of the largest employers in the area, and, at its peak, provided well-paid, highly skilled jobs for 154 people. During the period in which it operated, the company paid out approximately £9.5million in staff salaries. Despite the closure in early 2006, the percentage of working-age claimants in West Belfast dropped from 6% in February 2006 to 5.2% in December 2007.

I can inform the honourable Member and the House that Invest Northern Ireland is in regular contact with the joint administrators about the recovery of public funds. In September 2007, I informed the House that the administrators planned to make a payment to creditors in January 2008. Administrators have since informed Invest Northern Ireland that delays in agreeing creditor claims have, in turn, delayed the dividend payments.

As Members know, the final amount of the dividend can be agreed only after all creditor claims have been determined. Therefore, I am not in a position to confirm to the House the exact amount of public funds that will be recovered. However, I stand over the figure of £1.5million that Invest Northern Ireland mentioned in its letter to Mr Attwood, and the current position provides no reason to go back on that figure.

The delay in the payment is frustrating, but the latest position, as of today, is that the court has decreed that the administration be discharged in May 2008. As I indicated previously, I will keep the House fully informed about the recovery of public funds in this case. My Department is determined that that avenue will be explored fully to achieve the optimum result.

Unfortunately, I will not have time to deal with wider issues that relate to West Belfast. Mr Adams raised matters about South Belfast and East Belfast. The constituency boundaries of South Belfast include Belfast city centre, where several major multinational companies have invested. They draw employees not only from the four Belfast constituencies but from further afield.

Therefore, it is completely misleading to describe that as investment only in affluent South Belfast and to say that other areas do not benefit. All areas benefit from investment in the city centre. Of course, Members want to see all the areas that they represent being boosted by investment, and I am determined to see that happen.

Much of Invest Northern Ireland's investment is demand-led. It is not a question of going round and distributing a wish list for areas throughout Northern Ireland. Investors and companies will determine the issues. The parties must work together to create an entrepreneurial spirit in order to ensure that areas are attractive to investors and to provide the required level of education and skills. Everyone has a role to play in that.

No one can forget that West Belfast, and other parts of the Province, have been gravely disadvantaged for years by the ongoing violence, deprivation and problems that arose as a result of some of the activities that Mr Adams supported for many, many years.

I hope that we are now in a new era and that parties will work together to provide the best employment opportunities for everyone. I would have liked the opportunity to address some issues in greater detail, but I hope that I have allayed some of the concerns about Trivirix.

Adjourned at 4.54 pm.

Committee Stages

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

6 December 2007

LIBRARIES BILL (NIA 5/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Barry McElduff (Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr Francie Brolly
Lord Browne
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Nelson McCausland
Mr Paul Maskey
Mr Ken Robinson
Mr Jim Shannon

Witnesses:

Mr Colin Jack	}	Department of Culture,
Ms Julie Mapstone		Arts and Leisure
Mr Noel Kelly	}	Departmental Solicitor's
		Office

The Chairperson (Mr McElduff): The Committee will continue its clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Libraries Bill.

The Committee Clerk: Since the sound in this room is not as good as in our Committee Rooms, I ask the witnesses to speak up so that their voices will be picked up by the recording system and heard by Hansard.

The Chairperson: I refer members to the new timetable for the Libraries Bill prepared by the Committee Office. The Committee has only three more meetings before it must complete its clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill. That means that all the outstanding issues with the Department must be resolved over the next three meetings; there is a small matter of Christmas to be considered.

I advise members that last week we covered most of the Bill's clauses; some clauses, however, were deferred until today's meeting. I welcome Mr Colin Jack and Ms Julie Mapstone from the Department of

Culture, Arts and Leisure, and Mr Noel Kelly from the Departmental Solicitor's Office; they are here to provide clarification on the clauses, should members require it. The Principal Clerk of Bills from the Assembly's Bill Office is on hand to provide advice.

Clause 2 (Duty of Authority to provide library service)

The Chairperson: I ask members to look at clause 2 and the accompanying memorandum. Clause 2 requires the library authority to provide a public library service for people living, working or studying here. It lists the duties of the library authority and enables it to work with other bodies; it also enables the authority to provide library services to visitors.

Issues were raised about this clause. Members queried whether the performance standards for the authority should have to be approved by the Assembly, but after hearing the Minister's evidence, members decided on 25 October 2007 that they were content that the Minister would monitor standards and, ultimately, report to the Committee.

The Committee also asked the Minister to include a general phrase in clause 2 to make it the duty of the authority to collect and protect material of regional import. The Minister's response was that the library-stock policy, including that on reference collections, is covered by clause 2(2)(a). He said that he expects to see the library authority 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 diaspora is too great a burden for the public library service. It could unbalance the book-purchase budget as well as leave the authority open to litigation should anything be omitted. At the Committee's meeting of 22 November, members agreed that they were content with that response.

The Committee wrote to the Minister asking that he include the terms, "comprehensive" and "efficient" in the clause. The Minister replied that he is content with our proposals to include the terms "comprehensive" and "efficient" in the legislation and that the legislative draftsman will be asked to find the best way of incorporating those terms. We therefore have it in writing from the Minister that he will take our request on board.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 2 agreed to.

Schedule 1 (The Northern Ireland Library Authority)

The Chairperson: Paragraph 2 of schedule 1 deals with the membership of the authority and specifies the number of members and experience required. The Committee raised issues about the size of the authority; the Bill specifies that it should have between seven and 14 members, but the Committee wrote to the Minister

and asked that he amend the clause to allow for 20. In his letter of 27 November 2007 the Minister stated that he is still considering the issue.

At last week's discussion we recommended a maximum of 17 or 19; most of whom should be elected local representatives and that the chairperson should always be an elected local representative. We use the term local representative to refer to someone in local government — a councillor. I refer members to the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 for guidance on how members of the education and library boards were selected.

The Department has advised that Miss Irene Knox has devised an operational structure for the library authority, of which she is the chief executive designate, and the matter is with the permanent secretary for consideration. When the Minister has approved that structure, it will be forwarded to the Committee. When are we likely to receive it?

Ms Julie Mapstone (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure): I am not entirely sure but either just before or just after Christmas.

The Chairperson: The next step for the Committee is to agree a proposal on what it wishes to be included in the legislation and write to the Minister accordingly. The proposal must include a suggested minimum and maximum number of authority members. Does the Committee wish to state that most members and the chairperson must always be elected representatives drawn from local government? Do we wish to make any additional specifications? Jim, you feel strongly about the matter.

Mr Shannon: I certainly do, Chairman. It is important that the membership reflect elected representation across the Province, and we should stipulate that most members and the chairman will always be elected representatives. I am minded to go for 19 members, but I am conscious that some members may prefer to wait until the number of councils becomes known; although I am not sure when that will be. If we opt for 19 members, is there any way to change it?

Mr Colin Jack (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Since it is unlikely that the number of district councils will become clear before the Bill has been passed, it is important to establish principles on the balance of the authority's membership. We need to take further advice on the precise wording of the legislation from the Office of the Legislative Counsel, the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments and other interested parties.

However, a range in the size of membership would allow adjustments to be made based on the number of councils that is eventually decided. We need a formula that will operate effectively now, with 26 councils, and which can be adapted to whatever number of councils

there are in the future. I understand that seven, 11 and 15 are the options being considered.

The Principal Clerk of Bills: One possible way of introducing flexibility would be to provide power to make an Order — a statutory rule that would give the Minister power to readdress the figures. If members are unhappy about including a range that would give the Minister the flexibility to vary the figures without any further need to consult the committee, they could stipulate a figure but provide the Minister with the power to make a statutory rule to vary it. However, the statutory rule would have to be approved by the Assembly, which would enable the Assembly to decide whether the change was acceptable.

Mr Noel Kelly (Departmental Solicitor's Office): That is a workable solution, but I will inject a note of caution: your proposition is that the Assembly should approve any regulation, in which case an amendment to introduce such a power would have to be careful to say that the regulation would be by way of positive resolution rather than negative resolution, because, as you appreciate, there are two ways of doing it. A negative resolution is made and becomes law and stays law until there is a motion to annul; you are choosing the other — *[Interruption.]*

The Principal Clerk of Bills: No, I was not, Noel. I simply said that the Minister would be given the power to make a statutory rule; the Office of the Legislative Council would give advice on how the Assembly should deal with it. Negative resolution would probably be appropriate. Members will understand that negative resolution means that there must be a vote in the Assembly to refuse it, and that remains within the power of the Assembly. The Assembly can reject the proposed statutory rule after examining it. That should be sufficient; the change does not require affirmative resolution. It appears a bit over the top.

Mr N Kelly: Either would work.

The Chairperson: Jim, have we found a mechanism for what you hope to achieve?

Mr Shannon: I believe that we have found a mechanism that will bring everyone on board, although I leave the terminology to the Principal Clerk of Bills, who can word it accordingly. The main thing is that the authority's make-up reflects the geographical representation of the Province. We also want to ensure that elected members from local government form a majority and that the chairperson will always be an elected representative from one of the councils, whether there are 11 or 15 of them.

The Chairperson: You recommend that the authority should have 17 or 19 members.

Mr Shannon: I was referring to the councils.

The Chairperson: Of course.

Mr Shannon: The membership of the authority should reflect that. I am in favour of 19; however, I am conscious that some members may feel that that number is not appropriate. Nevertheless, 19 is, I believe, the number that we should go for.

The Chairperson: You are emphasising the democratic character of the authority.

Mr Shannon: Absolutely. That is my proposal. I thank the Principal Clerk of Bills and Colin for their advice.

Mr Jack: Our understanding of the Minister's thinking on the matter is that the numbers proposed in schedule 1 as the minimum and maximum are likely to rise no matter how the schedule is amended.

The Principal Clerk of Bills: To give effect to Jim's proposal of 19 we would do away with the range provided in schedule 1(2)(b), and the Committee would ask that the legislation should specify a definitive number; in this case 19. In addition, the Minister would be provided with the power to make regulations.

Mr Shannon: I want to make sure that we specify a number. I propose 19, with the proviso that the Minister can increase it with the approval of the Assembly and the Committee.

Mr K Robinson: We must go back to the principle that we are trying to establish. Through bitter experience, we have discovered that when local councillors are removed from a public body it ceases to function effectively. We have seen that in the Health Service over the years, so we are determined not to go down that path.

There is indecision about how many local councils there will be. However, the quality of the people who will be attracted to the new local councils with enhanced powers will probably be different from local government at present. That is no slight on those who are in local government; it is simply the case that the enhanced powers will attract certain people. With enhanced powers, the balance will change and local government will become a much more effective and attractive institution. Therefore we want to ensure that the principle of local accountability and greater local knowledge, which might be brought to bear by the new brand of councillor, is included.

We suspect that the public appointments structure encourages a very incestuous relationship among management boards — whether for library services, education or health — and a wealth of experience that could be brought to bear on those areas is being lost. That is the principle that we are trying to establish. Perhaps the numbers on the authority are superfluous, but they must reflect the new structures.

The Chairperson: I wonder, Ken, whether the Committee must recommend a specified figure to the Department.

Mr K Robinson: Is the number range being taken out of the equation? Are we being advised not to talk about a range?

Mr Jack: The next stage is for the Committee to decide what it puts in its report, which the Department and the Minister will consider based on discussions with the Office of the Legislative Counsel and what it recommends as workable. The more detail the Committee provides on the principles that it wants to see enshrined in the legislation, the better. If the Committee has strong views on specific numbers, it would be helpful if it would specify them.

Mr K Robinson: We wish to include the principle of geographical spread. I would hate to be left out of the loop when everything moves to Omagh. I have that in the back of my mind. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: That is an excellent point.

Mr K Robinson: We are aware of issues such as geographical spread, gender and community attachment; the education and library boards manage to work under that umbrella. Those are the sort of principles that we want to establish.

Mr Brolly: Ken raised the notion of examining the quality of people who apply for positions rather than the quantity. Quality is important in such organisations. Normally appointments are made by somebody proposing one of his or her party members and the other members agreeing. The poor fellow might be illiterate, if you understand what I am saying — *[Laughter.]*

Mr Shannon: Which of your party members are you referring to?

The Chairperson: Such a person would bring an interesting perspective on literacy to the new library authority.

Mr Brolly: There should be criteria for deciding whether a person is suitable to make judgements about education or library matters.

The Chairperson: I want to conclude the debate on the size of the authority. Are we being prescriptive about the figure?

Mr Jack: The Department would want to examine the issue of the quality of authority members. There are models that would allow an element of competition for the appointment of district council representatives to the library authority. For example, one could invite all 26 councils to nominate a person. Those candidates would be interviewed using the criteria applied to authority members who are chosen by public appointment. That is one way in which it could be

done in the interim. Perhaps that process could be adapted in some way when there are fewer councils.

Mr D Bradley: The Committee does not need to make a final decision now. Would it be helpful if the Committee Clerk gathered members' views and came back next week with a form of words that the Committee could recommend to the Department?

The Chairperson: Is that practical, Linda?

The Committee Clerk: The Hansard report, which will contain the detail of members' deliberations, will not be available, under Hansard procedures, until Thursday 13 December. That restricts members' ability to discuss those issues before our last meeting.

Mr K Robinson: Is it possible to get an early draft?

The Committee Clerk: We can ask, but it will be up to Hansard.

Mr K Robinson: Given its importance — it is the first Bill from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to be introduced in the Assembly — perhaps Hansard will be in the Christmas spirit.

The Chairperson: We will request that.

Mr K Robinson: I got a hit straight away.
[Laughter.]

Mr McCausland: From what Colin was saying, it is clear that the mechanism by which members will be selected for the authority will have to be flexible because it will relate to 26 councils initially, then, ultimately, to however many councils it is decided we should have. Nineteen is a reasonable number with which to start.

The Chairperson: We will revisit that next week, with the benefit of the early Hansard report; we will need to zone in on a figure.

Mr Shannon: I am prepared to propose the figure of 19, as it will enable the authority to be representative of society. As Nelson said, it is a starting point; but we want to move towards a conclusion on this issue.

The Chairperson: There will be a power to vary the number. Are Dominic and Francie OK with that?

Mr D Bradley: Yes.

Mr Brolly: We could rationalise the figure 19 by saying that it is one member for each constituency plus one.

Mr Shannon: You think too much.

Mr Brolly: I was thinking of a geographical spread.

The Chairperson: The Committee's view is that most authority members should be elected representatives.

Mr Shannon: I propose accordingly.

The Chairperson: Are members agreed?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: The Committee was also concerned about the constitution of the authority. We wrote to the Minister asking that sub-paragraph (2) be amended to state that the authority shall be: "representative of the community in Northern Ireland".

That is a direct quotation from section 73(4) the Northern Ireland Act 1998 regarding the constitution of the Equality Commission. The Minister has not yet replied.

Do Committee members wish that phrase to be included in sub-paragraph (2)? Furthermore, should it apply to the total membership of the authority or just the non-councillors?

Mr McCausland: The political representation will automatically include councillors from a cross-section of the community. The suggested amendment will be more relevant to the nominated members of the authority.

The Chairperson: It would be sensible to defer sub-paragraph (2) until we receive the Minister's response.

Schedule 1 referred for further consideration.

Schedule 2 (Transfer schemes)

The Chairperson: Schedule 2 has 10 paragraphs and provides for a scheme for the transfer of property, rights and liabilities from the education and library boards to the library authority. Apart from paragraphs 1 and 4, no issues have been raised concerning schedule 2.

Paragraph 1 of schedule 2 deals with the "Creation and apportionment of property, rights and liabilities etc." NIPSA feels that paragraph 1 does not create rights or liabilities between the transferred employee and the transferor and suggests that a further sub-paragraph be added to establish rights and liabilities.

The Committee requested that the Department and NIPSA's legal counsel meet to sort out the issue. On 19 November, the Committee wrote to the Minister asking him the date on which the meeting was due to take place. As no response was received, this week the Central Committee Office sent a further request for an update. The Central Committee Office was told that a letter would be forthcoming from Julie Mapstone — who is head of the libraries branch in the Department and is responsible for implementing the new library authority outlined in the review of public administration — stating that there had not yet been a meeting between NIPSA's legal counsel and the representatives from the Departmental Solicitor's Office. However, the Committee has not yet received that letter.

The Minister gave an undertaking to the Committee when giving evidence on the Bill on 18 October:

“It seems sensible to me to put the unions’ lawyer and the Department’s lawyer into one room to see if they can agree on a position — if that is possible to achieve. That is what we are doing. If an agreed position is reached, we will be in a good position to move forward, and we will report back to the Committee at the earliest opportunity.”

That quote is from the Hansard report of 18 October 2007.

There are specific questions that the Committee wants the departmental officials to address. What is the state of play at present? Is the Department awaiting a response from NIPSA to its request for a meeting? Could the fact that the Department is represented by the Departmental Solicitor’s Office and NIPSA by senior counsel cause difficulty in arranging a meeting? If so, will the Department consider employing its own senior counsel? I ask for an undertaking that the meeting with NIPSA will take place.

Mr N Kelly: In a letter to the Department, Mr Corey, NIPSA’s general secretary, states that senior counsel did not consider it appropriate to forward to a Department a copy of the full legal opinion that senior counsel had provided to NIPSA as his client.

The Chairperson: What is the date of that letter?

Mr N Kelly: It is dated 6 November 2007; I will give the Committee a copy.

It is not for me to speculate on what was going through senior counsel’s mind, but, ordinarily, when a senior counsel, a junior counsel, a solicitor, an apprentice solicitor or a law clerk gives a legal opinion, it becomes the property of the client, and the client can do what he wants with it. He can put it on the internet, or, if he wants, he can run off copies and paste them on lamp posts outside City Hall. I do not understand the proposition. Mr Corey states in his letter that:

“Senior Counsel... did not consider it appropriate to forward to a Government Department a copy of his full legal opinion”.

However, I cannot comment further on that.

The letter goes on to say:

“However he”

Mr O’Donoghue —

“has also advised and offered that any matters relating to the legal opinion can be discussed directly with Senior Counsel representing the Department.”

Mr Corey knows full well that senior counsel is not instructed on behalf of the Department. Therefore, to my mind, it is not co-operative when, according to Mr Corey, a position is taken by Mr O’Donoghue that he, Mr O’Donoghue, will not speak to anybody who does not have a wig and a silk gown. I cannot comment further on that either. That is the position; I will hand a

copy of the letter to the Committee. There is not a great deal more that I can do to help the Committee. My opinion on the legal issues remains as it was.

At the risk of boring the Committee to death, it might be useful if I spoke briefly on The Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations (TUPE). I have run quickly through Mr Corey’s evidence to the Committee, and he is plain wrong about TUPE. It is a complex issue. I am conscious that the Committee is in an awkward position: it has heard an opinion from one experienced lawyer who is a QC; and it has an opinion from another experienced lawyer who is not a QC but who is a chairperson of employment tribunals. The two factors probably cancel each other out. That leaves the Committee faced with two competing legal opinions, without its own legal advice. There is not a much more that I can do to address that problem, but it might be of some assistance if I spoke generally about TUPE to highlight some of the issues, as I am concerned that Mr Corey appears to misunderstand the position.

Mr Jack: Last week, the permanent secretary wrote to John Corey, restating that Noel is ready and willing to discuss the matter with senior counsel. To date, there has been no response.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

Noel, it is certainly worth taking the time to comment on TUPE.

Mr N Kelly: It might be of some use. I will not refer to each and every paragraph, but I will pass round a copy of ‘Staff Transfers in the Public Service: Statement of Practice’, which was prepared by the Westminster Government. It deals with the various situations that arise when staff are transferred in or out of the public sector or within the public sector. It is a policy document that draws on the legal principles involved. It sets the matter out clearly — if members could spare half a day to read it. I do not expect that they can. Its thrust is that where the TUPE regulations apply, they should apply; and where they do not, their principles should apply. In other words, legislation should be drafted to ensure that staff in the public sector who in certain circumstances might not be covered by TUPE would receive the same protection as those elsewhere who are automatically covered by TUPE.

What concerns me about the evidence that was provided by Mr Corey is that he states quite clearly that, in his view, TUPE does not apply to the public sector. That is simply wrong. I refer members to the The Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006. I am amazed that Mr Corey would not be aware that regulation 3(4) states in absolutely plain terms that:

“these Regulations apply to—

(a) public and private undertakings engaged in economic activities whether or not they are operating for gain”.

The wording of the regulations is fairly obscure. That is because they are derived from the acquired rights directive in EU law.

The position is not that TUPE regulations do not apply to the public sector. That is clearly not the case. It is a good deal more complicated than that. The position is set out in paragraphs 17 to 20 of the Cabinet Office policy document that I have provided to the Committee, which refers to situations in which there are transfers and reorganisations in the public sector. That is applicable to the library sector, in which there are, clearly, transfers and reorganisations.

The legal position, which is set out in paragraph 18 of the Cabinet Office statement of practice, is that the application of the TUPE regulations is excluded only in a narrow range of circumstances. As of right, the TUPE regulations apply to all public-sector workers who are transferred, unless they fall into one narrow exemption, namely the reorganisation of public administrative functions. At first glance, one might believe that that wording is sufficient to exclude practically everyone. Again, I must stress that that comes from EU law, and is construed extremely strictly. Therefore, the exemption applies to the smallest possible group of people. Paragraph 18 of the policy document states that:

“Case law suggests that it excludes from the legislation’s application only a relatively limited range of situations involving the transfer of entities pursuing non-economic objectives within the public sector.”

The document goes on to state that:

“The Henke exception” —

— which is what I have been discussing —

— “has been thought to apply where: the reason for a transfer is only because there is a change of geographical boundaries and the type of public sector body carrying out the function does not change...or where the main function is a judicial, quasi-judicial or quasi-judicial regulatory function”.

It goes on to suggest that changes should be made to legislation in order to ensure that TUPE protection be afforded to all staff that might otherwise be excluded. Therefore, the situation is that there is a potential transfer of staff to whom it is unclear that the TUPE regulations should apply as of right.

In one interpretation, which has not been fully tested by the courts — although there are references in the footnotes to some decisions — most of the staff will be protected as of right by the TUPE regulations. In another interpretation, a great many of them will not. In order to avoid that confusion when there is a transfer of staff in the public sector, the legislation provides either that the wording of the TUPE regulations is simply replicated — in other words, that

it will state specifically that contracts are passed on as they are, which, although I have paraphrased that to the nth degree, is, essentially, one alternative — or the other alternative, which is simply that the transfer is relevant for the purposes of the regulations. Either alternative works.

It appears that part of NIPSA’s reluctance to accept the Department’s action as valid is a reluctance to accept that it can simply be stated in primary legislation that the transfer is a relevant transfer.

Clearly, if it is a relevant transfer, all the protections afforded under the 2006 regulations automatically follow. I am assuming that part of NIPSA’s reluctance is based on that misapprehension.

However, I offer the Committee the following reassurance: it is being proposed that primary legislation means that The Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 applies to this transfer. The primary legislation — the Bill — makes it a relevant transfer.

It is also possible to do that by subordinate legislation — which makes it even clearer that it can be done by primary legislation. Paragraph 20 of the Cabinet Office document refers to an English Act — the Employment Relations Act 2004, which states that one can do precisely that. Section 38 of that Act includes a power that can be used to apply the requirements of TUPE specifically to transfers.

We have a similar provision in The Employment Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1999. If we wished, we could make provision by subordinate legislation. However, we have not done it by subordinate legislation because we have primary legislation. It is perfectly clear that primary legislation is better than subordinate legislation. However, that power is in reserve so that if, for example, there is a move within fisheries or some other part of the public sector that is not going to be implemented by legislation, the subordinate power in the 1999 Order to provide TUPE protection can be used.

I underline that reassurance, which can be summed up by saying that if something can be done by subordinate legislation, it can be done by primary legislation. I would stress that if it is a relevant transfer for the purposes of the 2006 regulations, it automatically takes with it all the other protections that appear to be concerning Mr Corey and Mr O’Donoghue — the right to be consulted, etc. If it is a relevant transfer, the regulations apply and those protections flow from that. I shall finish now, before members fall asleep. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: The Minister will be asked to write formally to the Committee to confirm that he has received legal advice on the matter and is satisfied

with that advice, and that the Bill reflects that advice as drafted.

Mr D Bradley: Would that include direct reference to the TUPE regulations?

The Principal Clerk of Bills: All of what Mr Kelly has said is on the record, and will form part of the Committee's report. The report will include a complete record of all the information that Mr Kelly has provided. The Minister will write to the Committee to state that he has been given advice and is satisfied with it, and is satisfied that his Bill incorporates that advice. It will be for the Committee to decide whether it accepts that.

Schedule 2 referred for further consideration.

Schedule 3 (Amendments)

The Chairperson: Schedule 3 sets out the consequent amendments to other legislation as a result of the Bill. Schedule 4 set out consequent repeals.

At last week's meeting, the Department advised that it may make amendments to schedules 3 and 4 to include reference to additional legislation. The Committee indicated that it was content with that arrangement.

The Committee accepts that this is a technical matter and that the amendments are necessary and consequent on the legislation. The Committee is content to leave the matter with the Department and the draftsman.

Question, That the Committee is content with the schedule, put and agreed to.

Schedule 3 agreed to.

The Chairperson: There is certain territory into which the Committee should not stray at times. Mr Jack, have you anything to add?

Mr Jack: I do not think that I have much more to say today. We will look forward to receiving the Committee's report. There are still some significant issues on which the Committee has strong and important views. We will seek to advise the Minister as to how best the Department can take on board those views.

Schedule 4 (Repeals)

The Chairperson: The Committee accepts that this is a technical matter and that the repeals are necessary and consequent on the legislation, and the Committee is content to leave this matter with the Department and the draftsman.

Question, That the Committee is content with the schedule, put and agreed to.

Schedule 4 agreed to.

The Chairperson: Another issue is outstanding. I advise members that Ms Irene Knox, chief executive

designate of the library authority, has advised that documentation on the operational structure of the authority will not be sent to the Committee until its meeting of 17 January 2008. She has indicated that she will be able to brief the Committee on that structure at that meeting.

That concludes our considerations of the Libraries Bill for this meeting. I thank the departmental officials for coming. I emphasise to Mr Jack the Committee's desire for early responses to its requests.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

13 December 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 Kieran McCarthy
Mr Nelson McCausland
Mr Ken Robinson
Mr Jim Shannon

The Chairperson (Mr McElduff): I refer Committee members to the letter that was sent to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure on 10 December 2007. The letter sets out the Committee's views on the membership of the new library authority, as discussed at last week's meeting, and requests confirmation that the Minister is satisfied with the legal advice that he was given with regard to schedule 2. A response is required by 18 December 2007 in order to allow the Committee to continue its clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill in January 2008.

Ms Irene Knox, the chief executive designate, will outline the library authority's operational structure to the Committee on 17 January 2008; the date of the Committee's second meeting in the new year.

I also refer members to correspondence from the Minister on possible redundancies. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will provide £660,000 to cover the cost of redundancies in the current financial year. It has also submitted a bid for an additional £782,000 to cover the cost of redundancies in the December monitoring round.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

10 January 2008

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:

Ms Irene Armstrong	}	Department of Culture,
Ms Julie Mapstone		Arts and Leisure
Mr Noel Kelly	}	Departmental Solicitor's
		Office

Schedule 1 (The Northern Ireland Library Authority)

Schedule 2 (Transfer schemes)

The Chairperson (Mr McElduff): The Committee has received correspondence from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in response to its proposals on board membership of the new library authority, contained in paragraph 2 of schedule 1, and also the request for confirmation that the Minister is content with the legal advice that he received about schedule 2, which deals with staff transfers.

Mr K Robinson: It is worth commenting that the Committee was clear about its reasons for wanting the board membership based in that way. The Minister has now accepted that fact, and I am glad that he has responded to the positive views of the Committee, albeit that that was not the case in the early days. We always felt that we were dragging against an unseen

weight, and another unseen weight was felt in our earlier discussions.

As the last member to join the Committee, I thought that I was in the dark, because I was always playing catch-up. It is obvious from having listened to members on the far side of the table that we are all playing catch-up on those issues. The Committee dug its heels in on that matter, and it has achieved what it wanted. It is pleasant that the Minister now agrees with us. I hope that that is a good sign that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the Minister and the Committee can work cohesively.

The Chairperson: We are making some inroads.

Mr McCausland: The Committee raised the issue of diversity. The Minister's letter states: "Such a statement is not normally included except where the business of the body in question is specifically equality related, or highly politically sensitive."

Therefore, diversity applies to bodies such as the Northern Ireland Equality Commission and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. Is this not simply a question of good practice? The Minister uses the words "is not normally included except". In many respects, we are in a new realm. There are not many newly constituted bodies; the bodies that come to mind immediately are the Equality Commission, the Human Rights Commission and the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I do not know the precise terminology that describes the Equality Commission or the Human Rights Commission, but it is good practice for a body to reflect Northern Ireland society. It does not work in the case of the Human Rights Commission or the Equality Commission, because those organisations do not reflect Northern Ireland society. However, the principle of diversity of membership is a good principle, particularly in the case of a cultural body such as the library authority, which should reflect the cultural diversity of Northern Ireland. Why use the words "not normally included" when there are not many examples? Should we not simply be establishing good practice?

Mr Shannon: I concur with Ken's comments. The Committee clearly intimated to the Minister and the Department its wish that the board of the library authority be constituted in a certain way and that the balance should lie in favour of elected representatives rather than independent members. The Minister has taken the Committee's view on board and has responded accordingly. The Committee should take some credit for its negotiations with the Minister. He realised that the Committee had provided the best solution, with which he agreed.

Mr K Robinson: Unfortunately, Chairperson, if we were to make a positive decision, it would exclude us from membership of the Luddite society.

The Chairperson: Do you have any unresolved concerns, Nelson?

Mr McCausland: I still think that it is a missed opportunity. The Committee has prevailed on the matter of board membership, but diversity is a good principle.

The Chairperson: You might have another opportunity to present that argument to senior officials from the Department, who will join us shortly.

We will go back to Ken's point. The Minister has agreed that a majority of the members of the board of the library authority should be elected representatives of district councils. He has also agreed that the board should comprise 19 members and that the requirement of a majority of places for elected representatives will be stated in the legislation. As you say, Ken, the Minister has listened.

Mr K Robinson: It is a major step forward.

The Chairperson: The Department will have to amend paragraph 2(1)(b) of schedule 1.

Let us move on to paragraph 2(1)(a) of schedule 1. The Committee had agreed to ask the Minister to amend this provision so that the chair of the board of the library authority will always be an elected local government representative. In his letter, however, the Minister has expressed his wish to leave open the issue of the recruitment of the chair of the board. The letter states:

"It will of course be open to District Councillors to apply for the post of Chair".

That is not necessarily the same thing, but it is par for the course here.

Is the Committee satisfied with the Minister's response? If not, the Committee would have to put down its own amendment. Is it fair to say that the Committee is broadly content?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Paragraph 2 deals with membership. I advise members that the Committee had agreed to ask the Minister to amend the paragraph to state that the library authority shall be representative of the community. That is Nelson's point. It mirrors the words used in section 73(4) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 concerning the make-up of the Equality Commission.

In the Minister's letter, he mentions the issues of equality and diversity. We might tease out those issues further with the departmental officials. The Department has said that any amendments to the Bill will not be included until the Committee produces its final report in February. That includes amendments to which the Minister has agreed.

The Principal Clerk of Bills: It would be more in line with good practice for the Committee to receive the wording of amendments before it signs off its report. There are a couple of reasons for that. It would avoid the possibility — the likelihood, even — of problems in dealing with amendments when the Bill reaches Consideration Stage, which will follow some time after the Committee's report has been completed.

If the Committee has not seen those amendments in advance and satisfied itself that the amendments are exactly as it had anticipated, problems arise about additional issues that must be dealt with in detail, after the Committee has concluded its detailed examination. In other words, it is much more difficult to deal with the detail in the Assembly Chamber than it is to deal with detail at Committee Stage.

I strongly recommend, to the Department and the Committee, that the Committee should request the drafted amendments before it signs off its report. That means that when the Committee has signed off its report, it is agreeing the Bill in its finalised form. That is in line with good practice, as it has been developed for other Committees. I recommend that the Committee should seek to have the amendments brought to it and have them agreed before it completes its report.

The Chairperson: Are members content with that arrangement?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Schedule 2 deals with transfer schemes. The Committee's letter to the Minister of 10 December 2007 sought his assurance that he was satisfied with the legal advice that he had received about schedule 2. In the Minister's letter, he confirms that he is content with the legal advice that he has received. Are Members content to proceed with the line-by-line reading of paragraph 2 of schedule 1 and paragraphs 1 and 4 of schedule 2, now that we have the Minister's assurance?

Mr McNarry: I am happy to proceed with the line-by-line reading, but not necessarily on the basis of the Minister's assurance. Although I am not challenging the Minister's assurance, further information on the legal side is still to be provided. Will the Committee hear more about that today?

The Chairperson: You are entitled to ask that question, and you will be given the opportunity to do so.

Mr McNarry: How will I get that opportunity?

The Chairperson: You will get the opportunity when senior departmental officials join the meeting.

Mr McNarry: Are you suggesting to me, or are you telling me — with all due respect to the senior departmental officials — that the Committee is going

to undertake a line-by-line reading in their presence and that members will ask them for their opinion? That would make those officials, in effect, members of the Committee.

The Chairperson: No, it would not. However, you are entitled to seek information en route. That is the plan.

Mr McNarry: I find that to be very strange.

The Principal Clerk of Bills: That is the normal process. In other words, the Committee is examining each paragraph. If the Committee is content, it agrees the paragraph.

Mr McNarry: The Committee has examined lots of paragraphs without the presence of departmental officials. Why are they here today?

The Chairperson: Departmental officials were present at Committee meetings on previous occasions.

Mr McNarry: I do not recall having seen them sitting in a meeting of the Committee.

The Chairperson: Your recollection may not tally with that of others.

Mr McNarry: You mean that they were sitting at the table — formally — in the meeting, with their name tags as the Committee undertook a line-by-line reading of the Bill?

The Chairperson: I will ask the Committee Clerk about that matter.

The Committee Clerk: On previous occasions, departmental officials and representatives from the Departmental Solicitor's Office were present at Committee meetings. The last meeting at which the Committee discussed the Libraries Bill was held in Belfast Central Library. Mr McNarry was unable to attend that meeting. Departmental officials appeared as witnesses at that meeting to assist on any issues that the Committee raised.

Mr McNarry: I fully understand and accept that. However, at a previous Committee meeting at which I was present, when a line-by-line reading was undertaken — not when the Committee met at Central Library — I do not recall any officials sitting in on that meeting. Am I correct in saying that?

The Committee Clerk: We can consult the minutes.

The Chairperson: We can check that fact from the minutes.

Mr McNarry: Is there a sudden lapse of memory about these things? Were they here or were they not here?

The Chairperson: For the sake of accuracy, David, we will check the minutes of the previous meetings at which we analysed the Bill to find out whether senior officials were in attendance, and in what capacity those officials were in attendance.

Mr McNarry: I am not having a senior moment, and I do not want to think that I am. It is too early in the year for that.

The Chairperson: At this point in the meeting, I invite Mr Noel Kelly from the Departmental Solicitor's Office and senior officials from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Julie Mapstone and Irene Armstrong, to join us. Thank you for coming this morning. Before I move to the line-by-line reading of paragraph 2 of schedule 1 and paragraphs 1 and 4 of schedule 2, I will tidy up the issues that remain from schedule 1.

Paragraph 2 of schedule 1 relates to membership. I am seeking an assurance from the departmental officials that the Minister has taken legal advice on the diversity issue.

Mr McCausland: I have a point on the diversity and representativeness of the board of the library authority. The Minister's letter states that he: "will be in a position to ensure the balance we seek."

If one were seeking balance, would it not make sense to have it in the wording of the legislation?

Ms Julie Mapstone (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure): The Department has not sought legal advice on the diversity issue. We followed the pattern of other bodies sponsored by DCAL, such as the Arts Council and Sport Northern Ireland, which are not obliged to comply with equality legislation.

Mr McCausland: Those bodies were set up umpteen years ago, and we have moved on since then. Is it not the case that the more recently established bodies such as the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission are subject to diversity legislation? Cultural bodies should reflect the cultural diversity of Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson: Julie, can you park that issue? Dominic Bradley and David McNarry will ask their questions, and then you can give a composite answer.

Mr D Bradley: The Minister states that an attempt to have a diverse board might conflict with section 75 groups. I would have thought that that attempt might also fit in well with section 75, depending on how diversity was defined.

Mr McNarry: I recall Mr Noel Kelly attending a Committee meeting on a previous occasion regarding legalities and concerns that the Committee had over representations that it had from trade unions. We left that issue with Mr Kelly in the hope that he would have discussions with the trade unions' legal representative.

Mr Noel Kelly (Departmental Solicitor's Office): That is correct. You will recall that that session was held at Central Library on 6 December 2007. At that

stage, the Department had not received a reply from the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA), and no meeting had been facilitated. Furthermore, no copy of the final opinion from NIPSA's senior counsel, Frank O'Donoghue QC, was furnished. Things have moved on slightly, in that NIPSA wrote to the Department on 10 December 2007. John Corey, NIPSA's general secretary, states:

"First, we were not aware until I spoke with Julie Mapstone last month that the Department was not being advised by counsel."

You will recall that NIPSA said that its senior counsel would not discuss the matter with me because I was not a senior counsel. Mr Corey states that he was not aware that the Department was not being advised by counsel — and of course I accept what he says — but I am not sure what difference it makes. The letter continues:

"Second, to avoid unnecessary complications Senior Counsel has advised that Noel Kelly contacts directly NIPSA's Solicitor Mr Viv Harty."

Mr Harty's address and phone number are supplied. I tried to phone, but I got no response. Therefore, on 20 December 2007, I delivered a letter by hand to Viv Harty's office; it summarised the issue and stated that the matter arose:

"because of a helpful intervention by Mr McNarry MLA in the Assembly Committee who suggested that I should meet with Mr O'Donoghue QC to discuss the differences in opinion which are apparent in the matter. For some reason that I do not understand, that meeting has not proved possible."

The letter went on to say that I had tried to phone Viv Harty but had been unable to reach him. It stated:

"If you feel it would be helpful, I am willing to meet to discuss this matter further with either you or with Mr O'Donoghue on Friday 21st (pm), Thursday 27th (all day) or Friday 28th (all day) December or a date in January to be agreed."

I have received no response.

Mr McNarry: Thank you, Mr Kelly. I appreciate the efforts that you have made to seek a solution to that matter. I am wrestling with two issues. First, there is the question of whether to move on to line-by-line scrutiny of the schedule on the basis of the Minister's assurances. I am slightly concerned, being mindful of the potential for legal challenge, that the Minister has made a decision unsighted of any legal challenge that may arise, because there have been no real discussions.

The Committee has treated NIPSA very fairly. Members listened to its case. The Committee attempted to facilitate a resolution, or at least contact between Mr Noel Kelly and its representatives. I wonder whether members share my view that we should tell NIPSA that we have heard about Mr Kelly's efforts to contact its officials and ask where that leaves the Committee. We should ask NIPSA whether it intends to withdraw its previous concerns or whether it thinks that the Committee is at least entitled to an

explanation about where it stands on the issue of potential legal challenges.

I am sure that all members agree that our concern is that we do not want to agree a Bill in the knowledge that there is every prospect of its being challenged in court 24 hours later. It would be very disingenuous of us to do that in the light of what Mr Kelly has reported to us.

Mr N Kelly: If I might interject; it is unlikely that there will be a challenge to the Bill in the time frame that you suggest. NIPSA is suggesting that, at some future date, if there were a dispute about the transfer of a member of staff that ends up in an industrial tribunal, possibly two years down the line, a tribunal chairperson will take a different interpretation of the legislation to that which the Department, the draftsman and I take.

It is easy to suggest such a possible situation. It is always possible to say that the legislation could be challenged. That is how lawyers make a living — thank God. You can never rule out a challenge. However, that is where it sits. I am content, if the transfer is stated in the legislation to be a relevant transfer for the purposes of the 2006 regulations, that carries with it all the protections that flow from the transfer being a relevant transfer. At the meeting in Central Library, I practically put the entire Committee to sleep by going through the mechanics and background of the legislation.

NIPSA's objection is that it suggests that, at some point — perhaps two years down the line — the legislation might be challenged if there is a dispute about a transfer. The legislation may be challenged, but my opinion is that it is good.

Mr McNarry: I am grateful to Mr Kelly. I can see why the Minister has said what he said in his letter, and I am prepared to accept that. I still ask that the Committee writes to NIPSA on the basis of what it has heard today and asks for explanations.

The Chairperson: Do members agree that the Committee writes to NIPSA?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Do members agree to paragraph 2(1)(a) of schedule 1, subject to amendment?

The Principal Clerk of Bills: Have we agreed that the Committee should see the amendments? The Committee may want to find out whether the Department is happy to provide amendments, in which case you could agree the paragraph as amended, rather than subject to an unseen amendment.

The Chairperson: OK.

Ms Mapstone: That is fine. We received further advice on the matter this morning, and the Department

is happy to come back to the Committee with those paragraphs amended as agreed.

The Principal Clerk of Bills: In those circumstances, it is probably better to leave schedule 1 so that it can be agreed exactly as it will appear in the Bill, rather than at a time when we do not know the precise wording of the amendment.

The Chairperson: Therefore, we will park schedule 1 in its entirety.

Paragraphs 1 to 3 of schedule 2 relate to the creation and apportionment of property, rights and liabilities, etc. Do Julie or Irene wish to comment on paragraph 1?

Ms Mapstone: No.

The Chairperson: Are members content with paragraphs 1 to 3 of schedule 2?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Paragraph 4 deals with employment contracts. Are members happy with paragraph 4(1)?

The Principal Clerk of Bills: The only issue with paragraph 4 concerns Mr McNarry's request that a letter be sent to the trade union. Unfortunately, Mr McNarry has left the room; however, do members wish to wait and consider the trade-union response before agreeing paragraph 4, or are they content to anticipate the likely response and proceed?

Mr D Bradley: There is little point in writing to the trade unions unless we await their reply.

The Chairperson: Should we revisit paragraph 4 in its entirety?

Mr D Bradley: Yes, after we have received NIPSA's response.

The Chairperson: In light of the request to NIPSA, we will park paragraph 4 of schedule 2.

Members will have a final opportunity to engage in a clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill on 24 January 2008, and we hope that the departmental officials will attend on that day.

Can the departmental officials give us an assurance that the required amendments will be brought before the Committee in time for consideration at our 17 January 2008 meeting?

Ms Mapstone: We will certainly endeavour to do that, although that will depend on the legislative draftsman who compiles the amendments. However, if requested, I am sure that he will manage to do so by that time. There are not too many amendments, and he should, therefore, be able to meet that deadline.

The Chairperson: Members should refer to the outline plan for the Committee Stage of the Libraries

Bill, which restates that 24 January 2008 will be the last opportunity to carry out a clause-by-clause reading.

Schedule 1 referred for further consideration.

Schedule 2 referred for further consideration.

The Chairperson: Members should refer to the Minister's response to the Committee's request for information about DCAL's bid for £980,000 in the December monitoring round in order to fund redundancy payments that may arise as a result of the establishment of the new library authority. The Minister is currently unable to give details of the number of people who might be involved or of the cost, but he has undertaken to inform the Committee as soon as that information becomes available. Are members content with the Minister's response?

Mr K Robinson: On a point of clarification: is the £600,000 tranche of redundancy payments to be met from moneys that are currently in the libraries budget? Everywhere we have gone in the past couple of months, librarians and people associated with libraries have told us about how tough things are. Could that £600,000 have been spent on books, materials and library improvements, or was it salted away specifically to meet redundancy payments?

Mr Shannon: Does that mean that things are going to get tougher?

Mr P Ramsey: I support Ken's comments. In my constituency, the Western Education and Library Board has expressed ongoing concerns about the viability of maintaining a unique library service such as the current one. According to the board, literacy and numeracy services will be significantly reduced. We must have more information. Given those and future reductions, will the boards be able to deliver a good and efficient service to the wider public?

The Chairperson: Members will be able to see the letter requesting —

Mr K Robinson: The Minister's letter states:

"A first tranche of redundancies is being met from approximately £600,000 monies available from the libraries budget in this year."

That concerns me. Was that £600,000 set aside to buy extra books and materials throughout the current financial year? Is it now being pulled out of the pot to be held for redundancies that may not have been foreseen earlier?

The second sum mentioned in the Minister's letter is £980,000, which is additional money. I am not as concerned about that as I am about the £600,000 being scooped out of the existing libraries budget that might have been used in other ways.

Mr McCausland: The Minister's letter states that the Department asked for information on: "potential voluntary redundancies in this financial year".

Do we know whether those will actually be realised? This is the month of January. If it is not known whether someone is leaving the service now, there is only another 10 weeks to find out. We should find out how much of that will actually be realised.

The Chairperson: We have a series of questions for the Minister and the Department, and we will take action accordingly.

Mr P Ramsey: Will the Committee also write to the boards to seek an explanation of some points: for example, will there be a reduction of revenue because of redundancies? Ken has asked whether there will be reductions in the purchasing of materials and in the introduction of new programmes.

Mr McCausland: If we are also writing to the boards, can we ask them — we could also get this information from the Department — what reduction there will be in the libraries budget of each board in percentage terms for the next financial year.

Mr P Ramsey: The situation has changed since the boards made their presentation to the Committee, so we must find that out.

The Chairperson: We will take that action.

Mr Brolly: Is it worth considering whether the £600,000 is money that has been set aside for redundancies that the boards anticipate and of which they are already aware? The other sum of £980,000 may be for use in the event of redundancies that have not been anticipated. I do not know. As Ken says, we need to clarify that.

Ms Mapstone: May I comment? The £600,000 is not new money: that is quite correct. It did not become available to the libraries budget until September. The reason for that is that it was part of a line of expenditure in the draft Budget that referred to a unitary charge element, which was put into the budget some time ago as an anticipation of public-private partnership or private finance initiative projects that would require a unitary charge payment every year. What is in the line is in excess of what libraries need to pay in unitary charges; however, the Department is not allowed, without Department of Finance and Personnel permission, to reallocate it.

Mr K Robinson: So you are not dipping into the pot.

Ms Mapstone: We are not. We received permission to reallocate that sum in September; therefore, although it was already there, it was not widely available to the boards. We are not, therefore, taking money from the boards. In September, we went out to the boards. We told them that we had this money

available, asked how they wished to spend it and set out the criteria. Overwhelmingly, the boards requested that the money be spent on redundancy payments. The Department is complying with the boards' views of where the money is needed. They chose redundancies so overwhelmingly that we put in the additional bid.

Mr Brolly: That is helpful.

Mr McCausland: While Julie is here, we can ask another question. Can we have an explanation, in simple, understandable form, of how the assessment of relative needs exercise (ARNE) actually works? Sometimes those issues are so complicated.

Ms Mapstone: We can supply that. I cannot give it to you now, because I may not get the details right; but we can provide you with that.

Mr McCausland: That would be useful. There has been a 30% reduction in the funding of the Belfast Education and Library Board over the past four to five years. I have never understood why that should have happened; one accepts that that is how the system works. I am interested to know why it has had that effect on funding. The population has not dropped by 30%.

Ms Mapstone: I recall that financing per head for the Belfast Education and Library Board was significantly in excess of other areas and that there was a need for a readjustment.

Mr McCausland: I am keen to know why the reduction was so substantial.

Ms Mapstone: We can provide the details.

The Chairperson: Members are clear on the questions that the Committee will put to the boards. I thank Noel, Julie and Irene for coming along this morning to assist us.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

17 January 2008

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:

Ms Irene Armstrong	}	Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure
Ms Julie Mapstone		
Mr Noel Kelly	}	Departmental Solicitor's Office

The Chairperson (Mr McElduff): We move now to the Libraries Bill. I invite Mr Noel Kelly from the Departmental Solicitor's Office, and Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) officials Julie Mapstone and Irene Armstrong to the table. I refer members to the correspondence between DCAL and the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) on schedule 2 of the Libraries Bill.

First, the Principal Clerk of Bills will set the context for us and remind us what stage we have reached.

The Principal Clerk of Bills: It might be helpful for members to pause for breath and see what stage we have reached with the Libraries Bill. Over the last day or so, I read through the Bill thoroughly and the Committee's work on it. All the clauses have been agreed, except clause 2, which is subject to a possible minor amendment by the Department. The Committee can deal with that this morning; it is in the letter from

the Minister. Clause 2 is the only clause that the Committee must deal with today.

There are 19 paragraphs in schedule 1, all of which have been agreed, except paragraph 2, which is subject to three possible departmental amendments. Those amendments are also in the Minister's letter, and the Committee will deal with them this morning. We can ask the officials to explain them.

Paragraph 6 of schedule 2 is slightly unusual because, according to the minutes of previous meetings, the Department and the Committee agreed that it should be omitted. That would involve a very minor amendment. The Committee requires the Department to say that the Minister will table an amendment to omit paragraph 6 of schedule 1.

There are 10 paragraphs in schedule 2.

All 10 have been agreed, except paragraphs 1 and 4. NIPSA had concerns about those paragraphs, and last week the Committee agreed to send a letter to NIPSA stating that the Committee was minded to accept the Bill in its present form but that it wanted to hear whether NIPSA had any concerns. The deadline for receiving a reply was not met; however, a letter from NIPSA was subsequently received.

At its meeting on 6 December 2007 in Belfast Central Library, the Committee agreed that it would accept a reassurance from the Minister about the legal aspects in respect to schedule 2. That assurance has been given and is in a previous letter from the Minister that the Committee looked at last week. I am concerned that although the Committee received and accepted the Minister's reassurance, it asked for further confirmation. The Committee might want to consider the letter that has subsequently been received from the Minister.

There are three technical departmental amendments to schedule 3; they are in the Minister's most recent letter. The Committee can ask for a short explanation on them.

The Committee must sign off clause 2, finalise a couple of paragraphs in schedule 1, finalise two paragraphs in schedule 2, and finalise part of schedule 3. There is no reason that that should not be completed today.

The Chairperson: That matches my understanding of what has happened to date, specifically the Minister's assurance that he is content with the legal advice. I suggest that the Committee move to finalise its consideration of the Bill. Are members agreeable?

Members indicated assent.

Clause 2 (Duty of Authority to provide library service)

The Chairperson: I refer members to the proposed amendments to clause 2(1); to schedule 1(2)(1)(b); and the amendments to schedule 3.

I also refer members to the Minister's response to schedule 1(2); and to schedule 2(1) and schedule 2(4). I suggest that we consider each item in order.

I invite the Principal Clerk to go through each amendment.

The Principal Clerk of Bills: The Minister's letter sets out in simple terms the proposed amendments that he suggests the Committee accept. There are three groups of amendment, the first of which relates to clause 2. I understand that it is in response to a request by the Committee, but members may wish to ask the Department to set out the background to that amendment. If the Committee is happy with it, it is a matter of signing off the clause to be amended.

Ms Julie Mapstone (Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure): We discussed this matter with the Committee during previous evidence sessions. Members may recall that the phrase "comprehensive and efficient" appears in the existing libraries' legislation in Northern Ireland and across the water. When we came to draft this legislation, we felt that that phrase did not deliver much in the way of meaning. Therefore, instead of the word "comprehensive", we set out in clause 2(2)(a) what we consider to be the main task of the library service. We removed the term "efficient", because we did not feel that efficiency should be legislated for but should be dealt with in the procedures and monitoring of public expenditure.

However, I know that the Committee received evidence from several other people connected with the Library Service who asked for the phrase to be reinserted, and we are content to do that. It will not change the major policy but it will, perhaps, provide reassurance that there is no change, in effect, to the way that the Library Service should be delivered.

Mr McCausland: I am happy for the phrase to be reinstated, and I agree entirely that it should be. On several occasions, I have said that the Library Service should stock books on, for example, the Ulster diaspora and the history of Northern Ireland. How will that be addressed? At the moment, much of that material cannot be accessed in Northern Ireland's libraries and people end up having to go to somewhere such as the British Library. The Committee has discussed the lack of a national library in Northern Ireland. Can appropriate wording be included in the legislation to ensure that people can access such material in Northern Ireland?

Ms Mapstone: Earlier exchanges of letters between the Minister and the Committee dealt with the nature

and importance of collections. Clause 2(2)(a) sets out that the new library authority shall:

"secure that facilities are available for the borrowing of, or reference to, library materials sufficient in number, range and quality to meet the general requirements of adults and children".

We cannot place a highly technical and specific demand on the public library service to make all research material available. However, we accept the importance of collections, and Belfast Central Library is among several holding important collections.

Mr McCausland: I appreciate that point, but the wording of clause 2(2)(a) is probably not much different from that in the current legislation, and, at the moment, there is not sufficient access to the type of material that I have mentioned. How can that access be created? Any attempt to develop cultural contacts between Northern Ireland with the rest of the world must include an emphasis on tourism, particularly geological and cultural tourism, and so forth. Lack of access to such material creates a void in the cultural wealth of Northern Ireland.

Ms Mapstone: Library professionals tell me that there is considerable access to existing collections. Inevitably, there will be some gaps because in the absence of a national library there cannot be a fully comprehensive collection.

Mr McCausland: I appreciate that. Therefore, in the absence of a national library, how can we produce something — and I accept that it would not be of the same calibre — that would at least concentrate on books that are specific to this place?

Ms Mapstone: That is a matter for the collections policy which will be developed by the library authority. Perhaps the Committee will recall the Minister's letter about collections, which assured members that he would ask the library authority to develop a collections policy that will ensure that existing material is better advertised and more widely available and will look at the development of collections.

Mr McCausland: I understand and accept that the Minister has given us an assurance that he will do that. However, would it not be better to include something in the legislation? This Minister may keep to his assurance, but a future Minister may not have the same interest in the matter. People have the right to access that sort of information.

Ms Mapstone: All I can do is refer the member to clause 2(2)(a). Without being specific, the clause states that facilities should be sufficient for "general requirements", and that would apply to research facilities also. I would expect a collections policy to address any major gaps in collections as regards local historical or local cultural information.

Mr McCausland: There is a parallel example regarding museums. Legislation relating to museums states that they should collect general material, which means that in museums you will find items from Egypt and all over the world. However, there is also a specific reference to — and I cannot remember the exact terminology used — the history of this region. If that can be the case for museums, there is no reason why it cannot be the case for libraries. It is not incumbent on museums to collect every remaining type of left-footed spade or other obscure items: the reference is general. Therefore, some reference to Northern Ireland, or the region — or whatever people want to call it — could be included in the Libraries Bill. I accept the Minister's commitment, but something more could be done.

The Chairperson: Are you referring to the way that museums are set up, Mr McCausland?

Mr McCausland: Yes, there is a specific reference in the legislation governing museums.

The Chairperson: Do other members have a view on that point?

Mr K Robinson: I agree with Mr McCausland: it is very important to have collections that are specific to Northern Ireland given the possibilities of genealogical tourism, et cetera. The only helpful reference I can find is in Ms Knox's presentation paper on the organisational structures of the library authority, which states:

"Providing access to local, Ulster and Irish history."

From experience, I know that it is sometimes extremely difficult to gather local material. As Mr McCausland said, sometimes one ends up going to London, Dublin or — in extreme cases — Armagh to get local material.

Ms Mapstone: I also draw the Committee's attention to the Department's policy guidelines in the document 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries', which set out the importance of collections and their maintenance. Therefore, there is a departmental commitment to collections and to recognising the importance of material that is relevant to local historical research. That commitment, which is in the policy guidelines, will be monitored by the Department, as regards the operation of the Library Service, in order to make sure that it is adhered to. The legislation states that the material must be sufficient; and when that is taken together with the Minister's letter to the Committee assuring it that he would seek to have a collections policy; we feel that those measures meet the issues that members have referred to.

The Chairperson: Normally, the Committee would seek such an assurance. You are reminding us that we have already got that assurance, Ms Mapstone.

Ms Mapstone: The Minister's letter on the collections policy was one of the earlier letters — I do not have it with me and I cannot remember the date.

Mr P Ramsey: Mr McCausland's request is not unreasonable, and I do not understand the resistance from the departmental officials. It would only take a one-liner to ensure that access is provided to the materials that have been mentioned. If such wording were included in the Bill, then ensuring that such reference material would be accessible would be one of the Department's priorities. I support the inclusion of such a measure in the legislation.

The Chairperson: It strikes me that the Committee will need to revisit this clause.

The Principal Clerk of Bills: The question is whether it would be appropriate for such a measure to go into primary legislation, a policy document, or regulations setting out the duties of libraries. That is a matter for the Department.

Mr McCausland: Documents come and go: legislation is more permanent. The record indicates that policy documents in this area have not been adhered to.

The Chairperson: As a Committee, we have to form an opinion on the matter.

Mr Brolly: Could we have an example of how such a measure would be put into primary legislation? The matter seems to be more operational than legislative.

The Chairperson: Mr Brolly, are you saying that you are content for the matter to continue to be covered by policy guidelines rather than legislation?

Mr Brolly: Yes, unless the Committee wishes to include some form of monitoring principle that would ensure that the type of material that Mr McCausland, or any of us, wants to read is available. We could reach a point at which various interest groups, large and small, would be asking for this facility.

Mr McCausland: If I want books about an obscure aspect of Japanese history, I cannot expect my local library, or even Belfast Central Library, to hold them. However, if one wants to access material on Northern Ireland, one should be able to get it in Northern Ireland. There is a huge volume of material — perhaps I should not have said "huge" as that will frighten the officials when they think of the cost. There is a significant volume of material that should be, and could be, made available, but it is not. People in both communities are being robbed of part of their cultural heritage.

A simple, two-minute story will hammer the point home. The man most responsible for the founding of Los Angeles was born in Belfast and he was educated in a Christian Brothers School in Dublin before going to America. He is a significant individual. People

have come to Belfast from Los Angeles, and I have discovered that no-one knows that he was originally from here despite an interesting biography, which I have at home, having been written about him. If I were to go into a library, I would never come across it. That is the sort of interesting material that I am talking about. Past records regarding libraries suggest that if such material is not nailed down, it will get pushed aside and be forgotten.

Mr P Ramsey: You are right.

Mr McCausland: Museums legislation contains a phrase that could be used as a guideline.

Mr Brolly: I appreciate exactly what Mr McCausland says. However, we need an example of the wording that could be included in the legislation.

Mr McCausland: The museums legislation contains a line — I cannot remember the exact terminology — that refers to Northern Ireland, or the region.

Ms Mapstone: I want to propose some wording that has been brought forward by my colleague Mr Kelly. He suggests that a phrase that could be added to clause 2(2)(b) which would be along the lines of:

“creating an adequate collection of reference material relevant to the cultural heritage of Northern Ireland.”

Mr McCausland: Perfect.

Ms Mapstone: I am not suggesting it as an amendment, because, of course, legislative counsel would have to do that. However, would that type of wording be appropriate?

Mr McCausland: That is the sort of phrase that is needed. The wording that was used for museums was slightly wider. I believe that it employed the term, “Ulster”, because, pre-partition, material would have been relevant because someone was born in Donegal, or whatever; whereas, now, it has general relevance. However, apart from that minor comment, Mr Kelly’s wording is not a million miles away from what we need. He has earned his money today.

Mr D Bradley: It is not unreasonable to expect the legislation to refer to material on Northern Ireland since it is directed at Northern Ireland. The current wording could be used as a template for any region therefore it is a good idea to make it more specific. In my view, the collections policy does not necessarily cover this issue. As I made you aware before, Chairman, part of the Irish and local studies collection in Armagh was removed to the cellar of the libraries headquarters. It is essential that such collections are made available to the public. Such a reference in the legislation might help to drive that policy.

The Chairperson: I believe that we have reached an outcome.

Mr Brolly: Sorry, Chairman. I missed what has just been agreed.

The Chairperson: I invite Noel or Julie to restate the wording that was offered.

Mr Noel Kelly (Departmental Solicitor’s Office): Generally, it is wrong to legislate in haste. However, a rough draft of the new sub-paragraph, which would become clause 2(2)(b)(vi), would require the authority to have regard to the desirability of creating an adequate collection of reference material relevant to the cultural heritage of all of the people of Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson: We can sign off on that aspect of the legislation subject to confirmation of the wording of the amendment. We will discuss the exact wording next week. Is that fair?

The Principal Clerk of Bills: Therefore, the clause will be amended in accordance with the amendment that is before the Committee today and which will be along the lines of the wording proposed by departmental officials. Although, ultimately, that will not be the wording that the Office of Legislative Counsel (OLC) produces, Mr Kelly could leave his wording with the Committee Clerk so that the Committee can see that the revised wording will be along those lines.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause subject to the Department’s amendment, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 2, as amended, agreed to.

Schedule 1 (The Northern Ireland Library Authority)

The Principal Clerk of Bills: The next three suggested amendments are linked. The amendment to schedule 1, paragraph 2(1) will insert the new line “not more than 18 members”; the amendment to schedule 1, paragraph 2(2) relates to members being drawn from among representative councillors; and the third amendment, which is also to schedule 1, paragraph 2(2), will provide an opportunity for the Minister to bring forward a statutory rule to amend the figure of 18. Chairman, you might wish the officials to comment on that.

Ms Mapstone: The Committee has received a letter from the Minister in which he committed himself to the principle of the amendments, and we have now tried to nail down the language. There are two aspects to schedule 1, paragraph 2: one is the number of people who will be on the board of the authority and the provision to amend that number by statutory rule; the second is the composition of the authority and the provision that a majority of members must be drawn from among elected district councillors. We have met the Committee’s wishes in respect of those points. The only thing is that, as you can see from the Minister’s letter, he has included the words “up to 19”. The reason for that is that we do not want to render the authority inoperable

if, for any reason, it loses a member. However, the objective is that it should have 19 members.

The Chairperson: That was your point, Mr Robinson.

Mr K Robinson: Yes. My point seems to have been addressed. However, will the officials clarify whether, at some point, a cute Minister would not, for his own convenience, refer the number back to seven and so thwart the will of the Committee, which was that membership of the authority should have as wide a geographical and gender spread as possible. I realise that, initially, it may be difficult to get members with the experience and expertise required to get the authority off the ground. Can I be assured that, in the future, a cute Minister will not abuse that point?

The Chairperson: Do you want some mechanism for nailing down that number?

Mr K Robinson: Yes.

The Chairperson: Can that be done? Is there a way of ensuring that the emphasis is on having 19 members and discouraging regression from that figure?

Mr K Robinson: I suggest that an antiquated form of words, perhaps a spoken assurance, might be useful in this context.

Mr Shannon: Could the number seven not be omitted from the Bill? The wording could be “the chairperson and eighteen members”.

Mr K Robinson: I do not want to mess around too much with the wording of the Bill at the moment. It struck me on reading through the papers that after quite a struggle with officials the will of the Committee prevailed and we got it accepted that elected representatives should be on board to give some public accountability and geographical spread.

We went for a higher number of members to try to achieve that. I do not want the will of the Committee to be thwarted at some point in the future. The term “a spoken assurance” means nothing to me, but perhaps someone can elaborate on it?

The Principal Clerk of Bills: As the evidence being given to the Committee is on the record, assurances given will be recorded. That should be sufficient for the Committee.

Mr Shannon: In the Minister’s reply dated 20 December he clearly stated that he is disposed to agree to a board of 19 members. That is clear-cut; why do we not just go with that?

Mr K Robinson: If members are content, and if officials are giving us that assurance, then that is fine.

Mr Shannon: If there is any hassle, we do not need any other assurance, or form of words. The Committee can simply quote the letter.

Mr K Robinson: I know where Jim Shannon lives if this goes wrong.

Mr Shannon: It will not go wrong. I am the eternal optimist.

Mr McNarry: He is never in.

Question, That the Committee is content with the schedule subject to the Department’s amendment, *put and agreed to.*

Schedule 1, as amended, agreed to.

Schedule 2 (Transfer schemes)

The Principal Clerk of Bills: The Committee needs to sign off schedule 2. The schedule was agreed apart from paragraphs 1 and 4 because there was doubt over what the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance’s (NIPSA) response would be. Since the Committee has concluded that it will not consider the issues raised by NIPSA, there will be no amendments to schedule 2 and the Committee is clear to sign it off.

Question, That the Committee is content with the schedule, *put and agreed to.*

Schedule 2 agreed to.

Schedule 3 (Amendments)

The Principal Clerk of Bills: Schedule 3 is subject to three technical amendments. The Committee agreed in an earlier session that it was content for the Department to draft those amendments and bring them forward. Members now have the wording of the amendments in front of them, and they are simply changes to other pieces of legislation that will ensure that references to the board are included. Three pieces of legislation are mentioned. The Committee has already indicated that it is content with those technical amendments but it may wish to hear further comment from the officials.

The Chairperson: Do officials wish to say anything further on the amendments?

Ms Mapstone: The amendments simply deal with replacing references to the education and library boards with the library authority in other legislation.

The Chairperson: Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

Schedule 4 (Repeals)

The Principal Clerk of Bills: Schedule 4 has not been signed off. None of what has been done so far has brought about the need for any amendments to schedule 4. The Committee can now be reasonably satisfied that the schedule simply repeals old pieces of legislation which will no longer be relevant. The officials might want to comment on schedule 4, but it appears to me that the Committee is clear to sign it off.

The Chairperson: Do the officials wish to comment further on schedule 4?

Ms Mapstone: No.

Question, That the Committee is content with the schedule, *put and agreed to.*

Schedule 4 agreed to.

The Committee Clerk: I have been passed a note suggesting a proposed amendment to clause 2(2)(b). The suggested wording is to add the following words: “(vi) creating an adequate collection of reference material relevant to the cultural heritage of (all the people of Northern Ireland or the heritage of Northern Ireland).”

The Principal Clerk of Bills: At some point, that amendment can be brought back to the Committee for members’ reassurance, but it is clear that the Committee is content with the general thrust of it.

The Chairperson: That concludes the clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Libraries Bill. I am grateful to members and not least to departmental officials and the departmental solicitor’s office for their helpful contribution. Thank you.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

17 January 2008

CHARITIES BILL (NIA 9/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Gregory Campbell (Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Mickey Brady
Mr Fred Cobain
Mr Jonathan Craig
Ms Anna Lo
Mr Fra McCann
Mrs Claire McGill
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Alban Maginness

Witnesses:

Mr Dermot Curran	} CO3 — Chief Officers 3rd Sector
Ms Majella McCloskey	
Ms Carol O'Bryan	
Ms Wendy Osborne	

The Chairperson (Mr Campbell): We now come to the marathon that will be the Charities Bill. We have officials from CO3 with us. You are very welcome, and thank you for coming along and supplying the Committee with hard copies of your presentation.

Majella, do you want to introduce your team? We will start with your presentation, followed by members' questions.

Ms Majella McCloskey (CO3 — Chief Officers 3rd Sector): I thank the Committee for inviting us along to give evidence.

I am Majella McCloskey, and I am the director of CO3 — Chief Officers 3rd Sector. I am accompanied by three CO3 members: Wendy Osborne, who is the chief executive of the Volunteer Development Agency; Carol O'Bryan, who is the chief executive of the Simon Community; and Dermot Curran, who is the chief executive of the Belfast Community Housing

Association and is also CO3's treasurer. Wendy and I will make the formal presentation, and Carol and Dermot will help us to answer any questions.

CO3 is a membership body for the people who head up charities in Northern Ireland. It has 175 members, and it looks after the professional and personal development needs of those members. CO3 also keeps members well informed by sharing information, and it investigates policy issues from time to time on particular subjects. That is a key point; with charities that have paid staff, it is likely that their chief executives will have the lead role on governance and relations with the new charity commission.

We thought that it might be helpful to give members a flavour of the charitable sector in Northern Ireland. It is important to point out that there are some large charities in Northern Ireland, with a turnover of more than £10 million to £20 million. They have large staff numbers, both people who work in Northern Ireland and others who are based here for organisations that operate in other jurisdictions such as the South of Ireland, Britain and internationally. There are also some small community-based organisations — groups that come together because of a shared interest such as local community groups, historical associations, and so forth. It is a broad church, for want of a better word. A wide range of groups is involved, and it is crucial to bear that fact in mind.

The sector is made up of not only indigenous and local charities but charities that operate on an all-Ireland or UK basis. Indeed, some charities that are based here operate on a global level — for example, the Mexico Child Link Trust.

There is great breadth in the charitable sector. Some charities are schools, universities, playgroups, local community groups and civil liberties organisations. The breadth of the charitable sector in Northern Ireland is tremendous. The sector is vibrant, and I feel proud to be a part of it. The sector has played an important role in Northern Ireland society and should continue to do so.

What is CO3's core message? Why are we here today to give evidence to the Committee? It is important to say at the outset that we welcome the establishment of a charity commission. We have talked extensively to, and carried out consultations with, our members since the idea of a charity commission was first mooted in 2006. It is important that there is regulation, and we believe in the importance of accountability. We are mindful of the fact that we receive public money, both from Government and from donations from the public. We are aware of all those issues, and it is important that organisations are accountable and transparent. There is a need for a charity commission.

That being said, there have been very few cases of fraud or mismanagement of money in the charitable sector in Northern Ireland. It is really a matter of having a common charities register so that more information is available — for example, how many charities there are and what they do.

That being said, it is important that the commission is properly established and has the resources to do the job that it needs to do and that it is accountable in its operations. The commission must understand and value the work of charities in Northern Ireland in its approach and operation.

In our submission, we proposed an amendment to the Bill that focuses on valuing the importance of charities to civil society in Northern Ireland. We are not suggesting that a charity commission should champion the role of charities or that it should represent charities, because bodies already exist in the sector that do that, and do it very well. The charity commission should have a built-in ethos that recognises that charities are important in Northern Ireland. The commission should be mindful of the importance and value of charities. If that ethos existed, it would set the tone for a good relationship with the charitable sector and for the commission being proportionate in the way in which it deals with organisations. Thus, if an organisation is very small, the commission will be conscious of that in its operations. That is a key point.

Ms Wendy Osborne (CO3 — Chief Officers 3rd Sector): I will talk about bureaucracy and accountability. We all know that this is a highly technical, complex and wordy Bill. The legislation will not sit in isolation; it will sit alongside other policy initiatives that deal with charities and the voluntary and community sector. It is important that it does not overburden organisations by requiring them to prepare different sets of submissions and annual returns for various Departments and the charity commission. That would not be an effective use of a charity's resources.

Although there must be some bureaucracy and a level of accountability, there is a concern that if the people who run the charity commission do not understand that it must not sit in isolation, it may be ineffective in conducting its business.

It is right that charities, particularly when they are in receipt of public funding, should undergo an increased level of auditing and reporting, and the new charity commission must take account of that and ensure that such procedures are as streamlined as possible. Such accountability will help everybody to understand how charities work.

The subject of trustees must also be considered, including matters relating to the establishment of the incorporation of trustees and charitable incorporated

organisations. Although those new provisions are to be welcomed, the charity commission must understand how they will integrate with existing arrangements, and established charities and organisations will have to consider the implications of the new arrangements and make choices about what they will do, which will depend on understanding the regulations and creating effective bureaucratic systems.

When considering trustee eligibility, the nature of Northern Ireland must be taken into account, and issues relating to that must be brought on board and understood to ensure that people who may wish to be trustees are not automatically excluded. One size may not fit all; attempts to legislate for only one size deter people and create difficulties for the very people whom the legislation was intended to encourage and enable. We do not wish to stop charity; we wish to ensure that a charity is as effective as it can be.

Proportionality is another key issue. All groups and organisations that wish to attain charitable status will be required to register with the charity commission and, in most instances, provide similar information. I will draw from my own experience; the organisation of which I am the chief executive — the Volunteer Development Agency — has a revenue turnover of around £1 million; however, I also happen to be the chairperson of a local historical society, which has no paid staff and revenue of perhaps only a couple of hundred or a few thousand pounds a year. Auditing requirements for those bodies will be different, which is to be welcomed; however, in all other regards, charity commission registration will be exactly the same. If the legislation is to work, proportionality must be considered in order that such local historical societies and volunteer-led groups will still be eligible for charitable status but will not have the bureaucratic burden that one would wish for a large charitable organisation, which might be responsible for large sums of public funding. The key issue is proportionality, and the legislation does not adequately recognise that and will not enable the charity commission to regulate charities of all sizes effectively.

There is a question about whether the charity commission will be adequately resourced. A figure of £800,000 is stated in the legislation. Last year, the new regulatory body in Scotland — with a staff of 45 people — had an operating budget of £1.7 million. The nature of what the new charity commission will be asking organisations to do and its regulatory functions will, over time, create a substantial volume of work to register all charities in Northern Ireland. If the charity commission is to create guidance and be responsible for the accountability of that guidance, those functions must be adequately resourced. Experience tells us that charities will be required to ensure that they

conform to the regulations. Therefore, the regulatory body will have to ensure that those procedures are as streamlined as possible, and resources will affect that process. Ultimately, the problems with conforming to regulations will impact on charities' work, and I do not believe that any one wishes that to be affected.

There may also be resource implications for charities. Clearly, my organisation and organisations that are members of CO3 will have to consider, and take advice on, what they do and how they will conform to the new regulations. If that becomes an issue, additional legal advice may have to be sought, which will have resource implications for charities.

The legislation allows the new charity commission to request payment for certain things, if that is deemed appropriate. That may never come to pass, but the legislation allows for it. Regulation is good, but it must be undertaken with the aim of allowing the charitable sector in Northern Ireland to flourish. Therefore, the key question for the people agreeing, progressing and implementing the legislation is how to get the balance right.

Majella mentioned accountability, and CO3 does not want to stop charitable organisations operating in Northern Ireland; it wants its organisations to be regulated so that they are as effective as possible. If we agree that charities are important, that they operate in all areas and all communities in Northern Ireland, that they attract public participation and many additional financial resources, it cannot be disputed that they add real value to life in Northern Ireland. Therefore, the charity commission must be independent, because it will regulate a substantial amount of civil society in Northern Ireland. For that reason, it is important that the charity commission is seen to be free from interference and is accountable. The scope and powers of the commission will have such an impact on the charitable sector that it should be directly accountable to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

CO3 welcomes the establishment of the charity commission, and it wants it to be successful. In order for the commission to succeed, it must take the context of charities into consideration and ensure that it does not hamper charities' effectiveness by being overly burdensome. It must be properly established and resourced, be accountable and, crucially, be balanced and proportionate. The commission must show that it values the context in which it is working.

It is not known how many charitable organisations are recognised, but the establishment of the charity commission will have far-reaching implications for everyone who works in the charitable sector. CO3 is happy to engage further with the Committee for Social Development on any issues that we have raised.

The Chairperson: We will now move on to members' questions. Please be aware that there are time constraints, so I would appreciate it if the questions and responses are concise.

You mentioned resources and bureaucracy. Am I right in assuming that some of the larger charities — or those that are part of a larger organisation, either in the UK, the Republic or elsewhere — may be able to draw on resources to help them to cope with increased bureaucracy to which smaller charities may not have access?

Ms Osborne: Larger charities may have expertise in their own structures and may also have access to additional resources. Smaller charities will not have those resources, especially if they are led and run by volunteers. Additional bureaucracy will be more complex for such charities and their trustees than it will be for larger organisations.

The Chairperson: I assumed that that was the case. There are greater demands for transparency all around. I have read press articles in which charities state how much out of every pound donated — 85p, say — goes directly to the people that that charity was set up to try to help. Is the amount of money that goes to those people likely to fall because of the increased levels of bureaucracy that the charity commission will demand?

Mr Dermot Curran (CO3 — Chief Officers 3rd Sector): Housing associations are registered charities, and they receive grant aid for development and for the provision of social housing, so regulations already require accountability. Monitoring and performance management are also considerations. The formulation of common objectives and needs, and the added value of good practice, would be beneficial to the sector, because housing associations are quasi-public authorities and are accountable to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints. Therefore, housing associations are already regulated by the Department for Social Development. They are also audited by the Northern Ireland Audit Office. Openness, transparency and accountability are required. The sector does bring added value, which, perhaps, the 85p out of the pound cannot always clearly identify in local communities.

The Chairperson: Majella, you mentioned the Mexico Child Link Trust. There are charities in Northern Ireland that have links to places such as the Republic of Ireland, GB, Europe and Africa. Accountability is a clear issue for charities that are based in Northern Ireland. How does accountability work if a charity has international links?

Ms McCloskey: Our understanding of the Bill is that, if a charity is based or operates in Northern Ireland, it will have to register with the charity

commission. Some CO3 members who are part of wider operations in Ireland or in Britain are concerned that they will be obliged to make multiple registrations. It will be important for charity commissions to work closely together to ensure that some of the processes are duplicated in order to avoid additional bureaucracy.

The Chairperson: If a charity based in Northern Ireland is working in a country that does not have a charity commission — for instance, I do not know whether Mexico has one — how will accountability be affected?

Ms Carol O'Bryan (CO3 — Chief Officers 3rd Sector): The key issue for such charities is their local links. Oxfam and Christian Aid disperse moneys in the developing world, and their local relationships, which should have integrity, are of the utmost importance.

The Chairperson: I am not suggesting that there is any impropriety or interference; it was simply a query.

Mr Hilditch: Thank you for the presentation. Majella, can you elaborate on why you feel that there may be a conflict about the commission's advice/guidance role, given its regulatory function?

Ms McCloskey: If you do not mind, Wendy will answer that question.

Ms Osborne: The primary function of the charity commission will be as a regulatory body. It can be difficult for a regulatory body to provide guidance and information, because it may have to step in and make a judgement about how an organisation has carried out its business. Tensions will always exist. The charity commission will have to provide information about its regulations and what charities will have to conform to. It will have to maintain a wall between that role and the regulatory function.

The Volunteer Development Agency and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) are good examples of organisations that already provide information and guidance for the sector, which can tap into their resources. In some ways, it is better to use those resources, because the charity commission can then remain independent, which is important, given its key regulatory function. There are examples in England and Wales of the blurring of the regulatory and the advice, guidance and support functions of such commissions, which were no help to those organisations or the charitable sector in general.

Mr Hilditch: What is your assessment of the current level of advice and guidance that is available?

Ms Osborne: A range of advice and guidance is available for charities in Northern Ireland. However, it requires quite a bit of changing and tweaking, because it will have to respond to the Bill and to the guidance

from the new charity commission on the legislation. The task of informing the charitable sector about the new regulations will be an onerous one.

Ms Lo: I understand the concerns of the voluntary sector. However, the Equality Commission, for instance, gives advice and guidance to employers and employees as well as having a regulatory role. Such organisations can operate effectively if those roles are clearly defined. I do not believe that there is a significant conflict of interest. Do you have an opinion about that?

Ms Osborne: A conflict of interest could arise. We have already said that we believe that the charity commission will be required to provide support and guidance — but at what level? Having used the resources of the Equality Commission and other regulatory bodies, I know that they are quite specific about the guidance that they offer and how it is given, so that there is no sense in which they could be seen to be acting inappropriately. They may have to account for the guidance that they have given and for the impact that a particular case may have on the organisation. Those organisations are very careful about that, and rightly so. There are boundaries; it is important that the charity commission understands and recognises those boundaries and is able to operate within them.

Mrs McGill: Thank you for your presentation, Wendy. You mentioned proportionality, which is a point well made and is something that must be taken into account. How will that work? How will it be decided? Will it be on the basis of numbers? There are large charities and small charities; will that present difficulties? The point has been made that there is a key requirement that must be enshrined in the legislation.

Ms Osborne: The requirement that the charity commission consider proportionality as it does its business should be enshrined in the legislation. That is important. In the first consultation document, the audit requirements were far more onerous for smaller charities. We welcome that fact that the legislation will change that situation, so that the audit requirements for charities with smaller revenues will be less onerous than they might have been.

They must comply with everything apart from that. Therefore, the charity commission must understand that a small, volunteer-led and volunteer-run organisation that wants to be a charity — for all the right reasons — may require additional guidance about how those returns are to be made. There might be some element of proportionality in relation to the returns that the charity commission demands. That sort of flexibility will be required in order to make the commission work.

Mrs McGill: Flexibility is certainly desirable. However, you are talking about enshrining it in legislation, and that will be difficult. The commission must be prescriptive. It must say that, if a charity falls into a certain group, it will be required to do such and such, and, if it is a big charity that belongs to a different group, it will be required to do something else. You have made a good point, but I see a problem with it.

Ms Osborne: There is already an element of flexibility about finances. There are benchmarks in the legislation already. Therefore, other reporting mechanisms could be created around those benchmarks. The reporting mechanisms — the reports and their structures — could be different alongside the different audit reports. There are already provisions with which the commission could work.

Mr Craig: As someone who has participated in charities over the past 20 years, I would like the CO3 representatives to expand on the issue of proportionality. I can see a huge potential problem, because the legislation will impose a level of bureaucracy on a charity no matter what. That is acceptable for large charities, because some of them are, in all honesty, more like very well-run businesses. Bureaucracy will not be a big issue for them. However, the vast majority of charities are very small and local. They will not have the infrastructure to comply with some of the legislative requests. Can you expand on your points about proportionality?

Mr Curran: Finance is one issue, because organisations must produce accounts and have them approved by external auditors. Whether an organisation is small or large, external auditors must sign off the accounts. In that sense, there might be no proportionality in dealing with £100,000 a year compared with £1.3 million a year. However, there might be proportionality in what is expected of an organisation from a procedural point of view. For example, in my organisation — the Belfast Community Housing Association — compared with an organisation that employs two to three people, how can I have clear segregation of duties when I conduct business, if I do not have enough people to do that? How can one get around that? Furthermore, how can one ensure that a charity is governed effectively and is open and transparent about the way in which it is being governed, while, more importantly, ensuring that it can still carry out its business?

There are small housing associations with limited numbers of staff, and their management boards have to get involved in day-to-day business issues. As Mr Craig rightly said, larger organisations have a clear separation of duties and hierarchies of personnel and finance. In that sense, the proportionality would be in accepting as a given the fact that small organisations simply cannot do the same thing as larger ones and

that, for example, external auditors are happy enough to sign off audited accounts in the context of a small organisation. That might be one measure.

Miss McIlveen: Thank you for your presentation. Your written submission, under the heading ‘Trustee Eligibility’, states that CO3: “would wish to ensure that organisations which wish to have trustees who are ex-prisoners, should be able to do so and that the procedures for doing so should not be unduly prohibitive.”

Can you expand on that? I am concerned, because that might include people who had been in prison for crimes such as fraud and armed robbery. How do you deal with that?

Ms McCloskey: That point came from some of our members. Generally, there is an intention in the charitable sector to involve users of services in the governance of charities as much as possible.

In some organisations that work with ex-prisoners, such as the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO), in cases where convictions could not be spent, there would still be a capacity — if it were appropriate and within the confines of good governance — for someone who might fall into that category to be involved in the governance of that organisation. That is an issue that is particular to Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson: Michelle’s concern was about a conviction that related to some form of financial impropriety.

Ms McCloskey: That would not be appropriate at all. There is quite a lot of information in the legislation about the categories of convictions that would disqualify someone from ever acting as a trustee. CO3 welcomes that. We have to take account of the particular set of circumstances in Northern Ireland.

Miss McIlveen: Your comment was very general.

The Chairperson: It is certainly something that the Committee will take up with the Department.

Thank you all for attending the meeting. I hope that you found it as helpful as the Committee did.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

24 January 2008

CHARITIES BILL (NIA 9/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Gregory Campbell (Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Mickey Brady
Mr Thomas Burns
Mr Fred Cobain
Mr Jonathan Craig
Ms Anna Lo
Mr Fra McCann
Mrs Claire McGill
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Alban Maginness

Witnesses:

Mr Seamus McAleavey	} Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action
Ms Denise McCann	
Ms Paula Reynolds	

The Chairperson (Mr Campbell): I welcome Mr McAleavey, Ms McCann and Ms Reynolds from the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA). They will give evidence on the Charities Bill. The normal format for Committee meetings is that an opening submission is made, which is followed by questions from Committee members.

Mr Seamus McAleavey (Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action): I thank the Committee for inviting us to give evidence. I am Seamus McAleavey, and I am accompanied by Paula Reynolds, who is the director of NICVA's member services, and Denise McCann, who is the head of charity advice at NICVA.

We have been working on these issues for some time. A charities Bill, the registration of charities, and the creation of a charity commission for Northern Ireland have been raised often during the past five or

eight years, only to recede. We are glad that a Bill will now come to fruition.

As the Committee will know, NICVA represents the interests of voluntary and community groups in Northern Ireland, many of which are charities. Members will also know that there are approximately 4,500 voluntary and community groups in Northern Ireland; they are a diverse range of organisations that include small and multinational organisations, such as Save the Children, Oxfam and Concern Worldwide.

There is no register of voluntary and community organisations in Northern Ireland. NICVA's database, developed as a result of our research on the state of that sector, perhaps provides the best estimate of the number of voluntary and community organisations in Northern Ireland. We know that, in 2004, income for the sector was approximately £614 million. Money that was donated by the public accounted for 30% of that figure, and Government provided 30% for the purchase of public services. The rest of the money came from various sources, such as earned income and charitable trusts.

The voluntary and community sector is extensive and employs approximately 29,000 people — that is more than 4% of Northern Ireland's workforce. As I have already said, the issue of charity legislation has been raised often. In March 2004, the Department for Social Development (DSD) set up an advisory panel, of which I was a member. The panel examined the issue again and offered recommendations to the Minister for Social Development, which included creating a charity commission and a charities Bill for Northern Ireland.

In June 2005, the Department consulted on the main proposals for charity law reform in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action worked in partnership with the Department, hosting seminars across Northern Ireland and consulting on the issue. In July and in October 2006, the Department consulted NICVA again — and the sector at large — on the draft legislation.

We fully support the Charities Bill and we are fairly content with everything in it; it is a good piece of work. However, some issues concern us, and I will ask Paula to say something about them.

Ms Paula Reynolds (Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action): We are concerned about a few important overarching areas in the Bill. There should be clarity in the registration of charities and in the auditing requirements and accounting thresholds. The Bill should contain further information on the duties of the trustees, the auditing and examination requirements of small companies, and on the compulsory consultation on any revision to the public benefit test guidance. Finally, there is the issue of resourcing.

As stated in our submission, the Bill has created confusion around the registration of charities. The draft Charities (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 clearly stated that every charity that is established or that operates in Northern Ireland must be listed in the register of charities. We thought that that was very clear: if a charity is formed in Northern Ireland, it must be listed in the register of charities; or if a charity is formed in another jurisdiction and is regulated there, it must still be listed in the register of charities in Northern Ireland; hence it must go through the public benefit test.

However, clause 16(2) of the Charities Bill states:

“Every institution which is a charity under the law of Northern Ireland must be registered in the register of charities.”

Does that refer only to charities from Northern Ireland or to charities outside Northern Ireland but which operate therein?

Furthermore, clauses 167 and 16 deal with broadly the same issues, but that link is not referred to in the Bill. Clause 167 refers to institutions that are not charities under the law of Northern Ireland; we assume that that clause refers to bodies that have been set up elsewhere but which operate here. However, that has not been clarified. Clauses 167 and 16 relate to charities that must be registered, but there is no reference to that in the Bill.

One may assume that clause 167 relates to charities that have been set up elsewhere but which operate here. However, it seems that under the provisions of clause 167 the charity commission does not have to set up a register of such charities. Therefore charities could operate in Northern Ireland but not be listed on the register of charities because clause 167(6)(a) states that the charity commission “may” be required to keep a register.

There is another issue concerning registration and clarity in English legislation: the thirteenth head of charity or thirteenth other charitable purpose, which relates to the promotion of the efficiency of the armed forces. The charity could have a charitable purpose or status in England and Wales because of that; however, that charitable purpose does not exist in Northern Ireland legislation. Charities could work here, regardless of whether they are registered. More clarity is required in those important areas.

The second area that requires more clarity is accounting thresholds and audit requirements. We have no problem with the Bill’s provisions in that regard, as they will help our charities to work well; it will help them with financial governance. We welcome everything there. However, the wording is confusing, and perhaps a rewrite would help.

More information needs to be added to some areas. It would be of value to charities if the general duties of the trustees were included in the Bill because that

causes some confusion and can cause governance issues. The Bill does not require small companies — those under a threshold of £90,000 — to have any external audit. NICVA believes that it should.

Compulsory consultation and the public benefit test are important. The public benefit test is a cornerstone of the legislation, so it is important for the commission to consult on any revision to the test and guidance on it.

Finally, there is an issue about the resourcing of the commission. Those are our issues.

The Chairperson: Paula, you say that you would like greater clarity in clause 167(6), which states that the commission “may” be required to keep a register. Should the commission have to keep a register? I understand your need for greater clarity, but which do you prefer?

Mr McAleavey: We prefer the wording of 18(2) in ‘the Proposal for an Order in Council: The Charities (Northern Ireland) Order 2006’:

“Every charity which is established or operates in Northern Ireland must be registered in the register of charities.”

That is crystal clear. The new wording leaves us in some doubt: some organisations may find themselves on or off the register. At worst, someone in Northern Ireland could decide, for whatever reason, to seek charitable status in England, return here, and perhaps not have to be on the register or abide by the same regulations.

The Chairperson: I have a question about accounting thresholds. Do you see any difficulties for the smaller organisations that you represent? Bureaucracy might follow the implementation of the Bill.

Ms Denise McCann (Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action): Throughout the consultation periods, smaller organisations were concerned about the accounting requirements that were to be implemented; the Department listened to those concerns and raised the accounting thresholds. For example, a small charity is classified as one whose gross income is less than £100,000. Such a charity will not have to have a full audit; it can opt to have an “independent examination”. That independent examination can be carried out by someone whom the trustees believe to have the requisite ability. More guidance will have to be issued on that, but the independent examination can be carried out by a retired bank official, for example. The person carrying it out does not have to be an accounting professional, but they do have to have the requisite ability. Small charities were content with that. The charities understand that there has to be some scrutiny of accounts, but the Department did not want it to be onerous or burdensome for them; for that reason, small charities were content with an independent examination.

Mr McAleavey: The original proposals were for a threshold of £25,000, which we believed to be too low.

The Chairperson: I was just coming to that. Are you content with a threshold of £100,000? You would not describe charities that have a gross annual income of more than £100,000 as “small charities”.

Mr McAleavey: Most organisations that have an income of more than £100,000 have audited accounts.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the witnesses for their presentation. Will the administration of the new legislation be a burden on some charities?

Mr McAleavey: Everything is a trade-off. There is almost universal support in voluntary and community organisations in Northern Ireland for the Charities Bill and the creation of a commission. The charities know that that will place a burden on them but that it is important in increasing public confidence. The Chairperson and I have spoken on radio programmes about the threat that bogus charities pose, although there is a danger that bona fide charities will be damaged when people hear about such bogus charities.

Charities in Northern Ireland recognise that anything that helps to boost public confidence in them is important. Likewise, the public will have more confidence in charities if their operation is properly and adequately scrutinised; people feel that that is beneficial. Most charitable organisations provide annual reports and accounts, but there is no compulsion on them to place them with a body such as the proposed charity commission. Such an obligation would be beneficial.

Mr Brady: Thank you for your presentation. Are you happy with the thrust of the proposed arrangements on accounting and registration? You said that the general duties of trustees should be included in the Bill. I know of charities — particularly small charities — that were formed 20-odd years ago, and nobody knows who the trustees are. It is important to acknowledge that details of the trustees tend to get lost as the years go on.

Ms D McCann: We are calling for the general duties of trustees to be included in the legislation because it is difficult to find them in the Trustee Act (Northern Ireland) 2001 and other legislation. One relies on bodies such as the Committee for Social Development and relevant professionals to find out the duties of a charity trustee.

The Bill grants the commission the power to act as the custodian of charities when trustees have died or cannot be traced.

Miss McIlveen: Although the Bill states that at least one member of the commission should be a barrister or a solicitor of seven years' standing, you would prefer it were two. Why is that?

You also say that you:

“support the broad interpretation of the advancement of religion which will include the belief in more than one god”.

Does that sentiment represent all your members?

Mr McAleavey: No. Voluntary and community organisations' views reflect the differences in society.

The Chairperson: Miss McIlveen is asking whether NICVA is making a theological point or merely taking a broad approach. The thinking in your brief is not shared by many people in Northern Ireland.

Mr McAleavey: Absolutely. We are using that approach for the purposes of charity law.

Miss McIlveen: Why should the commission contain more than one legal representative?

Mr McAleavey: The first few years following the establishment of the commission will be complex and onerous, so it will need people with a variety of skills. We do not usually say that a commission or body should be made up of experts; non-legal people have much to bring to a commission due to their understanding of charities and their roles in Northern Ireland. Eighteen months after the creation of the Scottish commission, a review is being conducted into the success or otherwise of the public benefit test.

The commission will take on a life of its own. Perhaps in the early years it will employ people with legal qualifications or it will have access to good-quality legal advice. It is a difficult and complex area.

Mr Craig: Paragraph 2.3 of your submission refers to the public benefit requirement. That is probably one of the more controversial aspects, because any charity that falls outside that requirement would not be registered. It also mentions clause 4(4)(b), which says that the commission would not have to consult before revising the guidance if it decides that it is unnecessary to do so. Do you fear that the commission could become self-serving?

Mr McAleavey: Yes. The public benefit test is a cornerstone of the legislation. However, if the commission wanted to review it at some point, it should do so only after adequate consultation. We would not like the commission or any other body to make changes that could have a huge impact.

Mrs McGill: Thank you for your presentation. Some of your documents referred to the composition of the commission, and that has already been commented on. I became concerned as soon as I saw that the commission — although no one disputes the need for one — could grow and grow and grow. I am keen to hear your views on that. Some of the research papers from the Department mentioned the commission's being composed of a chairman, a deputy chairman, three or five members and 16 staff; another

document mentioned a chief executive. I am unclear about the commission's final makeup. What would you consider to be a workable commission?

In a previous meeting, I asked for clarification on the connection between the Department for Social Development and the commission. That is still unclear. You referred to the question of who would make appointments to the commission. How should a workable commission be composed?

Mr McAleavey: The commission should be a relatively small body. A chief and a deputy chief commissioner and five staff would be more than adequate. The commission will have a particular role in looking after the "commanding heights" of charity regulation. Staffing is the one area where there might be a danger of unchecked growth. To the best of my knowledge, the Charity Commission for England and Wales employs several hundred people. Adequate staffing is necessary because people will expect a certain degree of scrutiny. If thousands of charities in Northern Ireland submit their annual accounts and reports, the commission staff will have to sample and verify some of them. If a member of the public has concerns about an organisation or a charity collection and wishes to check it with the commission, the commission must be able to respond to the person about whether the organisation is bona fide. To the best of my knowledge, the Charity Commission for England and Wales scrutinises only about 5% of all the returns that it gets.

The Chairperson: Is that the case in Scotland?

Mr McAleavey: I am not sure; I cannot comment on Scotland. I am speaking from our knowledge of the Charity Commission for England and Wales. Drilling down into the accounts of those organisations is a mammoth task.

Mrs McGill: Does the Charity Commission examine only 5% of charities' work?

Mr McAleavey: My understanding is that the Charity Commission takes a sample of all the annual reports and accounts that it receives in order to examine and verify them. It does not review every charity every year; that would be an enormous task. I am sure that the cost benefit would be a problem.

However, the commission will investigate any concern about a charity. If you or I or any member of the public were to raise an issue, the commission would have all the data that it needs to deal with it. To do that it needs adequate staff. Reasonable scrutiny would have to be carried out in order to answer fairly simple questions from the public.

The Chairperson: Are a chief commissioner, a deputy commissioner and five staff adequate?

Ms Reynolds: The Bill's explanatory notes set out three functions, with four staff in each, and a chief executive. Funnily enough, yesterday we looked at earlier papers that proposed about 30 staff. NICVA suggests that clarity is needed on that issue, because the 2005 documentation and the Charities Bill have set the same costs and resource allocation for the commission, even though the Bill requires the commission to carry out new work. That relates to the point that Mrs McGill made about the possible unrestrained growth of the commission's functions. In the earlier consultation papers the commission was not required to issue fund-raising certificates and permits, which it is under the Bill. NICVA believes that that will be a labour-intensive, onerous task. We cannot say specifically how many staff the commission needs, although we are happy with its roles and functions.

The Chairperson: The Committee will certainly take those matters up with the Department in its consideration of the Bill.

Mrs McGill: What is your understanding of the function of the official custodian for charities in the North of Ireland?

Ms D McCann: The charity commission could act as official custodian for a charity when its trustees have disappeared, died, or when all of trace of them has been lost. The charity commission could either transfer that charity's assets to another similar charity through a cy-près scheme or disperse them in a reasonable manner.

Mrs McGill: Would the official custodian operate outside the charity commission? Will someone else be required to adopt that role?

Ms D McCann: My understanding is that the charity commission as a corporate body will assume the role of official custodian.

The Chairperson: Folks, thank you very much for your assistance; you have provided the Committee with considerable food for thought. I am sure that you will follow the Bill's progress. If any other issues emerge, we shall, of course, seek to discuss them with you.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

24 January 2008

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
Rev Dr Robert Coulter
Dr Kieran Deeny
Mr Alex Easton
Mr Tommy Gallagher
Mrs Carmel Hanna
Mr John McCallister

Witnesses:

Mr Seamus Camplisson	} Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
Mr Andrew Elliott	

The Chairperson (Mrs I Robinson): We are now at the Committee stage of the Public Health (Amendment) Bill. I welcome departmental officials Andrew Elliott and Seamus Camplisson. The officials are present to provide clarification and answer questions, as the Committee commences clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Public Health (Amendment) Bill. Members have been provided with a copy of the Bill, submissions to the Committee's consultations, and a copy of the Hansard report of the Committee briefing by officials on the background to the draft Bill, on Thursday 15 November 2007. Also enclosed is a brief prepared by the Department.

I now invite officials to explain the background to the Bill, why it is needed and what it will achieve, before proceeding to the clause-by-clause consideration. I remind members that when the Bill was referred to the Committee before Christmas, the Committee decided to put notices in newspapers, and invite views and comments from a range of relevant organisations. Only four responses have been received,

and all are supportive of the provisions in the Bill. I draw your attention also to the response from the Belfast Harbour Commissioners, which urges the urgent introduction of the provisions, saying that:

"It is only a matter of time before this situation causes operational difficulties and reputational difficulties to the Port."

You are very welcome, Seamus and Andrew, and I hand over to you to take us through this Bill.

Mr Andrew Elliott (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Thank you very much. It is important to reiterate what I said when we met the Committee at the Children's Hospice — the Bill is highly technical and is about ensuring that Northern Ireland's domestic legislation is capable of replicating the international health regulations that were produced by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2005. As they are applied to all signatory members of WHO, every part of the world has to respond to those international health regulations. Therefore, it is important to ensure that our primary legislation — the Public Health Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 — can replicate those regulations, which is the purpose of the amendment.

The Chairperson: Do Members have any questions about the Bill or what Andrew said? If Members are content, we will begin the clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill. In effect, the Bill only contains one substantive clause and a second clause, which is the short title. I invite the departmental officials to outline the meaning of clause 1, and questions or discussion after that.

Clause 1 (Regulations for control of certain diseases)

Mr Seamus Camplisson (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): The clause extends the Department's power to make regulations so that it can give the Eastern Health and Social Services Board — which, in Belfast, has the only registered port for such purposes — the power to inspect ships for chemical or radiological contamination in addition to the existing powers to inspect for infectious diseases. That will enable the Department to write new regulations, which are compliant with international health regulations and are, generally, up to date.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 1 agreed to.

Clause 2 agreed to.

Are Members content that a report on the Committee Stage of the Public Health (Amendment) Bill be drafted for consideration at a later date?

Members indicated assent.

That completes the Committee Stage. I thank the Departmental officials for their time.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

24 January 2008

LIBRARIES BILL (NIA 5/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Dominic Bradley (Acting Chairperson)
Mr Francie Brolly
Lord Browne
Mr Kieran McCarthy
Mr Nelson McCausland
Mr Ken Robinson
Mr Jim Shannon

The Acting Chairperson (Mr D Bradley): A letter from the Minister has been received, headed ‘Clause 2: duty to provide library services’, and the Principal Clerk of Bills will advise us on that.

The Principal Clerk of Bills: Members may recall that last week we signed off on the Libraries Bill. However, two points were outstanding. One of the points was minor, and the other was more substantive. The substantive point is covered in the Minister’s letter, and it relates to the Committee’s suggestion — Mr McCausland raised the matter — that there should be a statutory duty to maintain a collection of library materials. That amendment is dealt with in the attachment to the Minister’s letter.

The Office of the Legislative Counsel proposes that the following words should be inserted at the end of clause 2(2)(b)(iii):

“maintaining a collection of library materials relevant to the cultural heritage of Northern Ireland;”

The Acting Chairperson: Is that the form of words that Noel Kelly used last week?

The Principal Clerk of Bills: He may not have used those exact words. Although Noel is a lawyer, the representatives from the Office of the Legislative Counsel are the real experts, and those are their proposed words. It is a matter of simply confirming that everyone is content with the suggested amendment.

The Acting Chairperson: Are members content with the amendment as suggested?

Members indicated assent.

The Principal Clerk of Bills: The Committee earlier indicated that it preferred the removal of paragraph 6 of schedule 1, concerning secondments, and the suggested amendment is precisely what the Committee requested. Therefore, if the Committee is content, its work on the Libraries Bill is completed. The Committee Clerk will compile a final report for members’ consideration and forwarding to the Assembly.

The amendments must now be formally adopted. That is done at Consideration Stage in plenary session. Members will consider all the amendments and then the Speaker will call for a vote on each of them. Obviously, the Committee wants those amendments to be agreed, as we have signed them off, and the Department and the Minister are content with them.

Everyone wants the amendments to be signed off. The Speaker will ask that the amendment be made. Hopefully, we will get an “Aye”, and the Speaker will call for the vote on the clause, as amended.

I suggest that we break the process into four parts, and take the first two amendments together. They are at lines 1 and 16 of clause 2 and relate to the duty to be placed on the library authority. I suggest that there will be a short debate, following which the Speaker will call the amendments consecutively.

There is a further batch of amendments: at schedule 1, page 8, leave out line 15 and insert

‘(b) not more than 18 other members;’

at schedule 1, page 8, line 18, after ‘secure’ insert

‘(a) that at any time a majority of members are councillors (within the meaning of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972; and (b)’;

at schedule 1, page 8, line 19, at end insert

‘(3) The Department may by order subject to negative resolution amend sub-paragraph (1)(b) by substituting for the number specified there such other number as may be specified in the order.’

That brings in the ability to make a statutory rule to amend the number of people on the authority. Those all relate to membership, and I suggest that they be debated as a single group.

The Acting Chairperson: The next amendment also refers to membership.

The Principal Clerk of Bills: No, the next amendment is for the removal of schedule 1(6), which relates to secondment to the library authority. It should be dealt with on its own. That paragraph will disappear. The first three references to schedule 1 will be taken together, because they relate to secondments to the library authority. There will be a short debate on that, and it will be treated as one amendment.

Finally, the technical amendments relate to making minor alterations to other pieces of legislation. If the Committee is content, I suggest that the amendments be called in four groups. There will be four short debates during the Consideration Stage, and, at the end of each debate, the Speaker will deal with the amendments that have been discussed. If members are content with those groupings, I will recommend them.

The Acting Chairperson: Are members content with that grouping?

Members indicated assent.

The Principal Clerk of Bills: Chairman, your work on the Libraries Bill is finished. You have merely to sign off the report, which the Clerk will bring to you in the next week or so, and the next event will be the Bill's Consideration Stage.

Mr Shannon: How long will it take between the Consideration Stage and the Bill leaving the Assembly? Will it be three months?

The Principal Clerk of Bills: The Department will have to take the amendments to the Executive Committee to have them signed off. That might take two to three weeks. From the moment that our report goes to the Business Office until the point at which the Minister will be in a position to call the Consideration Stage could take three weeks, possibly one month.

Following the Consideration Stage, things will move quickly to the Further Consideration Stage, at which there might be some need for minor tweaks to the Bill. The Office of the Legislative Counsel might want to tweak the wording of the Bill to make it work better. Many Further Consideration Stages do not have any amendments and take only a few seconds. Following that is the Final Stage — the last opportunity to debate the Bill before the Assembly votes to pass it. At the end of the Final Stage the Speaker asks that the Bill passes its Final Stage. With an “Aye” vote, the Bill is out of the Assembly and it goes for Royal Assent.

The Acting Chairperson: Are members agreed that the Clerk should prepare the report on the Committee Stage and lodge that with the Business Office?

The Principal Clerk of Bills: It has to be signed off.

The Acting Chairperson: We shall sign it off and it will be lodged with the Business Office. I thank Committee members for their scrutiny of the Libraries Bill.

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 7 December 2007

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action it has taken in preparation for the forthcoming examination of the United Kingdom Government by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child; and what plans it has to hold a debate in the Assembly on the Northern Ireland Jurisdictional Report. (AQW 535/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley and Mr M McGuinness): The State report which was submitted to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child in July of this year was a composite report covering the four jurisdictions. Departmental officials made a significant contribution to that report in relation to devolved issues, following a series of consultations with key stakeholders. These were carried out prior to devolution.

In line with the other devolved administrations, a Northern Ireland country-specific report was sent to the Committee at the end of August. Both reports refer to a pre-devolution period.

Both reports make a clear distinction between devolved and excepted/reserved matters. The reports relate solely to policies and decisions taken in the context of direct rule.

The two reports have been placed in the Assembly Library, made available to the OFMDFM Committee and have been published on the website www.allchildrenni.gov.uk. Hard copies will be available shortly.

We understand that the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child will not hold its examination until late 2008. We have asked our officials to begin our preparatory work now.

The question of whether there should be a debate in the Assembly is of course a matter for the Assembly Business Committee.

Deloitte Touche Report, 'The Cost of Division: A Shared Future Strategy'

Mrs Long asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the cost involved in placing the Deloitte Touche report, 'The Cost of Division: A Shared Future Strategy' on the departmental website. (AQW 814/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We have no plans to place the report on the departmental website. As explained in AQW 348/07, the report is already widely accessible.

Resource Efficiency

Mr P Ramsey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the mathematical formula used to assess Northern Ireland's resource efficiency, referred to in the Sustainable Development Strategy for Northern Ireland: First Steps Towards Sustainability. (AQW 1602/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The measure of resource efficiency included in the Sustainable Development Strategy for Northern Ireland was estimated using the results of research undertaken within the "*Northern Limits Project*" (2004), which benefited from sponsorship by the Department of the Environment and Queen's University Belfast. An objective of the project was to examine and calculate Northern Ireland's ecological impact on the environment.

The estimate of resource efficiency was derived by looking at the amount of resources that remain within Northern Ireland and comparing this to total resource consumption by the economy here. This comparison enabled the ratio of: (i) resources consumed, less waste, to: (ii) total resources consumed, to be calculated.

Precise information relating to the data used within the calculations can be obtained from the "*Northern Limits*" final report which is available from <http://www.northern-limits.com/>.

Tackling Child Poverty

Mrs Long asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail whether or not the proportion of funding for tackling child poverty, set out in the United Kingdom Comprehensive Spending Review, and allocated to Northern Ireland under the Barnett formula, will be ring fenced for this sole purpose,

similar to the allocation in England, Scotland and Wales.
(AQW 1727/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

Tackling poverty and indeed child poverty requires a co-ordinated plan of actions across a range of departmental programmes including employment, education, health and social development. It is not anticipated therefore that resources within the Northern Ireland Block allocation will be ring fenced solely for this purpose. It is expected however 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 and child poverty will be prioritised and mainstreamed within the departmental public expenditure planning process.

Junior Ministers, in their role of particular responsibility for children, will continue to lobby ministers in other departments to ensure this is the case.

European Union Gender Goods and Services Directive

Mr Storey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to the answers to AQW 624/08, AQW 626/08 and AQW 631/08, to outline the cost of the recent public consultation on the European Union Gender Goods and Services Directive.
(AQW 1828/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The cost associated with the consultation on the EU Gender Goods and Services Directive was £1,724.00. This amount covered design, printing, distribution and advertising costs.

Programmes for Children and Young People

Ms S Ramsey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to explain how it is ensuring that programmes for children and young people are funded and resourced.
(AQW 1834/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The report "An Analysis of Public Expenditure on Children in Northern Ireland" commissioned by the Commissioner for Children and Young People for Northern Ireland and part funded by OFMDFM and DFP was copied to Ministerial colleagues in advance of the Budget 07 exercise to inform their decisions. We also strongly made the case for significant funding for children's programmes during pre-Budget discussions. Significant resources have been provided across a number of Departments including £26 million to facilitate the continuation of projects previously funded by the Children and Young People's funding package.

We were successful in attracting funding in the draft Budget for the development of plans to implement a Play Policy for Northern Ireland. The play policy is set within the context of the 10-year strategy and will contribute to the delivery of many of our strategic aims for children and young people, particularly those which relate to improved health and achievement outcomes.

We have also secured resources in the draft Budget to support exemplar area based projects which will contribute to a range of improved outcomes for children and young people through joined up working.

Junior Ministers have a particular responsibility for children and young people's issues. They are currently working on an action plan to most effectively ensure children's issues are addressed and resourced adequately across government.

Waterways Ireland

Mr McElduff asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the pay awards, both applied and consolidated, in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, for administration and professional technical staff in Waterways Ireland, since the body's inception; and to detail the action he is taking to resolve pay discrepancies between staff from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.
(AQW 2173/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

Details of the pay awards, both applied and consolidated, for administration and professional technical staff in Waterways Ireland, since the Body's inception are as follows:

Professional Technical and Administration Staff based in Northern Ireland		Professional Technical and Administration Staff based in Ireland	
01/04/01	2%	01/04/01	2%
01/10/01	5.5%	01/10/01	5.5%
01/12/01 Bench-marking award Phase 1, 25% of the agreed award was applied to each scale with effect from this date. Each grade received different increase and some grades received different increases at different points on the scales as set out in the Benchmarking Report in the South. These increases were applied to the relevant points on the scales.		01/12/01 Bench-marking award Phase 1, 25% of the agreed award was applied to each scale with effect from this date. Each grade received different increase and some grades received different increases at different points on the scales as set out in the Benchmarking Report in the South. These increases were applied to the relevant points on the scales.	

Professional Technical and Administration Staff based in Northern Ireland		Professional Technical and Administration Staff based in Ireland	
01/04/02 – one off lump sum payment of 1% of annual pay (not applied to scale) non-consolidated.		01/04/02 one off lump sum payment of 1% of annual pay (not applied to scale) non-consolidated.	
01/10/02	2.67%	01/10/02	4%
01/04/03 – one off payment £200 non-consolidated (performance bonus)			
01/04/04, plus £235 non-consolidated (performance bonus)	2%	01/01/04, plus Ph2 of benchmarking (50% of agreed award)	3%
		01/07/04	2%
		01/12/04	2%
01/08/05 16 th month settlement – WI have submitted proposals to TU for consideration.		01/06/05, plus Ph3 of Benchmarking (25% of agreed award)	1.5%
		01/12/05	1.5%
01/08/06 Proposals for implementing the 06/07 pay awards are with Departments for consideration		01/06/06	2.5%
		01/12/06	3%
		01/06/07	2%

The Chief Executive Officers (CEO's) of the North/South Implementation Bodies and Tourism Ireland have raised concerns that the disparity in pay, between personnel employed in Northern Ireland whose pay is linked to the Northern Ireland Civil Service and staff in Ireland whose pay is linked to the Irish Civil Service, is affecting their ability to attract, motivate and retain staff. The Council considered this matter at the Institutional meeting on 30 October 2007 and 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. Officials from the two Finance Departments plan to meet in the near future to discuss the matter.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Equality in the Agricultural Industry

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development pursuant to her comments during the debate on the Abolition of the Agricultural Wages Board, on 22 October 2007, to give her assessment of which sector(s) within the agricultural industry currently deny equality in the workplace to their employees, whether local or immigrant workers. (AQW 1867/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): I have no evidence to suggest that any sector within the agricultural industry currently denies equality in the workplace to its employees whether local or migrant workers. The existence of the Agricultural Wages Board ensures the rights of all agricultural workers in the North are protected.

Front Line Advisers

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of front line staff currently employed by her department to offer advice to (i) beef and sheep farmers; and (ii) dairy farmers. (AQW 1869/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department currently employs 110 front line staff to provide advice/support, albeit not exclusively, to beef and sheep and dairy farmers.

In addition Veterinary Service employ 282 staff who may, as appropriate/on occasion, provide advice, but this is not their primary/sole function.

Article 4 Audits

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of Article 4 audits that have been carried out by her department on European programmes, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1897/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department has carried out a total of 1946 Article 4 inspections across all European programmes for which I am responsible by 16th November 2007. The total number of inspections completed in each of the last five years by programme area is as follows;

Year	Bsp	Peace	Leader	Interreg
2003	25	12	1	0
2004	37	32	52	0
2005	58	188	114	3
2006	74	518	102	10
2007	236	137	330	17
Total	430	887	599	30

Fishing Industry

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what assistance she will give to the fishing industry, given that the price of red diesel has risen to £2.10 per gallon. (AQW 2007/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Rising fuels prices have been caused primarily by the increase in crude oil prices and also by increases in the rate of excise duty. Both these matters are likely to be long term features for all parts of the economy that use oil.

The European Commission confirmed last year that Member State subsidy of the cost of fuel constituted operating aid and is incompatible therefore with the Treaty. However what we can do is to assist the industry to become more fuel efficient.

Under new European Fisheries Fund Regulation it will be possible to provide assistance for various measures including:

- The purchase of fuel efficient replacement engines, but subject to stringent conditions to prevent increases in fleet capacity.
- Use of bio-fuels in fishing vessels.
- Gear technology that reduces fuel consumption.
- Audits of vessels to identify where fuel can be saved.
- Vessel engineering to reduce fuel consumption.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will be consulting stakeholders early next year on an Operational Programme for the implementation of the EFF here.

Fishing Licences

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the reasons why the entitlement to fish for whitefish has been removed from Category A licence holders. (AQW 2009/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The 2005 EC TAC and Quota Regulation

removed the flexibility for vessels using fishing gear with a higher days at sea allocation from using fishing gears with lower days at sea allocations, if they did not have a track record of using such gears from 2001 to 2004.

The change was made largely to conserve cod stocks by preventing the possibility of vessels with no recent track record of using whitefish gear from doing so in future. This change mostly affected a number of vessels using *Nephrops* gear that had no track record of using whitefish gear from 2001 to 2004.

Since 2006 vessel owners who wish to use fishing gears, such as whitefish gear, for which they do not have the appropriate track record, are permitted to transfer in days at sea from a vessel with an appropriate track record for that gear. The track record of gear use remains with the donor vessel.

Aid for the Prawn Boat Sector

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what consideration she will give to an emergency aid package for the prawn boat sector, given the high cost of fuel and low prawn prices. (AQW 2081/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have no plans to bring forward an aid package for the prawn boat sector. The European Commission confirmed last year that Member State subsidy of the cost of fuel constituted operating aid is incompatible therefore with the Treaty. However the new European Fisheries Fund will provide opportunities for the fishing industry to become energy efficient through measures such as grant-aid for the purchase of more fuel efficient engines. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will be consulting stakeholders early next year on an Operational Programme for the implementation of the EFF here.

Modernisation of the Fishing Fleet

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the measures she will take to modernise the fishing fleet, particularly the prawn sector. (AQW 2082/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Down Fishing Villages Taskforce has recently invited applications for a "Fleet Modification Scheme" that will provide grant support to the North's over-10 metre fishing fleet, to replace existing mechanical machinery (such as winches, cranes, net drums and steering gear) where the replacement will improve the safety of vessels and crew, without increasing the vessel's fishing-effort capacity. The

scheme will make available £480,000 at a rate of 40% grant on eligible items. Further assistance will be available under the European Fisheries Fund which will come into operation next year.

Carbon Footprint of the Prawn Boat Sector

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline what research has been carried out in relation to the carbon footprint of the prawn boat sector. (AQW 2090/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Comprehensive research on the carbon footprint of the prawn boat sector would require an examination of the direct emissions of CO₂ from the fossil fuels consumed by the prawn boat sector as well as the indirect CO₂ emissions from the whole lifecycle of the products used by these vessels included those associated with their manufacture and eventual breakdown. I am not aware of any research on indirect emissions, however Seafish published a report last year (available at www.seafish.org) on “Options for Improving Fuel efficiency in the UK Fleet” which focused on key segments of the fishing fleet, and covers fleet operations, gear type and fishing patterns. The Report includes an assessment of some of the current fuel efficiency measures, the degree of uptake and barriers to uptake of these measures.

Carbon Footprint of Fishing Fleets

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what trials have been carried out into the viability of using bio diesel in fishing fleets in order to reduce its carbon footprint. (AQW 2091/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Researchers from the University of Exeter, are currently testing the first commercial fishing boat to run on environmentally friendly bio-diesel made from vegetable oil. One of the aims of the project is to determine whether bio-diesel can be used as a direct substitute for red diesel in fishing boats without the need for modifications to the engine or fuel system. If successful the use of bio-fuel could significantly reduce overall carbon dioxide emissions as well as reducing other sulphur emissions to zero. The University of Exeter received funding from Defra under the Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance (FIFG) and Seafish to carry out the project.

Fishing Diversification Schemes

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what grants are to be made available to fishermen wishing to upgrade their boats in order to diversify into fishing for alternative species. (AQW 2092/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: In November 2006, DARD, through the Down Villages Fishing Taskforce, provided £220,000 grant support to enable vessels that primarily target whitefish to diversify into more sustainable fisheries. 12 eligible applications were received and 6 vessels were awarded diversification support.

In August 2007, a further £170,000 grant was awarded to enable the 6 remaining eligible vessels to complete their diversification projects and an additional £200,000 was provided to allow 5 dedicated whitefish vessels, which had not initially applied for such support, to seek such assistance.

During 2006 and 2007, DARD has also supported experimental “diversification” fisheries in the Irish Sea relating to sprats, potted and trawled nephrops, and shrimp fisheries. The total grant awards associated with this support exceeds £250,000.

There are no plans to have further diversification schemes at the moment although similar projects will be possible under the European Fisheries Fund which will come into operation next year.

Hospitality Expenditure

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the amount spent by her department on hospitality in each of the last five years. (AQW 2141/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Expenditure on hospitality for the Core Department only (i.e. excluding Agencies) for the last five financial years:

2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
£53,021	£77,697	£86,481	£97,169	£65,949

Coastal Shell Fishing Industry

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to assist the development of the coastal shell fishing industry based in Belfast and Larne Loughs. (AQW 2161/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The role of my Department is to promote the

sustainable development of both the wild and farmed shellfish sectors in all coastal waters including Belfast and Larne Lough, to licence shellfish farms and to provide financial assistance to develop these sectors under the European Fisheries Fund (EFF). The Department will be issuing a consultation paper early next year on an Operational Programme for the implementation of EFF here and all stakeholders will have the opportunity of contributing to the development of the various measures within the programme. Co-ordinated Local Aquaculture Management Systems (CLAMS) Groups have been established for licensed shellfish producers in Belfast Lough and Larne Lough under the Department's Co-ordinated Local Aquaculture Management Systems Initiative. The purpose of these groups is to assist local producers with the management and development shellfish farming the Loughs and inshore waters. The Department is also bringing forward legislation to protect the interests of bottom grown mussel producers whose sites are located within the northern limits of Belfast Harbour.

Fish Farming Industry

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the assistance she will provide to enable the fish farming industry, in particular those located off the East Antrim coast around Glenarm, to recover from the problems presented by the recent jellyfish appearance. (AQW 2162/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have met with representatives of the Northern Salmon Company to discuss the crisis and express my concerns over the potential impact for the company. I have also taken the views of Executive colleagues. My officials are engaging with the Company's management and officials from other Departments to assess the impact of the recent jellyfish appearance in Glenarm Bay and Red Bay, and to determine the potential for assistance.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Irish Language Bill

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any areas of contention relating to the use of the Irish Language that were raised by (i) individuals; or (ii) organisations, that contributed to his view that an Irish Language Bill would be divisive. (AQW 1819/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poole): In my statement to the house on the 16 October 2007 on the proposal to introduce Irish language

Legislation I advised that over 11,000 written responses were received as well as petitions containing 629 names. 65% (7,500) of the total number of respondents indicated support for some form of legislation. 35% (4,129) of all respondents were against any form of legislation.

The sheer numbers of responses confirms the strong and divergent views on this issue throughout the community. It is my intention to publish all the responses on DCAL's website by the end of this calendar year in line with Departmental accessibility guidelines.

Ian Patrick Magill's Employment at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail when Ian Patrick Magill was appointed to a position at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, and the position to which he was appointed. (AQW 1849/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I will answer these two questions together. Mr Ian Magill was employed by the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum between the years 1975 and 1997 in the capacity of Exhibitions Officer. Mr Magill was dismissed on 18 November 1997 following his conviction for the illegal importation of indecent video material and magazines.

Ian Patrick Magill's Employment at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail when Ian Patrick Magill's employment at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum was terminated and the reason(s) for this. (AQW 1850/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I will answer these two questions together. Mr Ian Magill was employed by the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum between the years 1975 and 1997 in the capacity of Exhibitions Officer. Mr Magill was dismissed on 18 November 1997 following his conviction for the illegal importation of indecent video material and magazines.

Land Bank Value

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the value of the land bank in his department that has the potential to be realised. (AQW 1911/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am aware that this Question was due for Answer on the

4th of December 2007, and I apologise to the Member for the delay.

As part of its planning work for the CSR period (2008 – 11), the department identified capital receipts which would arise through the disposal of PRONI's existing site on Balmoral Ave and through sales of Libraries assets and land owned by National Museums of Northern Ireland. Sales proceeds are estimated at £14.10m.

Beyond this, Minister Robinson has established a review of departmental asset holdings which seeks to identify the scope for better use of assets, including higher levels of disposals where appropriate. This work is being taken forward by the Capital Realisation Taskforce which plans to report before the end of this year.

DCAL has carried out a thorough review of its and sponsored bodies' asset holdings and has fully engaged with the Taskforce. Furthermore, I have arranged to meet its Head later this month to discuss my Department's returns. However, given that this process is not complete, I am unable to provide further details at this time.

Ian Patrick Magill's Employment with the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the date on which Ian Patrick Magill was suspended by the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, after his arrest in 1995 for importing child pornography; and to confirm whether or not he was paid his full salary during the period of his suspension. (AQW 1970/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Mr Magill was suspended by the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum on the 9th October 1995 as soon as it became aware that he had been found with indecent material coming through Heathrow Airport. Mr Magill was paid full salary during the period of his precautionary suspension in accordance with the Museums' disciplinary procedure.

In the period between Mr Magill's arrest and his conviction the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum undertook a preliminary investigation of the alleged offence. This involved communication with HM Customs and Excise and the Royal Ulster Constabulary. This preliminary investigation, together with legal advice thereon, led the Museum to conclude that Mr Magill should remain on suspension, pending the outcome of legal proceedings.

Following his conviction on the 11th November 1997 Mr Magill was summarily dismissed by the Museum, following a disciplinary hearing, on the 18th November 1997.

Against a background of considerable public and press interest in Mr Magill's case, the Board of Trustees commissioned an Independent Enquiry into the matter, led by a former County Court judge.

The Enquiry examined the circumstances surrounding Mr Magill's continued employment after his previous conviction in 1991 and concluded that while the Trustees could have considered the wider implications of the case for the museum, they acted in good faith in accordance with the legal advice available at that time. The Enquiry further established that Mr Magill did nothing untoward on museum premises and no action by him affected any child visiting the museum.

In line with the recommendations of the Enquiry, National Museums Northern Ireland introduced a number of measures to further ensure the safety and wellbeing of children, including the development of a Child Protection Policy and Procedures (now Child and Vulnerable Adult Policy and Procedures).

Ian Patrick Magill's Employment with the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action was taken by the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum in relation to Ian Patrick Magill, between his arrest in 1995 for importing child pornography and his conviction in 1997.

(AQW 1971/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Mr Magill was suspended by the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum on the 9th October 1995 as soon as it became aware that he had been found with indecent material coming through Heathrow Airport. Mr Magill was paid full salary during the period of his precautionary suspension in accordance with the Museums' disciplinary procedure.

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Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action was taken by the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum in relation to Ian Patrick Magill, after his conviction in 1997 for importing child pornography; and to detail the dates on which such action was taken. (AQW 1972/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Mr Magill was suspended by the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum on the 9th October 1995 as soon as it became aware that he had been found with indecent material coming through Heathrow Airport. Mr Magill was paid full salary during the period of his precautionary suspension in accordance with the Museums' disciplinary procedure.

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In line with the recommendations of the Enquiry, National Museums Northern Ireland introduced a number of measures to further ensure the safety and wellbeing of children, including the development of a Child Protection Policy and Procedures (now Child and Vulnerable Adult Policy and Procedures).

Sports Funding

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount of funding allocated to (i) soccer; (ii) Gaelic games; and (iii) rugby, in the last five years. (AQW 2054/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding to sport. Over the last five financial years SNI has allocated exchequer and lottery funding to soccer, Gaelic games and rugby as follows:

		Soccer	Gaelic Games	Rugby
2002/03	Exchequer Lottery	1,931,575 696,561	568,559 884,462	122,330 160,860
2003/04	Exchequer Lottery	69,624 322,149	217,111 1,181,112	101,825 244,163
2004/05	Exchequer Lottery	1,053,092 765,048	140,839 750,947	96,728 -
2005/06	Exchequer Lottery	93,258 9,000	1,004,081 101,330	102,930 -
2006/07	Exchequer Lottery	2,158,273 -	2,701,488 -	882,901 -

Library Provision

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail, broken down by education and library board, for each of the last five years (i) the total amount spent on library provision; and (ii) the percentage of the total budget of each board that these amounts represented. (AQW 2060/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I attach at Annex 1 details of recurrent expenditure on library provision broken down by Education and Library board, for each of the last five years and the percentage of the total recurrent budget of each board that these amounts represent.

Annex 2 also provides details of capital funding provided by DCAL for the public library service over the last five years.

ANNEX 1

All figures are in £000's										
	2002/03	2002/03	2003/04	2003/04	2004/05	2004/05	2005/06	2005/06	2006/07	2006/07
	Total recurrent	DCAL recurrent	Total recurrent	DCAL recurrent	Total recurrent	DCAL recurrent	Total recurrent	DCAL recurrent	Total recurrent	DCAL recurrent
BELB	203532	5730	213122	6073	209959	5049	222605	5541	229173	5774
Percentage		2.8%		2.8%		2.4%		2.5%		2.5%
NEELB	244478	4613	263650	5588	259989	4730	280604	4741	291379	5415
Percentage		1.9%		2.1%		1.8%		1.7%		1.9%
SEELB	222264	5183	232138	5916	233532	4667	249156	5376	244897	5634
Percentage		2.3%		2.5%		2.0%		2.2%		2.3%
SELB	254194	4349	273170	4336	278375	4166	298583	4533	310687	4996
Percentage		1.7%		1.6%		1.5%		1.5%		1.6%
WELB	234637	4369	258493	4216	284923	3726	299869	4088	308998	4535
Percentage		1.9%		1.6%		1.3%		1.4%		1.5%
ELfNI		3294		4032		3502		3514		3873

Notes

1. The DCAL figures for the financial years 2002/03 to 2004/05 includes payments for job evaluation.
2. In addition to its recurrent budget, the NEELB receives an annual amount for the Electronic Libraries Project for Northern Ireland (ELfNI) which it administers on behalf of the 5 Boards. The ELfNI figures shown in the table above are not included in the NEELB total recurrent budgets.

ANNEX 2

All figures are in £000's					
	2002/03 Capital	2003/04 Capital	2004/05 Capital	2005/06 Capital	2006/07 Capital
BELB	210	213	647	1082	865
NEELB	853	1409	646	316	1193
SEELB	260	448	593	243	515
SELB	194	717	175	559	656
WELB	1385	856	625	327	183

Shooting Clubs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of shooting clubs that have been approved in each of the last three years.
(AQW 2124/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The licensing of firearms clubs in Northern Ireland is a reserved matter and responsibility for this matter therefore rests with the Northern Ireland Office.

Shooting Clubs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of shooting clubs that were established in (i) 1970; (ii) 1990; and (iii) 2000.
(AQW 2125/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The licensing of firearms clubs in Northern Ireland is a reserved matter and responsibility for this matter therefore rests with the Northern Ireland Office.

Shooting Clubs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide a breakdown of shooting clubs that are (i) clay pigeon clubs and lay-outs; (ii) indoor; and (iii) outdoor. (AQW 2128/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The licensing of firearms clubs in Northern Ireland is a reserved matter and responsibility for this matter therefore rests with the Northern Ireland Office.

Windsor Park

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions he plans to have with the Irish Football Association and Linfield Football Club regarding the condition of Windsor Park; and whether or not government assistance will be made available to ensure that the stadium meets health and safety and FIFA criteria. (AQW 2155/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Responsibility for the condition of Windsor Park rests with the owners of the ground, Linfield FC and the Irish Football Association (IFA), the governing body of football in Northern Ireland. My Department is currently facilitating discussions between IFA and Linfield FC in relation to the condition of Windsor Park. Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport including the distribution of funding. SNI runs a number of funding programmes which are designed to assist owners and operators of Soccer grounds, including Windsor Park, meet health and safety and FIFA requirements. These include Soccer Strategy and Stadia Safety programmes.

Children and Young People in Sport

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his strategy for encouraging the participation of children and young people in sport and physical activity. (AQW 2170/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: On 9th October 2007, I published, for 3 month consultation, a draft of The Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation, 2007-2017." The draft Strategy, which was prepared by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) in partnership with Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), proposes a number of specific targets and actions which are designed to encourage greater participation by children and young people in sport and physical activity. The consultation on the draft Strategy ends on 9th January 2008 and a final Strategy will hopefully be published in the spring.

Irish language Broadcasting

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to clarify the position on the future status of Irish language broadcasting in Northern Ireland once the current allocation of funding ends. (AQW 2248/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: £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. As you are aware, I was unable to secure further funding for the Fund in the draft budget agreed by the Executive.

I am considering what options are available to me to promote Irish language broadcasting within the wider promotion of the Irish language, Government's commitments under the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, and my anticipated budget. I intend then to bring forward any proposals to this House and the CAL Committee in due course.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the expenses paid to each Board member of the Northern Ireland Events Company in the last three financial years. (AQW 2253/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Northern Ireland Events Company has paid the following amounts in expenses to each Board member in the last three years:

Name	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Aideen Corr		£563.80	
Mervyn Elder	£554.54	£610.40	£2,596.99
Ian Lee	£826.00	£1,068.40	£1,387.46
Paul McWilliams	£340.00	£174.40	£327.20
Eric Saunders	£94.40	£310.10	£371.79

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the salary paid to the Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Events Company over the last three years. (AQW 2254/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The gross salary for the Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Events Company for the last three years was:

2004/05	£49,999
2005/06	£53,171
2006/07	£53,171

EDUCATION

Competitive Education System

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail how she proposes to ensure that Northern Ireland's education system delivers a workforce that is more economically competitive than that of the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 92/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): The revised curriculum focuses on developing the skills young people need for life and work in the 21st century. Employability, incorporating Entrepreneurship, is also an important part of the revised post-primary curriculum.

In addition, the Entitlement Framework will guarantee all pupils access to a greater range of vocational courses, equipping them with the professional and technical skills that business and industry needs. Pupils will be able to access courses appropriate to their individual needs, interests and aspirations, providing a wider choice at age 14 and an even wider choice at age 16.

To support pupils in making their choices and decisions about their futures, we are working to develop high quality careers education, information advice and guidance.

All of this will be set within a broader strategic framework for 14-19 provision, on which DE and DEL are currently engaged, ensuring that our young people are equipped with the knowledge and skills to take their place in an increasingly global workforce.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

School Leavers

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of school leavers from areas of social disadvantage in Northern Ireland who have enrolled in (i) Queen's University, Belfast; (ii) the University of Ulster; and (iii) the Open University, in each of the past five years. (AQW 1937/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The Department does not hold information on the number of school leavers that have enrolled at 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 from areas of social disadvantage (defined here as the 20% most deprived super output areas) 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	390	485	10
2002/03	370	600	5
2003/04	320	640	5
2004/05	310	560	5
2005/06	390	710	5

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

Notes: Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5.

School Leavers

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of school leavers from Northern Ireland who attend universities in (i) England; (ii) Scotland; (iii) Wales; (iv) the Republic of Ireland; and (v) Northern Ireland. (AQW 2075/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department does not hold information on the number of Northern Ireland domiciled school leavers that have enrolled at 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. This information is not available for the Republic of Ireland.

On that basis, the number of these enrolments at UK Higher Education institutions by country of institution in 2005/06 is given in the table below:

England	2,125
Scotland	1,035
Wales	70
Northern Ireland	7,750

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

Notes: Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5.

Graduates

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of students that attended (a) Queen's University, Belfast; and (b) the University of Ulster, who were from (i) the Republic

of Ireland; (ii) Great Britain; and (iii) outside both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, in each of the last ten years. (AQW 2103/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The number of students that attended Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster who were from the Republic of Ireland, Great Britain and outside both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland in each of the last ten years is shown in the table below.

	Queen's University Belfast			University of Ulster		
	ROI	GB	Outside UK & ROI	ROI	GB	Outside UK & ROI
1996/97	1390	540	1105	2540	255	565
1997/98	1540	485	1065	2565	215	580
1998/99	1500	445	1085	2285	165	545
1999/00	1255	595	825	2055	200	685
2000/01	1165	505	770	1835	245	470
2001/02	1095	520	785	1840	285	520
2002/03	1075	500	840	1995	360	625
2003/04	975	465	870	2240	415	620
2004/05	1155	570	945	2265	445	605
2005/06	920	430	900	2435	470	620

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

Notes: Figures are based on a snapshot of enrolments at 1st December within the relevant academic year. Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5.

Hospitality Expenditure

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail his department's expenditure on hospitality for each of the last five years. (AQW 2140/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The expenditure on hospitality for the last five years is as follows:

Year	Amount £
06/07	30,192.54
05/06	33,078.80
04/05	29,904.47
03/04	42,758.56
02/03	29,969.93
Total	165,904.30

University Students

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the total number of students from the European Union, excluding the United Kingdom, currently studying at (i) Queen's University, Belfast; and (ii) the University of Ulster. (AQW 2296/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The total number of student enrolments from the European Union, excluding the United Kingdom, at (i) Queen's University, Belfast; and (ii) the University of Ulster in 2005/06 (the latest available year) is given in the table below: -

Queen's University of Belfast	University of Ulster
1,290	2,935

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

Notes: Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5.

Foreign Nationals

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail what responsibility his department has in relation to monitoring the number of foreign nationals residing in Northern Ireland. (AQW 2318/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Department for Employment and Learning has no formal responsibility to monitor the number of foreign nationals residing in Northern Ireland. Foreign nationals comprise a spectrum of categories of people covering asylum seekers, migrants, including migrant workers, dependents, students and others. The Department is leading work by state and non-state organisations on migrant worker issues.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Alternative Means of Energy Production

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the work undertaken in his department in relation to the exploration of alternative means of energy production in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1821/08)

The Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): The Department's work relating to the identification of alternative means of energy production is focused on renewable sources of energy.

The recently completed Grid Study researched the resource potential for different renewable technologies on the island of Ireland in 2020, the extent to which the renewable generation, primarily wind, could be accommodated onto the electricity grid, and implications for future network development. An initial consideration of study results suggests that there is potential for a significant increase in the level of electricity generation which can be obtained from renewable sources, however this will require significant investment in both renewable technologies and strengthening of the electricity grid.

The Department has also, 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. The 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 to enable consumers quickly to obtain an assessment of the suitability of the ground conditions for the installation of Ground Source Heat Pump systems.

Through the Environment and Renewable Energy Fund, which has been in place for some 18 months, the DETI has also supported work to stimulate the development of alternative energy sources and, in particular, Energy from Waste, microgeneration technologies and biomass. Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, too, has carried out biomass-related work under these Fund initiatives.

In addition, the Department is currently scoping the potential for bioenergy and marine renewable energy to contribute to more diversified and sustainable energy production in Northern Ireland.

Ballycastle/Campbeltown Ferry Link

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if his department is undertaking a new economic appraisal for the Ballycastle/Campbeltown ferry link. (AQW 1895/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I have agreed with Stewart Stevenson MSP, my counterpart in the Scottish Government who has lead responsibility for this matter, to jointly fund a new options and economic appraisal for the proposed Ballycastle to Campbeltown ferry route.

Closure of Tyco Health Care (UK) Manufacturing Limited

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action his Department has taken over the proposed closure of Tyco Health Care (UK) Manufacturing Limited in Ballymoney. (AQW 1896/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I deeply regret the planned closure of Tyco Healthcare UK Manufacturing Ltd (Tyco) in Ballymoney.

My Department has been in regular contact with Invest NI to ensure that all possible options were considered by Covidien Ltd (Covidien), the US parent of Tyco, before a final decision was made in relation to the proposed closure.

Invest NI met with local management in Ballymoney on 31 August 2007 and with senior US management on 4 September 2007. There has been ongoing contact with both local and US management since 4 September 2007.

At the meeting with senior US management Invest NI suggested a number of business options as detailed below:

- Change to production of new higher added value products;
- Possible transfer of products from other Covidien sites;
- An R&D Centre;
- Future use of the specialized sterilization unit in Ballymoney.

Invest NI also re-affirmed the possible forms of financial assistance available from Invest NI.

Following the confirmation of the closure on 23 November 2007 Invest NI met with the Ballymoney management on 29 November 2007. The local management confirmed that Covidien had considered all options during the 90 day consultation period however unfortunately had decided to proceed with the closure of the Ballymoney plant.

The US management has advised that no other option was considered suitable for the plant however this is absolutely no reflection on the workforce and stems from Covidien's reshaping of its portfolio and streamlining of operations.

Invest NI furnished Covidien with a list of Republic of Ireland companies that are believed to have a need for product sterilization. Invest NI offered to make initial contact with these companies to obtain preliminary feedback in relation to the sterilizer unit. During the 90 day consultation period Covidien had advised Invest NI not to make contact. Following the announcement on 23 November 2007 Invest NI has contacted Covidien in relation to this issue and is awaiting further feedback.

Invest NI contacted the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) in relation to Tyco when the announcement of the proposed closure was made in August 2007. As the closure of the Ballymoney plant has now been confirmed by Covidien, Invest NI will liaise with DEL and the company in order to organise provision of advice to staff on training, job vacancies and opportunities for self employment. The Tyco Human Resources manager has confirmed that the company will host a redundancy clinic and DEL has been advised to contact the company week commencing 3 December 2007 to initiate discussions in respect of the timing of the clinic.

Political Tourism

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline any plans his department has to develop the political tourism projects that currently take place in West Belfast in order to increase the number of tourists who visit.
(AQW 1926/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Political tourism is part of the tourism product mix and the interest in Northern Ireland's recent past presents a window of opportunity. However it is a sensitive subject where the needs of the visitor have not always been the primary focus of promoters.

It is only one element of the cultural tourism product within West Belfast. NITB is working with Belfast City Council, Belfast Visitor & Convention Bureau and local representatives to integrate political tourism into broader promotions for Great Britain and overseas marketing by Tourism Ireland.

Current Visitor Servicing projects supported by the International Fund for Ireland and the Integrated Development Fund include initiatives to distribute visitors from the traditional city centre attractions into communities within the Greater Belfast area. West Belfast is participating in the Belfast Cultural Diversity and Visitor Servicing Pilot Project which is in the final stages of development. This will be marketed by Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau (BVCB), NITB and Tourism Ireland.

Invest NI

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of visits by potential inward investors, hosted by Invest NI, to the South Antrim constituency in each of the past three years.
(AQW 1932/08)

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 the South Antrim constituency in 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07.

Potential inward investor visits	South Antrim Constituency
2004-2005	6
2005-2006	7
2006-2007	5

Invest NI does not determine locations for visits for 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.

Renewable Energy

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail all the bodies known to his department that provide renewable energy advice; and to outline the cost of these bodies to the Northern Ireland budget.
(AQW 1943/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The cost to the Northern Ireland Budget of bodies that provide renewable energy advice is detailed below:

Funding Body	Organisation Funded	Total Amount of Funding in 07/08 (£000's)	Total dedicated to Renewable Energy advice (£000's)
DETI	Action Renewables	1.182	1.182 This is to deliver an agreed work programme of renewable energy activities including technical advice, tailored renewables information and policy support.
Invest Northern Ireland	Carbon Trust	2.725	0.790 This is to provide a support programme for Invest NI client companies on energy efficiency and carbon reduction.
Northern Ireland Housing Executive	Northern Ireland Energy Agency	0.206	The target here is against providing advice to 70,000 households and delivering advice to elderly residents through Heat Smart. The advice through both programmes primarily focuses on energy efficiency but around 20% of these households also receive general advice on renewable energy.

Environment and Renewable Energy Fund

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide a breakdown of planned expenditure of the Environment and Renewable Energy Fund to the end of the current financial year.

(AQW 1944/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The planned expenditure of the Environment and Renewable Energy Fund (EREF) to the end of the current financial year, broken down by Department is estimated as:

Department	Planned capital expenditure (£ m)	Planned resource expenditure (£ m)
DETI	5	2.042
DSD	7.675	-
DFP	0.889	0.100
DARD	1.35	0.300
DOE	-	0.170
OFMDFM	-	0.300

Technology	Grant Paid (£)	Advertising Cost per installation (£)	Householder Contribution (£)	Total Installed Cost (including advertising) (£)	Total Installed Cost (excluding advertising) (£)
Solar Hot water	1125	330	2575	4030	3700
Photovoltaic	9100	330	8650	18080	17750
Wood Pellet Boilers	3160	330	4070	7560	7230
Wood Pellet Stoves	1173	330	1777	3280	2950
Wind Turbine	5100	330	7800	13230	12900
Ground Source Heat Pumps	2960	330	4900	8190	7860
Air Source Heat Pumps	1833	330	7517	9680	9350

Renewable Energy Reconnect/Household Programme

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the total amount of money spent on advertising the Renewable Energy Reconnect/Household programme. (AQW 1945/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The total amount spent, as of 22 November 2007, on advertising the Environment and Renewable Energy Fund, household programme, Reconnect is £495,675.

Renewable Energy Fund

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the cost of installation of each renewable energy type provided for by the Renewable Energy Fund (i) including advertising costs; and (ii) excluding advertising costs. (AQW 1946/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The average costs per renewable energy technology installation, including Reconnect grant, including and excluding advertising, and householder contribution are:

Trade Missions to India

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of companies from (i) Ballymena Borough Council area; (ii) Ballymoney Borough Council area; and (iii) Moyle District Council area, that have taken part in recent trade missions to India. (AQW 1959/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Since the beginning of 2006 Invest NI has organised 4 trade missions to India and participated in one other organised by Enterprise Ireland.

Two companies from the Ballymena Borough Council area and no companies from either the Ballymoney Borough Council or Moyle District Council areas participated in these missions.

Trade Missions are open to all companies in Northern Ireland seeking to do business in international markets. Invest NI publishes an annual trade events programme to all of its client companies and other interested parties. The details of all trade missions are also published on Invest NI's website www.investni.com/trade and on nibusinessinfo.co.uk – Northern Ireland's online business advice service

Redundancy Packages

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the actions he is taking to ensure that redundancy packages offered by TYCO are fair. (AQW 1961/08)

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.

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 Ballymoney.

Invest NI: Policy on Financial Assistance

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the policy of Invest NI in relation to offers of financial assistance to participate in overseas trade missions, by companies that have announced their intention to close their Northern Ireland-based operations before the trade mission takes place. (AQW 2069/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Invest NI policy and practice is not to provide financial assistance to companies towards their participation in overseas trade missions if they have announced their intention to close their Northern Ireland operations before the mission is scheduled to take place.

Invest NI:**Financial Assistance by Constituency**

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount of Invest NI assistance provided for each of the 18 Northern Ireland constituencies, expressed as a figure per head of population. (AQW 2086/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The table below presents assistance per head of adult population offered to businesses by parliamentary constituency.

It should be noted that parliamentary constituency 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, the final location decision rests with the business.

INVEST NI PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AREA ASSISTANCE PER HEAD (2002/03 - 2006/07)

Parliamentary Constituency	Assistance Per Head (£)
Belfast East	1,018
Belfast North	332
Belfast South	1,220
Belfast West	383
East Antrim	595
East Londonderry	339
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	326
Foyle	773
Lagan Valley	242
Mid Ulster	355
Newry and Armagh	288
North Antrim	245
North Down	167
South Antrim	480
South Down	163
Strangford	119
Upper Bann	670
West Tyrone	274
Northern Ireland	439

Notes

1. Population figures are based on 2006 mid-year estimates of adult population sourced from the Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency.

Sperrins Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Mrs McGill asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail Northern Ireland Tourist Board funding to projects in the designated Sperrins area of outstanding natural beauty, over the last five years. (AQW 2111/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) recognises the importance of the Sperrins as a designated area of outstanding natural beauty and the positive contribution this makes to tourism in Northern Ireland.

In the last five years the NITB has provided financial support of £927,313 for projects in the Sperrins area. In addition, £3.4m of Natural Rural Resource Tourism Initiative (NRRTI), which NITB jointly supported with Department of Agriculture & Rural Development (DARD) and DOE Environment & Heritage Service, was allocated to projects in the Sperrins area.

Invest NI: Jobs in Derry/Londonderry

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the jobs promoted or supported by Invest NI that were located in the Derry/Londonderry City Council area, over the last two years. (AQW 2164/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The table below presents the number of jobs promoted and safeguarded through inward-investment projects, located in Derry District Council Area (DCA), and supported by Invest NI during the two financial years 2005/06 and 2006/07.

Financial Year	Jobs Promoted	Jobs Safeguarded
2005/06	361	1,258
2006/07	754	0
Total	1,115	1,258

Projects supported include investments by Seagate Technology (Ireland) Ltd (300 new jobs), Firstsource Solutions Ltd (577 new jobs) and Axa Insurance (153 new jobs).

In addition, the Northern Ireland Start a Business Programme, which is provided by Invest NI in partnership with Enterprise Northern Ireland, offered assistance to 473 individuals to start their own business within Derry DCA. The expected employment associated with these is around 615.

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.

It should also be noted that constituency 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.

Invest NI: Salaries of Jobs Promoted or Supported

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the jobs promoted or

supported by Invest NI which have had weekly salaries above the Northern Ireland private sector median, over the last two years. (AQW 2165/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The table below details the number of jobs promoted and safeguarded through inward-investment projects during the past two years. This includes an analysis of the number expected to be paid above the Northern Ireland Private Sector Median (PSM).

Financial Year	Jobs Supported			Number Of Jobs Above Ni Psm		
	New	Safe-Guarded	Total	New	Safe-Guarded	Total
2005/06	3,052	3,003	6,055	2,015	2,827	4,842
2006/07	2,964	204	3,168	1,169	199	1,368
Total	6,016	3,207	9,223	3,184	3,026	6,210

Note: The analysis relates only to those jobs for which the necessary salary data was available. The total number of jobs promoted and safeguarded during the two year period was 6,551 and 3,485 respectively.

Invest NI: Number of Jobs Promoted or Safeguarded

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of jobs promoted or safeguarded by Invest NI over the last two years. (AQW 2166/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The table below presents the number of jobs promoted and safeguarded through inward-investment projects supported by Invest NI during the two financial years 2005/06 and 2006/07.

Financial Year	Jobs Promoted	Jobs Safeguarded
2005/06	3,100	3,281
2006/07	3,451	204
Grand Total	6,551	3,485

In addition, the Northern Ireland Start a Business Programme, which is provided by Invest NI in partnership with Enterprise Northern Ireland offered assistance to 6,381 individuals to start their own business. The expected employment associated with these is around 8,295.

Invest NI: Land Held

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the total amount of land held by Invest NI in each of the last five years. (AQW 2193/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Table 1 shows the amount of land held by Invest NI at the 31st March in each of the last five years. It also shows the amount of land available for sale.

TABLE 1 INVEST NI LAND HOLDING AND LAND AVAILABLE BY YEAR

Date	Land Holding (Acres)	Land Available for Sale (Acres)
2002-2003	2829	1028
2003-2004	2805	984
2004-2005	2806	958
2005-2006	2806	910
2006-2007	2793	861
2007/2008 (Estimate)	2780	770

The variation in land owned from one year to the next reflects the new impact of freehold sales and acquisitions.

Invest NI: Land Acquisitions

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount of land acquired by Invest NI in each of the last five years. (AQW 2194/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Since its formation Invest NI has acquired 6.67 acres of land.

Table 1 shows the breakdown of the acquisitions.

Invest NI is currently seeking to acquire new land to service the needs of its client base.

TABLE 1: INVEST NI LAND ACQUISITION BY YEAR

	Location of Land Acquisition	Amount of Land Acquired (Acres)
2002-2003	None	None
2003-2004	Down Business Park	4
2004-2005	None	None
2005-2006	None	None
2006-2007	Forth River Business Park	2.67
2007-2008 (Estimate)	None	None

Invest NI: Use of Land

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount of land provided for industrial use/development by Invest NI in each of the last five years. (AQW 2195/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI has interpreted the term “land provided” to mean the amount of land available.

Invest NI holds land exclusively for the use of its clients with an approved business case and a demonstrable immediate property need.

Invest NI currently (as of 31 October 2007) holds 2,793 acres of land across Northern Ireland. At 31 October 2007, Invest NI had 811 acres of available land. It is estimated that by the end of this financial year, 31st March 2008, this figure will have reduced to 770 acres.

Table 1 shows the breakdown of available land at the end of each financial year in each of the last five years.

Over the course of the last two years Invest NI has seen a large increase in demand for industrial land. Should this level of demand continue, the existing land bank will be fully let within the next 5 to 7 years. Invest NI is currently seeking to acquire new land to service the future needs of its clients.

TABLE 1: INVEST AVAILABLE LAND BY YEAR

	Land Available (Acres)
2002-2003	1028
2003-2004	984
2004-2005	958
2005-2006	910
2006-2007	861

Invest NI: Promoted or Safeguarded Jobs

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail all the jobs promoted or safeguarded by Invest NI, which have had weekly salaries above the Northern Ireland private sector median average, on an industrial sectoral basis over the past two years. (AQW 2208/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The table below details the number of jobs promoted and safeguarded through inward- investment projects supported during the past two years by industry sector. This includes an analysis of the number expected to be paid above the Northern Ireland Private Sector Median (PSM) wage.

Sector	Jobs Supported			Number Of Jobs Above Psm		
	New	Safeguarded	Total	New	Safeguarded	Total
Business & Financial Services	3,682	90	3,772	1,110	90	1,200
Clothing & Textiles	51	33	84	11	33	44
Electrical, Electronic & Optical Equipment	559	2,268	2,827	559	2,268	2,827
Fabricated Metal Products & Metal Finishing	44	0	44	38	0	38
Food, Drink & Tobacco	100	16	116	44	16	60
Non-Electrical Machinery	121	98	219	121	63	184
Other Manufacturing	153	362	515	131	362	493
Other Services	153	0	153	41	0	41
Paper Products, Printing & Publishing	130	0	130	130	0	130
Rubber & Plastic Products	56	247	303	56	101	157
Software & Computer Services	967	33	1,000	943	33	976
Transport Equipment	0	60	60	0	60	60
Total	6,016	3,207	9,223	3,184	3,026	6,210

Note: The analysis relates only to those jobs for which the necessary salary data was available. The total number of jobs promoted and safeguarded during the two year period was 6,551 and 3,485 respectively

Invest NI: Jobs in Derry/Londonderry

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail all the jobs promoted or safeguarded by Invest NI, which have been located in Derry/Londonderry City Council area, and have had weekly salaries above the Northern Ireland private sector median average, on an industrial sectoral basis over the last two years.

(AQW 2209/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The table below details the number of jobs promoted and safeguarded through inward-investment projects in Derry DCA during the past two years by industry sector. This includes an analysis of the number expected to be paid above the Northern Ireland Private Sector Median (PSM) and the regional median wage.

Sector	Jobs Supported			Number Of Jobs Above Ni Psm			Number Of Jobs Above Regional Psm		
	New	Safe-Guarded	Total	New	Safe-Guarded	Total	New	Safe-Guarded	Total
Business & Financial Services	616	0	616	83	0	83	83	0	83
Electrical, Electronic & Optical Equipment	300	1,076	1,376	300	1,076	1,376	300	1,076	1,376
Other Manufacturing	14	0	14	4	0	4	4	0	4
Rubber & Plastic Products	45	182	227	45	36	81	45	182	227
Software & Computer Services	24	0	24	0	0	0	24	0	24
Total	999	1,258	2,257	432	1,112	1,544	456	1,258	1,714

Notes:

- The analysis relates only to those jobs for which the necessary salary data was available. The total number of jobs promoted and safeguarded during the two year period was 1,115 and 1,258 respectively.
- The regional PSM is based on the following council areas – Derry, Limavady, Coleraine, Magherafelt and Strabane

Invest NI Jobs in Derry/Londonderry

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail all the jobs promoted or safeguarded by Invest NI over the last two years, which have had weekly salaries above the Northern Ireland private sector median average, and were located in the Derry/Londonderry City Council area. (AQW 2210/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The table below details the number of jobs promoted and safeguarded through inward investment projects in Derry DCA during the past two years. This includes an analysis of the number expected to be paid above the Northern Ireland Private Sector Median (PSM) and the regional median wage.

Financial Year	Jobs Offered By Project			Number Of Jobs Above Ni Psm			Number Of Jobs Above Regional Psm		
	New	Safe-Guarded	Total	New	Safe-Guarded	Total	New	Safe-Guarded	Total
2005/06	359	1,258	1,617	349	1,112	1,461	349	1,258	1,607
2006/07	640	0	640	83	0	83	107	0	107
Total	999	1,258	2,257	432	1,112	1,544	456	1,258	1,714

Notes:

- (i) The analysis relates only to those jobs for which the necessary salary data was available. The total number of jobs promoted and safeguarded during the two year period was 1,115 and 1,258 respectively.
- (ii) The regional PSM is based on the following council areas – Derry, Limavady, Coleraine, Magherafelt and Strabane.

Invest NI: Land Sold

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount of land sold by Invest NI in each of the last five years. (AQW 2238/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI holds land exclusively for the use of its clients with an approved business case and a demonstrable immediate property need.

In the five years ended 31 March 2007 Invest NI has sold 357 acres of land.

Table 1 shows the amount of land sold by Invest NI in each of the five years. It also shows estimated land sales to the end of the current financial year.

The last two years have seen a large increase in demand for Invest NI land. Should this level of demand continue, the land bank will be fully let within the next 5 to 7 years. Invest NI is currently seeking to acquire new land to service the needs of its client base.

TABLE 1: INVEST NI LAND SALES BY YEAR

	Land Sales (Acres)
2002-2003	56
2003-2004	74
2004-2005	62
2005-2006	93
2006-2007	72
2007-2008 (Estimate)	129

ENVIRONMENT

UN Global Climate Talks

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment in the light of the recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change in which experts have declared climate change as unequivocal, and state that it may bring abrupt and irreversible impacts on the world community, to indicate whether or not she will be attending the UN global climate talks in Bali in December 2007. (AQW 1848/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): Three UK Ministers, namely Hilary Benn, Secretary of State for the Department of the Environment Food and Rural Affairs, Phil Woolas, Minister of State for the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Gareth Thomas, Under Secretary of State for the Department for International Development are attending the 13th Climate Change Conference from 3rd – 14th December in Bali.

As our interests will be represented by the above attendees, and in order not to contribute further to the carbon footprint, I will not be attending the conference.

Housing Developments on Flood Plains

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of the Environment to detail her policy on the granting of

planning permission for housing developments on flood plains. (AQW 1858/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department's general policy approach to dealing with flooding is contained within Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 15 "Planning and Flood Risk" which adopts a precautionary approach to decision making. PPS15 is one of many material considerations in the determination of a planning application to be weighed against the development plan, other planning policy publications and other considerations including planning history. My Department will consult DARD Rivers Agency on planning applications within flood plains and have regard to what they say as part of the planning application assessment process. In those circumstances where new development within a flood plain would result in significant flood risk planning applications may be refused on these grounds.

Planning and Flood Risk

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of the Environment what action she is taking to discourage further development in areas of Comber susceptible to flooding, such as the Belfast Road, in order to protect existing neighbouring developments from the effects of displaced water. (AQW 1859/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Firstly, all planning applications for new development in Comber, and indeed elsewhere, are considered in the context of prevailing regional policy. In the case of lands liable to flooding, the relevant policy document is Planning Policy Statement 15, (PPS 15), 'Planning and Flood Risk', where there is presumption against development within flood plains unless in exceptional circumstances. In any planning application for development within an area susceptible to flooding, the Department will consult with Rivers Agency and Northern Ireland Water. The Department is guided by their advice and PPS15, 'Planning and Flood Risk', in drafting an opinion to Ards Borough Council for consideration.

Secondly, my Department has published a draft Plan for Ards and Down, including Comber. Proposals for Comber were drafted in line with prevailing regional policy and in consultation with key statutory agencies, in this case Rivers Agency which has a statutory role in relation to flooding issues. Land judged liable to flood, in the opinion of Rivers Agency, was not included for development in Comber or indeed elsewhere throughout Ards and Down. Draft Plan policies were open to objection and we are currently awaiting the report of the PAC on those objections, some of which relate to the exclusion of lands in Comber.

My Department will consider that report in detail in consultation with key agencies. Again, in the case of

flooding related issues, we will consult with Rivers Agency. It will then proceed to adopt the new Plan for Ards and Down, with or without modifications.

Driving Tests for People with Disabilities

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of people with disabilities who have taken a driving test in each of the past five years. (AQW 1862/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) conducts tests for people with disabilities and makes provision on a case by case basis.

The attached table details the number of people who sat a driving test and declared a disability to DVA in the financial years 2004/05, 2005/06, 2006/07 and the first seven months of 2007/08. Accurate figures for 2002/04 are not available as such tests were not recorded on the booking system.

Year	Number of applicants who declared a disability
2004/05	21
2005/06	65
2006/07	64
2007 to 31/10/07	37

Driving Test Candidates with Disabilities

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the special arrangements provided to driving test candidates with disabilities. (AQW 1863/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) has procedures in place to deliver special arrangements for driving test candidates with disabilities.

If the candidate is unable to access any of the six Theory Test sites they may be accommodated at an alternative mutually agreed location such as a DVA practical test centre, hotel or educational establishment.

There are a number of special arrangements in place for candidates with disabilities taking the practical test.

If the information on the application form is not explicit, DVA will liaise directly with the applicant to ensure there is no misunderstanding about their requirements and, if necessary, they will be awarded additional time for the test at no extra charge.

In addition, those candidates with hearing and/or speech difficulties may be accompanied with a signer

and, in some cases, the examiner may wear an electronic communication device to assist the candidate.

The practical test generally starts in the test centre but if a candidate is in a wheelchair or, as a result of another condition, feels unable to meet the examiner in the test centre, the examiner will, at their request, start the test in their vehicle.

Finally, on completion of the test, if appropriate, the examiner may discuss the adaptations on the candidate's vehicle and suggest additional amendments which may assist the driver with overall safe control of the vehicle.

Planning Applications

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment to detail her assessment of the time required for the Craigavon Planning Office to reach recommendation stage, in relation to commercial planning applications; and to give comparisons with the position in other Divisional Planning Offices. (AQW 1866/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The average time over the last 3 years taken in weeks to make a recommendation to Council on commercial planning applications by Craigavon Divisional Planning Office is shown in the table below.

Comparing Craigavon to other Divisions, timescales were longer in 2005/06 and 2006/07 reflecting workload pressures and complexity of proposals. This year processing times have decreased and are in line with the average across all Divisions.

Division	Average Time (weeks) 2005/06	Average Time (weeks) 2006/07	Average Time (weeks) 2007 – date
Ballymena	23.8	19.6	11.5
Belfast	19.3	17.6	11.4
Craigavon	33.1	27.7	13.7
Downpatrick	22.2	20.0	16.7
Londonderry	27.8	24.5	13.7
Omagh	28.0	24.1	13.5

Pomeroy Community Developments

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment (i) if the planning service recently approved a planning application for an Enterprise Park that was applied for by Pomeroy Community Developments, which was located outside Pomeroy Development zone limits; and (ii) if so, what basis and exceptional case was used and

accepted to approve this application outside the development zone. (AQW 1894/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Outline Planning permission for a Business/Industrial Enterprise Park was granted on 9 February 2007 for Pomeroy Community Projects. The Department is currently assessing a Reserved Matters application for the proposal.

The application was assessed under Planning Policy Statement 4 Industrial Development (PPS4). PPS4 makes provision for a specific industrial project outside but visually associated with settlement limits in exceptional circumstances where there is no suitable land within the settlement. The enterprise must make a significant contribution to the local economy rather than a speculative scheme. The proposal complied with the above requirements. The applicant demonstrated that no suitable sites were available within the development limits, the site is just outside the development limits sharing a common boundary with them and it will make a significant contribution to the local economy.

Planning Service

Mr Storey asked the Minister of the Environment if she will carry out a review of the way in which public representatives can interact with the planning service. (AQW 1899/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department remains committed to the involvement of public representatives at the earliest opportunity and throughout the plan making process in order that the views and comments of public representatives can help to shape emerging draft plans.

You will be aware that my officials are conducting an overall review of the development plan system. As part of that review, consideration will be given to the role of public representatives and the way in which they can interact with the Planning Service during the preparation of a draft plan.

District Councils are consulted about planning applications within their area by Planning Service. Councillors may also make representations to Planning Service about individual applications.

The procedures for this consultation between Planning Service and Councils in relation to planning applications are also currently the subject of a review. Once the review is complete, further consideration will be given to ways of improving the consultation process.

Chauffeur-Driven Car Hire Firms

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of chauffeur driven car hire businesses licenced in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1928/08)

The Minister of the Environment: There are no requirements for chauffeur driven car hire businesses to have an operator's licence within Northern Ireland. A chauffeur driven vehicle used to carry passengers for hire or reward is required to be licensed either as a taxi or bus. I am unable to determine the number of these vehicles licensed as taxis or buses. They are included in the general statistics for these categories and not recorded separately.

However, I can tell you that at June 2007 there were 374 taxed limousines in Northern Ireland and this will include many chauffeur driven vehicles.

Unlicensed Chauffeur-Driven Cars

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what measures are in place to alert members of the public to the dangers of hiring illegal and unlicensed chauffeur-driven cars. (AQW 1934/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Driver & Vehicle Agency has measures in place to alert members of the public to the dangers of hiring illegal and unlicensed chauffeur-driven cars.

An Agency educational information leaflet titled "A guide to hiring a vehicle for Weddings or other Special Occasions" is regularly distributed by enforcement and compliance staff to members of the general public and industry alike, outlining the risks and responsibilities associated with using these vehicles. This leaflet is also available at various Government offices and on DVA's website.

The Agency has raised awareness of the dangers in travelling in unlicensed public service vehicles through themed education at the Motor Plus Show hosted at the Kings Hall Belfast in 2005 and again in 2006 when it hosted an industry roadworthiness open day at its Headquarters in Belfast. The Agency is also committed to hosting an educational awareness stand at the 2008 NI Taxi Magazine Show to be hosted in the Nugent Hall Belfast.

Enforcement officers carry out unannounced enforcement visits at Wedding Trade Shows when hosted in Northern Ireland. This work involves inspecting the various categories of motor vehicles advertised for wedding hire and outlining legal requirements with their operators and the general public. This work has proved to be a very successful educational strategy but it has also been controversial in that it effectively disrupts the commercial aims of

illegal operators. Since April 2005, five Wedding Fairs have been visited by enforcement officers and 62 chauffeur-driven vehicles inspected.

When unlicensed chauffeur-driven cars are detected by enforcement officers at the roadside, passengers are advised immediately of the licensing status of the vehicle and the associated risks involved in travelling in such vehicles.

Chauffeur-Driven Car Hire Firms

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment what measures are in place to deter, detect and penalise the operators of illegal and unlicensed chauffeur-driven car hire firms, providing vehicles for weddings and other social occasions. (AQW 1935/08)

The Minister of the Environment: During the period April 2005 to date, the following measures have been taken by the Driver & Vehicle Agency to deter, detect and penalise those operating illegal and unlicensed chauffeur-driven cars in Northern Ireland:

An Agency educational information leaflet titled "A guide to hiring a vehicle for Weddings or other Special Occasions" is regularly distributed by enforcement and compliance staff to members of the general public and industry alike, outlining the risks and responsibilities associated with using these vehicles;

The Agency has raised awareness of the dangers in travelling in unlicensed public service vehicles through themed education at the Motor Plus Show hosted at the Kings Hall Belfast in 2005 and again in 2006 when it hosted an industry roadworthiness open day at its Headquarters in Belfast. The Agency is also committed to hosting an educational awareness stand at the 2008 NI Taxi Magazine Show to be hosted in the Nugent Hall Belfast;

Enforcement officers carry out unannounced enforcement visits at Wedding Trade Shows when hosted in Northern Ireland. This work involves inspecting the various categories of motor vehicles advertised for wedding hire and outlining legal requirements with their operators and the general public. This work has proved to be a very successful educational strategy. However, it has also been controversial in that it effectively disrupts the commercial aims of illegal operators. Since April 2005, five Wedding Fairs have been visited by enforcement officers and 62 chauffeur-driven vehicles inspected.

Enforcement officers carry out unannounced visits at suspect operator premises. These visits are aimed at inspecting vehicles suspected of being offered for hire and reward, and taking effective and proportionate enforcement action where mechanical deficiencies are

discovered. During the period 16 visits were carried out resulting in 86 vehicles inspected.

The Agency has been directing its available enforcement resources at targeting those suspect vehicles, drivers and operators who place the public at greatest risk, based on the grade of intelligence it receives. Enforcement officers do not have powers to confiscate unlicensed public service vehicles at present which limits the range of sanctions that can be imposed to prohibition and prosecution action; however, such powers will become available under the new proposed NI Taxi Bill, poised to come into force in early 2008.

The following road traffic offences were detected during intelligence led targeted operations and reported with a view to prosecution:

Offences detected at the roadside	Period April 2005 – Oct 2007
No Public Service Vehicle Licence	37
No Appropriate Drivers Licence	11
No Insurance	23
No Road Service Licence	6
Tachograph/Drivers Hours Offences	2

Chauffeur-Driven Car Hire Firms

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of chauffeur-driven car hire firms that have been found to be operating illegally over the past three years. (AQW 1936/08)

The Minister of the Environment: During the past 3 years, Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) Enforcement Officers have identified 32 chauffeur-driven car hire firms using vehicles that have been operating illegally.

Household Waste Recycling

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the percentage of total household waste which is recycled by each of the district councils in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1942/08)

The Minister of the Environment: In 2006/07 District Councils in Northern Ireland collectively recycled and composted 27.7% of collected household waste. The percentage of the total household waste recycled / composted for each district council is set out in table 1 overleaf.

Waste Management Group	District Council	% of household waste sent for recycling & composting as a % of total household waste arisings (2006/07)
ARC21	Antrim Borough Council	47.1%
	Ards Borough Council	25.5%
	Ballymena Borough Council	28.2%
	Belfast City Council	19.0%
	Carrickfergus Borough Council	21.9%
	Castlereagh Borough Council	34.9%
	Down District Council	32.2%
	Larne Borough Council	31.6%
	Lisburn City Council	25.1%
	Newtownabbey Borough Council	24.8%
	North Down Borough Council	33.0%
Total ARC21		26.8%
NWRWMG	Ballymoney Borough Council	24.7%
	Coleraine Borough Council	25.7%
	Derry City Council	24.4%
	Limavady Borough Council	28.5%
	Magherafelt District Council	35.3%
	Moyle District Council	26.5%
	Strabane District Council	22.8%
Total NWRWMG		26.3%
SWaMP	Armagh City & District Council	32.8%
	Banbridge District Council	45.1%
	Cookstown District Council	31.6%
	Craigavon Borough Council	30.0%
	Dungannon & South Tyrone Borough Council	24.9%
	Fermanagh District Council	27.8%
	Newry & Mourne District Council	27.8%

Waste Management Group	District Council	% of household waste sent for recycling & composting as a % of total household waste arisings (2006/07)
SWaMP	Omagh District Council	27.9%
Total SWaMP		30.5%
	Northern Ireland Total	27.7%

Toxin Emissions

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the results of her department's monitoring of toxin emissions for all towns in which this exercise is conducted, for the last five years. (AQW 1969/08)

The Minister of the Environment: A statutory framework has been established under the Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002 to manage local ambient air quality in Northern Ireland. Under this local air quality management framework, District Councils are required to review and assess a range of air pollutants against health based air quality objectives set out in the UK's Air Quality Strategy.

The monitoring results emanating from District Council reviews are compiled in reports which are submitted to the Department of the Environment for appraisal.

A report summarising all air quality monitoring data in Northern Ireland has been compiled annually since 2000 by the Department. These reports along with all relevant District Council reports can be viewed on the Departments dedicated Northern Ireland air quality website at http://www.airqualityni.co.uk/reports.php?n_action=report&t=3

The 2006 monitoring report will be published in early December and will also be available at the above web link.

Monitoring requirements for industrial installations regulated under the Pollution Prevention and Control Regulations (NI) 2003 are specified in permits on an installation by installation basis. Regulators may also carry out independent check monitoring. Information on monitoring results is available on public registers located in Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) headquarters at, Klondyke Building, Lower Ormeau Road, Belfast, BT7 2J, for those installations regulated by EHS and in District Council Offices for installations regulated by them.

Nuisance High Hedges

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the reasons for the delay in the introduction of legislation in relation to the 2005 consultation on nuisance high hedges. (AQW 1984/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I am aware that there is widespread concern about nuisance high hedges and I am keen to bring forward legislation as soon as possible. However, the timing will be subject to consideration of other competing priorities. These include (i) responding to a number of EU imperatives arising from new and amended EC Directives and European Court judgements, (ii) work to determine the way ahead on the Review of Public Administration, and (iii) proposals that will be brought forward to simplify, streamline and further reform the planning system.

Road Accident Deaths

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of road accident deaths involving drivers aged (i) 18-29; (ii) 30-49; (iii) 50-65; and (iv) over 65, for each of the past 10 years. (AQW 1994/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) is responsible for the collection and collation of statistics on all road traffic collisions. Figures obtained from the PSNI for the numbers of road deaths involving drivers aged 18-29, 30-49, 50-65 and over 65 for each of the past ten years are set out below. The figures do not indicate responsibility for the collisions.

Year	18-29	30-49	50-65	Over 65
1997	84	64	15	8
1998	90	72	32	20
1999	81	75	29	11
2000	96	94	32	13
2001	83	80	25	7
2002	88	62	42	15
2003	67	76	35	18
2004	80	74	21	23
2005	65	72	34	13
2006	67	73	24	6

Medical Standards for Obtaining a Driving Licence

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of the Environment to indicate whether or not there is any random check on the medical condition of all applicants for driving licences; and the number of prosecutions there have been, during each of the last three years, of holders of driving licences who failed to notify a significant medical condition when they made an application. (AQW 1995/08)

The Minister of the Environment: All applicants for, or the holders of, driving licences are required, by Article 9 of the Road Traffic (Northern Ireland) Order 1981, to inform the Department if they suffer from any medical condition that may affect their ability to drive a motor vehicle. In practice, the applicant completes a questionnaire which forms part of the driving licence application form, and make a declaration regarding their physical fitness to drive. Where this declaration indicates that the applicant may be suffering from a relevant disability, the Department instigates further enquiries, in accordance with guidance set by the Secretary of State for the Department for Transport's Honorary Medical Advisory Panels.

The 1981 Order did not provide the Department with any specific powers of prosecution where an applicant for a licence made a false declaration in respect of physical fitness to drive. However, the Road Traffic (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 has introduced a provision making it an offence for a licence holder to drive a motor vehicle having knowingly made a false declaration with regard to his physical fitness. This provision came into effect on 15 November 2007.

The Department does not carry out random checks on the validity of the declarations made by applicants.

Medical Standards for Obtaining a Driving Licence

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of the Environment to detail whether or not there are statutory medical imperatives applied to young persons obtaining a driving licence for the first time. (AQW 1996/08)

The Minister of the Environment: All applicants for driving licences are required to meet certain minimum medical standards, irrespective of age. The medical standards are, however, higher for drivers of large goods vehicles and passenger-carrying vehicles. There are no medical requirements, statutory or otherwise, specific to young persons.

Granting of Driving Licences to the Elderly

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of the Environment what is her assessment on whether or not there is any discrimination in the granting of driving licences to the elderly; and, if so, the age at which this discrimination begins. (AQW 1997/08)

The Minister of the Environment: In Northern Ireland, ordinary driving licences are issued for a period of up to ten years until the applicant is aged 60. Where the applicant is aged over 60 the licence is issued up to the seventieth anniversary of the applicant's birth or for a period of three years, whichever is the longer. Given the perception that age increases the risk of a person developing a condition which may impair their ability to drive a motor vehicle, it is considered desirable to assess an older licence holder's physical fitness to drive on a more regular basis. Due to the compulsory frequency of licence renewal where the licence holder is aged over 70, the licences are issued free of charge. The same provisions are applied throughout the United Kingdom.

There is no discrimination against elderly drivers: the medical standards remain the same irrespective of age. Elderly drivers are not routinely subjected to any medical assessments, other than the current self-declaration which is common to all applicants for a driving licence.

The current system of medical assessment, in relation to the granting of a driving licence, is based primarily on a system of self-declaration with a general responsibility on the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) to undertake and pay for medical investigations. The relevant medical criteria are set out in legislation and guidelines based on expert advice. The system as it stands has largely been in place since the mid 1970s and to date there has been no fundamental review of its key elements.

However, the Department for Transport in Great Britain is currently reviewing the practice of medical assessments, with a view to developing a more meaningful medical process. A UK-wide consultation exercise will be conducted, beginning in January 2008.

Driving Licences Issued to Drivers Suffering from Diabetes

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of the Environment to define the statutory regulations for granting driving licences to those who suffer from diabetes, and who fall into the categories (i) diet controlled; (ii) tablet controlled; and (iii) insulin dependent, and for what length of time driving licences are granted in each case. (AQW 1998/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Since April 1991, new applicants or existing drivers who suffer from insulin-dependent diabetes are prohibited from driving Large Goods Vehicles or Passenger-Carrying Vehicles. Drivers first licensed prior to April 1991 are dealt with individually and licensed subject to satisfactory annual Consultant assessment.

Regulation changes in April 2001 allow “exceptional case” drivers to apply for or renew their entitlement to drive small lorries (with or without a trailer) subject to meeting certain qualifying conditions. These conditions are that: the driver must not have suffered any hypoglycaemic attacks requiring assistance whilst driving within the previous 12 months; their condition has been stable for a period of at least one month prior to making an application for a licence; they must regularly monitor their condition by checking their blood glucose levels at least twice daily and at times relevant to driving; they must be examined every 12 months by a hospital consultant who specialises in diabetes; they must have no other condition which would render them a danger when driving small goods vehicles, they must sign an undertaking to comply with the directions of the doctor or doctors treating the diabetes; and they must report immediately any significant change in their condition.

Drivers who suffer from insulin-dependant diabetes may have their licences restricted for a period of up to three years.

Persons who suffer from diabetes which is either diet- or tablet-controlled may continue to drive without reference to the Department, provided they do not develop any diabetes-related conditions, such as a reduction of vision. Licences granted to persons suffering from diet- or tablet-controlled diabetes are often issued for the statutory maximum of ten years (below age 60).

Information relating to driving and diabetes may be found on the Driver & Vehicle Agency website www.dvlni.gov.uk under the section relating to medical conditions.

Illegal Dumping

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of successful prosecutions for illegal dumping in the Lisburn City Council area in the last five years. (AQW 2056/08)

The Minister of the Environment: EHS does not hold records for these prosecutions prior to late December 2003, when it assumed responsibility for waste management from District Councils. Since then, EHS has overseen 19 successful prosecutions for waste offences in the Lisburn City Council area.

Driving Test Waiting Times

Mr Savage asked the Minister of the Environment to detail, per test centre, the waiting time to take a driving test. (AQW 2108/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Details of the average waiting time for all test centres are included in the following table:

Test Centre	For week ending 1 December 2007	From 1 April to 1 December 2007
	Average weekly waiting times in days	Average year to date waiting times in days
Armagh	19	20
Ballymena	20	24
Balmoral	25	25
Coleraine	17	25
Cookstown	14	24
Craigavon	15	17
Dill Road, Belfast	30	35
Downpatrick	23	28
Enniskillen	28	32
Larne	32	33
Lisburn	15	20
New Buildings #	5	5
Newry	19	19
Newtownards	38	29
Omagh	19	25
Waterside	27	30

Vehicle Test Waiting Times

Mr Savage asked the Minister of the Environment to detail, by test centre, the waiting time for a vehicle test. (AQW 2109/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Details of the average waiting time for all test centres are included in the following table:

Test Centre	For week ending 1 December 2007	From 1 April – 1 December 2007
	Average weekly waiting times in days	Average year to date waiting times in days
Armagh	16	14
Ballymena	13	21

Test Centre	For week ending 1 December 2007	From 1 April – 1 December 2007
	Average weekly waiting times in days	Average year to date waiting times in days
Belfast	20	17
Coleraine	14	16
Cookstown	21	20
Craigavon	18	16
Downpatrick	16	17
Enniskillen	22	23
Larne	16	20
Lisburn	14	16
Londonderry	13	16
Mallusk	14	16
Newry	25	20
Newtownards	17	15
Omagh	21	16

Cost of Driving Lessons

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of the Environment whether or not her department has any control over the cost of driving lessons; and what consideration she will give to capping the cost of professional driving lessons, in order to make these more affordable for new young drivers. (AQW 2119/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Driver & Vehicle Agency regulates the activities of approved driving instructors. It does not employ them. Legislation does not provide for the Agency to set the price of driving lessons and I have no plans to change this.

Squirrel Numbers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration her department has given to a cull of the grey squirrel population, in the context of supporting the indigenous red squirrel. (AQW 2276/08)

The Minister of the Environment: It is acknowledged that the Grey Squirrel is the biggest threat to the conservation of the Red Squirrel in Northern Ireland.

A cull of the complete Grey Squirrel population would be impracticable. However, the Draft All-Ireland Species Action Plan (SAP) for the Red Squirrel, currently at the public consultation stage, does propose,

as one of its actions, the targeted control of Grey Squirrels to prevent their ingress into areas occupied by Red Squirrels only.

When the public consultation has been completed the targeted control of Grey Squirrels will be considered.

The Draft SAP can be found at http://www.ehsni.gov.uk/biodiversity/sap_uk/sap_ni.htm

Introduction of Wild Boar

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the approaches she has received from organisations or individuals in relation to the introduction of wild boar into Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2277/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I have received no approaches from organisations or individuals in relation to the introduction of Wild Boar into Northern Ireland.

Planning Applications

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the position in relation to planning application number 1267F, 8 The Park, Dunmurry, given the recent demolition of the building at this site.

(AQW 2331/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I can confirm that the planning application which was received on 20 September 2007 remains under consideration and no opinion has been formulated at this stage.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Freedom of Information Requests

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the cost to his department of dealing with Freedom of Information requests, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1739/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): The Department of Finance and Personnel, in common with all NI Departments, has not calculated or recorded information on the cost of individual FOI requests to date and therefore no information is available.

However, I have commissioned some analysis that may better inform the costings associated with the

Freedom of Information process. I will, of course, share this with you once it is complete.

Peace III Monitoring Committee

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail how the Peace III monitoring committee will be established; and to outline what action he will take to ensure that its membership reflects the make-up of the community.

(AQW 1947/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The PEACE III Monitoring Committee has been established in line with Articles 11, 63, 64 and 65 of European Council Regulation (EC) No 1083/2006 and in line with the partnerships and equality requirements of the Programme. The Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), the PEACE III Managing Authority, proposed its structure and it was agreed by the Executive on 13 September 2007. The structure of the PEACE III Monitoring Committee is as detailed below –

Member States and Managing and Certifying Authorities	4 members
Regional / Sub-Regional / Local Government	8 members
Social and Economic Partners	8 members
Cross Cutting Interests (Equality / Environment)	4 members
Independent expert on best practice in international peace building programmes	1 member
Total	25

SEUPB requested nominations for full and deputy members of the Monitoring Committee from appropriate nominating organisations. In seeking nominations, SEUPB specified that membership should be appropriately balanced between men and women, community background and urban and rural interests, and that members should be drawn from a broad geographical base. The role of these Monitoring Committee members will be to promote the best means of securing the objectives of the programme, and to monitor the progress towards those objectives. Committee members do not represent the particular interests of their sector. Committee decisions will be by consensus rather than by voting. I have subsequently approved nominations for full and deputy members as they have been brought forward on the basis that all necessary interests are represented. The inaugural meeting of the PEACE III Monitoring Committee took place on 6 November 2007 in Altnaveigh House, Newry.

Civil Service Staff Headcount

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of staff employed in

each government department in each of the last five years.
(AQW 1951/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The number of staff (permanent and temporary), based on headcount, employed in each of the 11 Northern Ireland Departments and their agencies at 1 January in each of the last 5 years is set out in the attached table.

NICS STAFF (HEADCOUNT) IN THE ELEVEN NI DEPARTMENTS AND THEIR AGENCIES AT 1 JANUARY 2003 – 2007

Department	1 Jan 03	1 Jan 04	1 Jan 05	1 Jan 06	1 Jan 07
DARD	3,838	4,075	4,259	4,110	3,336
DCAL	433	432	463	461	456
DE	595	639	702	694	697
DEL	1,654	1,756	1,808	1,845	1,819
DETI	718	737	769	747	713
DFP	2,814	2,984	3,036	3,050	3,037
DHSSPS	1,003	1,031	1,045	1,034	997
DOE	2,189	2,411	2,655	2,785	2,916
DRD	4,906	4,930	4,821	4,695	4,455
DSD	8,413	8,550	8,130	8,187	8,041
OFMDFM	385	394	417	369	388
Total	26,948	27,939	28,105	27,977	26,855

Efficiency Delivery Plans

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the amount of potential savings for each department, by 2010/2011, that will result from the development of efficiency delivery plans.
(AQW 2010/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Executive has agreed that all departments will deliver cumulative efficiency savings of 3% a year over the period 2008-09 to 2010-11. This amounts to some £790 million of efficiency savings by 2010-11.

The table below sets out the amount of savings for each department that will be realised over the Budget period.

Cumulative Total Efficiencies			£m
	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
DARD	6.2	12.2	18.1
DCAL	3.6	7.0	10.4
DE	63.2	124.5	184.0
DEL	20.3	40.1	59.2
DETI	7.7	15.2	22.5

Cumulative Total Efficiencies			£m
	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
DFP	5.7	10.3	14.8
DHSSPS	118.2	232.8	344.0
DOE	3.9	7.7	11.4
DRD	22.4	44.2	65.3
DSD	19.3	38.1	56.3
FSA	0.2	0.4	0.7
OFMDFM	2.4	4.6	6.8
Total Departments	273.2	537.3	793.5

Departments are currently developing efficiency delivery plans to ensure that the targets identified in the draft Budget are realised. These will be published on departmental websites at the time of the final Budget in late January.

In addition, the establishment of a Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit (PEDU) will examine the scope for departments to deliver higher levels of cash releasing efficiencies in achieving best practice levels of performance.

Executive Programme Fund

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail his department's plan to extend, or replace, the Executive Programme Fund, in particular the Executive Programme Fund for Children, due to end in March 2008. (AQW 2035/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Draft Budget 2008-11 has been developed on the basis that programmes previously funded through central funds, such as Executive Programme Funds, should be considered by the relevant departments in the context of their overall Budget outcome. This approach seeks to ensure that such programmes, where of sufficient priority, will have more certainty regarding longer term funding. It will also address problems experienced with the previous approach, such as poor levels of spend as compared to budget.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Supported Living

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what steps he has taken to ensure that the recommendations of the

Bamford Review in relation to 'supported living' are reflected in the draft Budget 2008-2011; and to detail the number of groups and individuals that are (i) currently supported; and (ii) will be supported, through 'supported living'. (AQW 1856/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): The Government's response to the Bamford Review is currently being developed and will include actions by a range of Departments who will be looking to the CSR for increased funding to develop services. My Department is leading on the preparation of the response which will be presented to the Executive for approval in February. Strengthening mental health and learning disability services in response to the Bamford Review findings was identified within my Department as a priority for the CSR and my Department's bids of £17m, £29m and £48m across the CSR period resulted in an allocation in the draft budget of £4m, £7m and £18m.

It is not possible to quantify the number of people provided with "supported living" as this covers a range of services and information is not held centrally.

Independent Sector Providers

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of spending by his department on independent sector providers, in order to reduce outpatient waiting lists for the years 2005; 2006; and 2007. (AQW 1870/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is available by financial year only. Spending on independent sector providers to reduce outpatient waiting times in 2005/06 was £406,607, and in 2006/07, £6,342,857.

At March 2006, there were 74,000 people waiting over 6 months for a first outpatient appointment. By 31 March 2007 this had been reduced to only 32 people. In clearing a backlog of this scale, it was necessary to supplement health service capacity with significant independent sector activity during 2006/07.

Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation Services

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the funding opportunities provided in his department's section of the draft Budget 2008-2011 for community-based drug and alcohol rehabilitation services, such as that provided by the Hope Centre in Ballymena. (AQW 1873/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Much of the work to deliver on the outcomes contained in the New Strategic Direction for

Alcohol and Drugs (NSD) is taken forward at a local level. The Department therefore asked each of the local Drug and Alcohol Co-Ordination Teams (DACTs) to develop a local action plan which would both address local needs and support the delivery of the NSD. In support of this, the Department allocated £4.8 million to the four DACTs in 07/08. A tender process was used by the DACTs to put in place services and programmes to deliver their Action Plans, and all local organisations were able to take part in this tender process.

The current level of funding will be available to DACTs until 2009, by which time we anticipate the Local Action Plans will have been reviewed, and consideration will be given to future programmes and services, delivery mechanisms, and the level of funding required.

Deep Vein Thrombosis

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what guidelines are in place in Northern Ireland for the treatment of Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT); and to confirm that all Health and Social Services Boards have implemented these guidelines. (AQW 1886/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are no formal guidelines in place in Northern Ireland for the treatment of Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT). However, in April 2007 the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety issued a circular to the health and social care sector drawing attention to the published recommendations of the Expert Working Group on the Prevention of Venous Thromboembolism in Hospitalised Patients. This Group was convened by the Department of Health in England to consider how current best practice and guidance on the prevention of venous thromboembolism (VTE) can be promoted and implemented.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is also reviewing guidance published by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence on the prevention of VTE in patients undergoing orthopaedic surgery and other high risk procedures.

TARCEVA Cancer Drug

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (i) detail the number of cancer patients who have been refused the drug 'TARCEVA'; and (ii) outline the department's plans for ensuring this drug for treating lung cancer is available on the National Health Service. (AQW 1907/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer you to my answer to your earlier question on this matter AQW1593/08.

Warm Homes Initiatives

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will confirm that the annual cost to the health budget of illnesses arising from cold damp homes and fuel poverty is of the order of £60 million per annum, and if he is planning, under his department's section of the Draft Budget 2008-2011, to make a contribution to warm homes initiatives, thereby in the longer term saving on the health budget. (AQW 1916/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A link between living in cold, damp conditions and a number of illnesses, including poor mental health, respiratory disease, and premature mortality has long been accepted. For this reason fuel poverty was recognised as an area for action in the public health strategy, Investing for Health.

The Fuel Poverty Strategy encourages a partnership approach to tackling fuel poverty involving Government Departments; relevant public sector organisations; the voluntary and community sector; energy suppliers; and relevant organisations in the energy industry. The tight outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review means that there are very limited resources available. I am not planning to make any contribution from the Draft Budget 2008 – 2011 to warm homes initiatives, however locally based Investing for Health arrangements are working with a number of partners eg DSD, energy agencies, NIHE and Councils etc to identify those at risk and to signpost and support clients to access appropriate initiatives including DSD's Warm Homes scheme. These efforts will continue.

New Acute Hospital in Enniskillen

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the projected budget for each of the first five operational years of the acute hospital in Enniskillen, due to open in 2011; and (ii) the percentage of that budget to be used to (a) pay for the Private Finance Initiative project; and (b) deliver frontline healthcare services.

(AQW 1938/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am unable to provide this information at present as the PFI procurement is in competitive dialogue stage. During this process commercial in confidence negotiations occur which ensure that bidders are required to compete with each other and meet the Trust's evaluation of the PFI to drive out the

most competitive solution in terms of quality and whole life cost.

Access to Midwife-Led Maternity Units

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to increase access for women to midwife-led maternity units. (AQW 1939/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is for Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts to determine the most appropriate pattern of local service provision. Boards and Trusts can give consideration to the development of midwife-led maternity units – in addition to other choices for maternity care – as part of their service planning.

Grant Aid

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of grant aid that has been awarded to Brook Northern Ireland in each of the last five financial years. (AQW 1941/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Health and Social Services Boards have provided the following funding to Brook in the last five years:

H&SSB	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Eastern	£70,000	£90,000	£84,000	£105,000	£129,000
Northern	£21,095	£21,622	£22,163	£37,978	£21,640
Southern	Nil	£1,325	£1,815	Nil	£1,787
Western	£385	Nil	£275	£137	£302
Totals	£91,480	£112,947	£108,253	£143,115	£152,729

My Department has provided funding as follows:

2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
£29,478	£28,170	£35,374	£39,468	£16,647

Review of Public Administration

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of the impact on productivity within his department of delays in implementing the Review of Public Administration reforms. (AQW 1948/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am looking in depth at the reforms developed by previous Direct Rule Ministers because I believe it is important that we adopt plans that are

specifically tailored to local needs, represent value for money and secure the sustained improvements in service that we all wish.

This has not had any adverse impact on the productivity of my department, which continues to deliver as normal on its responsibilities in improving health and social care for the people of Northern Ireland during this transitional period.

Advertising Expenditure

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount spent by his department on advertising in each of the last five years. (AQW 1964/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The following amounts were spent on advertising in the last four years.

2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007
£355,141	£277,494	£272,284	£204,358

Figures for 2002/2003 have not been recorded in this format and could only be provided at a disproportionate cost.

The figures provided are compiled using the total media spend for all forms of advertising.

Foreign National Employees

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (i) European Union foreign nationals; and (ii) non-European Union nationals, that are employed in his department. (AQW 1966/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In line with the rest of the Northern Ireland Civil Service the Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety does not hold data on the nationality of its employees.

Mental Health Services

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to ensure (i) that mental health problems are detected early in sufferers; and (ii) that appropriate services are available to treat those affected. (AQW 1967/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Early intervention in the management of mental health problems is important in order to prevent more serious problems arising. This is especially true in the management of eating disorders

and child and adolescent mental health. Health professionals are routinely given awareness training.

The recently completed Bamford Review points the way to achieve a comprehensive and modern mental health service. Implementing the Report's recommendations would ensure appropriate services are available. However, this will require appropriate funding.

Fertility Treatment

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on whether or not the £50,000 funding for additional counselling, announced in September 2006, following the review of criteria for access to fertility treatment, has been distributed; and to outline what plans he has to ensure that there is adequate provision for this service. (AQW 2000/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Additional investment has been allocated for the development of counselling services, and its distribution is for the four Health and Social Services Boards to determine in light of existing services and the particular areas that would benefit from further enhancement. I understand that commissioners have met with a range of stakeholders and a profile for future counselling services is expected to be agreed in December 2007. Service enhancements will include improved geographic access and improved information and support for people at all stages of their care pathway.

Care Management Networks

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he has taken to establish care management networks for patients with chronic illnesses. (AQW 2001/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department has been working with HSC Boards to develop new arrangements for the more effective management of people with chronic conditions. These arrangements include the development of self care programmes to help people manage their own conditions more effectively and pro-active case management arrangements whereby a network of healthcare professionals will deliver a fully integrated health and social care package to maintain people with the most complex chronic conditions in their own homes rather than being unnecessarily admitted to hospital.

An additional £1m was allocated in 2007/08 to aid the development of these initiatives.

IVF Treatment

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) recommendation that women should receive three cycles of IVF treatment; and what plans he has to ensure that this recommendation is implemented. (AQW 2002/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The NICE clinical guideline on the assessment and treatment for people with fertility problems was published prior to the establishment of the Department's formal link with the Institute and therefore has not been assessed for its applicability to Northern Ireland. The guideline is to be reviewed by NICE, commencing in February 2008, and the revised guidance will be assessed by the Department to determine whether it should be implemented in the Health and Social Care sector in Northern Ireland.

IVF Treatment

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm, in relation to a woman who commences one IVF cycle, under the existing criteria governing access to fertility treatments, that this cycle will include up to three treatments with any additional eggs harvested during the initial IVF treatment. (AQW 2004/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Under the existing criteria, couples are offered one cycle of IVF treatment. Subsequent cycles, including implantation of additional embryos produced and frozen during the initial IVF treatment, are not currently provided within the publicly funded fertility service.

Waiting Times for IVF Treatment

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to indicate whether or not any comparative studies are being undertaken to determine if waiting times for IVF treatment in Northern Ireland are greater or lesser than for Primary Care Trusts in England. (AQW 2005/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Studies to compare waiting times for IVF treatment are not currently being undertaken.

On 25 October I advised the Assembly that I have asked the HSS Boards for a report on the impact of the current criteria. When I have that report I will then be in a position to consider the extent to which the existing policy and its application meet the needs of service users.

IVF Treatment

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not his department has advised Health Trusts that they should be working to a three cycle treatment programme for women undergoing fertility treatment, similar to advice issued in 2007 by the Department of Health in England. (AQW 2013/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In September 2006 new criteria for access to publicly funded fertility treatment were introduced. In conjunction with the new access criteria. Health Boards and Trusts were advised that qualifying couples should be offered one cycle of fertility treatment.

IVF Treatment

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what his assessment is of the impact of any age-weighting proposal, on other age categories of women awaiting IVF treatment. (AQW 2014/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The current criteria for access to publicly funded fertility services were introduced following extensive consultation, which included consideration of the upper age limit for people receiving fertility treatment.

On 25 October I advised the Assembly that I have asked the HSS Boards for a report on the impact of the current criteria. When I have that report I will then be in a position to consider the extent to which the existing policy and its application meet the needs of service users.

IVF Treatment

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (i) detail the number of women awaiting IVF treatment at 1 November 2007; (ii) the length of waiting times; and (iii) the age profile of women awaiting treatment. (AQW 2015/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: (AQW 2015/08) Information on the number of (i) women awaiting IVF treatment in Northern Ireland at 01 November, broken down by (ii) length of time waiting in months is provided in the following table:

Months Waiting	Number of Women Waiting for IVF Treatment at 1 November 2007
0 - 2	151
3 - 5	150
6 - 8	122
9 - 11	65
12 -14	21
15-17	12
18 - 20	6
21- 23	5
24+	15
NI Total	547

Source: Regional Fertility Centre

(iii) Due to data disclosure issues it is not possible to report the number of women waiting by timeband and age. (AQW 2016/08) Information on the number of women awaiting IVF treatment in Northern Ireland at 01 November, broken down age is provided in the table below:

Age in Years ¹	Number of Women Waiting for IVF Treatment at 1 November 2007
<20	0
21-25	20
26-30	109
31-35	223
36-40	195
>40	0
NI Total	547

Source: Regional Fertility Centre

¹ The upper age limit for treatment is 39 years of age.

IVF Treatment

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of women, by age, in each age group, up to the age of 40 years, awaiting IVF treatment at 1 November 2007. (AQW 2016/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: (AQW 2015/08) Information on the number of (i) women awaiting IVF treatment in Northern Ireland at 01 November, broken down by (ii) length of time waiting in months is provided in the following table:

Months Waiting	Number of Women Waiting for IVF Treatment at 1 November 2007
0 - 2	151
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36-40	195
>40	0
NI Total	547

Source: Regional Fertility Centre

¹ The upper age limit for treatment is 39 years of age.

Medical Legal Claims

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of money that is received by Trusts for photocopying of patients' notes for medical legal claims. (AQW 2022/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not held centrally and could only be collated at disproportionate cost.

Car Parking Fees

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of money

that is received by Trusts from car parking fees. (AQW 2023/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Charging for car parking takes place in the Western Trust, the South Eastern Trust and Belfast Trust and the money received by each Trust in 2006/07 is as follows:

Trust	Income
Western	85,000
South Eastern	538,000
Belfast	843,000

Use of Hospital Facilities by Consultants for Private Patients

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of money that is received by Trusts in relation to the use of hospital facilities by Consultants for private patients. (AQW 2024/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the format requested. However, total Private Patient income for the 2006/07 financial year by Trust is as follows:

Trust	Amount £k
Northern	327
Belfast	3,714
South-Eastern	523
Southern	845
Western	519
NIAS	3

Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration he will give to the inclusion of warnings regarding Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders on all alcoholic beverage containers, similar to those which are carried on all tobacco products. (AQW 2023/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In May 2007, the UK Government announced an agreement with the drinks industry that will see alcohol unit and health information included on drinks labels. Depending on the level of implementation of this voluntary labelling agreement with industry, this information could include the following message regarding alcohol and pregnancy

(although the pregnancy element is not formally part of the agreement with the industry):

- Pregnant women or women trying to conceive should avoid drinking alcohol;
- If they do choose to drink, to minimise the risk to the baby, they should not drink more than one to two units of alcohol once or twice a week and should not get drunk.

It is anticipated that the majority of labels will carry this information by the end of next year.

Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration he will give to the introduction of a poster campaign in all pharmacies, general practice surgeries and well women clinics, warning of the dangers of drinking during pregnancy and the risk of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders. (AQW 2034/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In 2007, the four Chief Medical Officers for the UK agreed a new reworded message about alcohol and pregnancy, and this was message 'launched' on 25 May.

The advice, which was issued for the whole of the UK, recommends that:

- Pregnant women or women trying to conceive should avoid drinking alcohol;
- If they do choose to drink, to minimise the risk to the baby, they should not drink more than one to two units of alcohol once or twice a week and should not get drunk.

This message is contained in an information leaflet for the general public which has been produced by the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland on behalf of my Department. The leaflet is currently in print, and is typically distributed through health centres, surgeries and advice centres.

At this stage, no active consideration has been given to developing a poster on this issue.

Efficiency Measures

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the efficiency measures for his department for each of the next four years, and the estimated savings from each measure. (AQW 2037/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department is currently finalising challenging efficiencies amounting to

£118m/£233m/£344m by 2010/11, as part of the Executive Committee's agreed approach to the Comprehensive Spending Review. This builds on £146m of efficiencies already achieved by 2007/08.

My officials are working closely with health, social services and fire services to develop detailed plans for the delivery of these efficiencies. Until I am assured that these are real efficiencies and not simply service cuts by another name, I will not be supporting specific efficiency proposals and therefore cannot provide the estimated savings from each measure.

However, what I can say at this stage is that I fully expect that across the CSR period my Department will deliver £75m through taking advantage of national pay deals and through delivering the agreed 5% annual reduction in Departmental Budgets. I expect Pharmaceutical savings to deliver some £40m of additional savings. RPA changes in Trusts and Boards, to reduce administrative posts, should deliver £53m. The Fire service will provide approximately an additional £5m. This leaves a balance of some £171m to be found from further service proposals on productivity and procurement.

Operations

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of operations performed in each hospital in Northern Ireland in each of the last three years. (AQW 2038/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of operations* performed at each hospital in Northern Ireland in each of the last three years are shown in the table below.

Hospital	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06
Altnagelvin	18,050	19,362	19,971
Antrim	8,847	8,786	9,034
Ards	5,497	5,144	5,059
Belfast City	16,240	15,876	17,488
Causeway	6,356	6,348	6,385
Craigavon	10,118	10,013	10,184
Daisy Hill	6,440	5,120	4,489
Downe	2,372	2,178	1,699
Erne	2,576	2,864	3,043
Lagan Valley	4,765	4,929	5,625
Mater	7,965	7,395	8,075
Mid Ulster	3,326	3,121	2,771
Musgrave Park	6,321	7,628	7,934
RBHSC	5,296	5,069	5,091

Hospital	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06
Royal Victoria	34,869	34,962	35,763
South Tyrone	3,199	2,710	3,814
Tyrone County	5,771	4,955	5,487
Ulster	16,391	16,566	16,049
Whiteabbey	3,507	3,307	3,377
Total	167,906	166,333	171,338

Source: Hospital Inpatient System.

* For the purpose of this question an operation has been taken to mean all procedures undertaken within a surgical specialty, excluding any anaesthetic procedure, whilst in hospital.

Operations

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients who died during an operation in each hospital in Northern Ireland in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2039/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of patients who died during an operation is not available. Information held currently will only state that a patient died whilst in hospital, it does not provide information on the location in hospital where the death occurred.

Staff Projections

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the staff projections for (i) doctors; (ii) nurses; (iii) auxiliary staff; and (iv) administrators, for each hospital for each of the next four years.

(AQW 2040/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Staffing levels are a matter for individual Trusts, based on service requirements and available resources. However, in order to ensure that sufficient, suitably qualified staff are available to meet service needs my Department has established on-going regional workforce planning.

The workforce planning cycle comprises a major review approximately every three years, with interim update reviews. These are carried out for each clinical professional group including doctors and nurses and take into account the requirement for support staff.

Published reviews can be found on the Departmental internet site at <http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/hrd/wpu/wpu-planning/wpu-publications.htm>

Diabetes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of people who have been diagnosed with diabetes in Northern Ireland; and (ii) the number of people who have died of diabetes in Northern Ireland, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2049/08)

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. Table 1 shows the total number of people on the QOF diabetes register, as at 14 February each year, for the last three years. Table 2 shows the number of deaths in each year where the underlying cause of death was recorded as diabetes¹.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF PATIENTS ON DIABETES REGISTER (AGED 17 AND OVER)

	Number of patient on Diabetes Register (aged 17 and over)
As at 14 February 2005	51,541
As at 14 February 2006	54,950
As at 14 February 2007	56,924

Source: Payment Calculation and Analysis System (PCAS).

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF DEATHS WHERE DIABETES WAS THE UNDERLYING CAUSE OF DEATH

Registration Year	Number of deaths where diabetes was the underlying cause of death
2004	189
2005	224
2006 ^p	197

Source: Registrar General Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency

1. International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes E10-E14 (diabetes mellitus).

^p Provisional data.

MRSA

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps are in place to prevent the spread of MRSA to patients using ambulances.

(AQW 2065/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) has robust procedures for controlling infection, including MRSA, which comply with the

Ambulance Service Association's national guidance and procedures for infection prevention and control.

Ambulances are cleaned where necessary after each incident and 'made ready' at the end of each shift for the incoming crew. Ambulances are also scheduled for 'deep cleaning' each week and crews are stood down from front-line duty to do this. All ambulance staff are trained in infection control during their induction training. In addition, NIAS has invested in disposable clinical equipment to reduce the risk of infection.

Draft Budget

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, following the publication of the draft Budget, what consideration has been given by his department to whether or not bids originally described as "inescapable" or "unavoidable", actually were entirely within these categories; and to detail who has been involved in this work.

(AQW 2083/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Following the publication of the draft budget, my officials have continued the process of reviewing and challenging the nature and quantum of all of the bids classified as "inescapable" in liaison with HSC organisations.

Since the publication of the draft budget for consultation only one bid is now viewed as discretionary. This relates to the GP contract which was proposed as £1m/£5m/£10m and is no longer to be introduced

through the mandatory element of the UK wide GP contract. Decisions will be taken as to whether to invest in primary care services or shift resources to other service development proposals.

On the other hand, Boards and Trusts have raised concerns about whether the Department's assessment of inescapables is sufficient in a number of areas.

Budget Bids

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the budget bids classed as being "inescapable" or "unavoidable", that were so categorised as the result of (i) contractual obligations; or (ii) Ministerial commitments.

(AQW 2084/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In preparing each individual Comprehensive Spending Review proposal the guidance issued by DFP required that the extent to which the proposal was unavoidable be set out. The guidance also recognised that in some cases there would be significant costs associated with simply maintaining existing services with little or no impact on the delivery of public services.

It was recognised that costs may be unavoidable due to a Ministerial pre-commitment, legal or statutory obligation and price inflation. Other factors may also come into play depending on individual proposals.

The table attached sets out the reason that a bid was classified as inescapable or unavoidable.

	Ministerial Commitment	Legal/ Statutory obligation	Price Inflation	Other
Pay and Pay Reform (Agenda for Change)			√	Inescapable due to the need to meet rising costs over which the Department has no control.
Non Pay			√	
Pharmaceutical Services			√	
Superannuation		√		The HPSS Superannuation Scheme operates on a policy of parity with the NHS scheme in E&W. This is in line with Treasury policy. Failure to meet this cost would mean that future pension entitlements would be at risk.
Pandemic Flu Emergency Provision	√			Minister has identified contingency planning for an influenza pandemic as a priority if the mortality and morbidity implications of a pandemic flu are to be minimised.
Medical Workforce Training and Tuition Fees	√			Ministerial commitment has been given to the medical workforce plan which has identified the need to increase the numbers of GPs in NI and to the need to complete training of existing medical students.
Renal Services	√	√		Ministerial commitment to the Renal Service Review 2002 The Department also has a duty of care to provide existing services to all those that need it.

	Ministerial Commitment	Legal/ Statutory obligation	Price Inflation	Other
Child Protection	√	√		Consistent with the Secretary of States commitment and announcements to prioritise children's services. The requirement to vet is set out in various pieces of primary and secondary legislation.
Children with Complex Needs	√			Minister has endorsed the report on Children with Complex Physical Healthcare Needs.
Blood Safety		√		Blood Safety and Quality Regulations 2005 which transpose the European Blood Safety Directives 2005/61/EC and 2005/62/EC. These measures are being introduced across the whole of the UK.
Revenue Consequences of capital investment	√	√		Reflects the DHSSPS and Ministerial draft capital investment strategy to be taken forward within the ISNI. The non-cash costs of cost of capital and depreciation will be incurred even if the investments are not commissioned.
GP Contract				A high priority in NI given the recommendations arising in GB in relation to access to primary care.
Additional Acute Services		√		The Department has a duty of care to ensure that services in rural areas are maintained and sustained.
Mainstreaming Children and Young People's Package	√	√		These measures deliver on a number of the high level outcomes within the OFMDFM children and young people's strategy. Minister has given a commitment that the majority of the package will be mainstreamed.
Demographic Pressures in Primary and Community Services		√		The Department has a duty of care to ensure that existing services are available to all those that need them and that demographic change is addressed.

Contact with Mr John O'Hara

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what contact his department has had with John O'Hara during the past year; and to detail the dates of any such contact. (AQW 2159/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Officials from my Department, including those seconded as Inquiry staff, have had contact with John O'Hara on the following occasions to discuss the progress towards, and practical arrangements for, the resumption of the Inquiry:

20 November 2006	31 May 2007
4 December 2006	28 June 2007
1 February 2007	9 October 2007
27 February 2007	15 November 2007
19 April 2007	28 November 2007

In addition to the dates listed above, the Department has also had contact with John O'Hara on a small number of other occasions for which the dates are not available. This was also in relation to progress and practical arrangements.

Contact with Mr John O'Hara

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any discussions he has had with John O'Hara regarding his inquiry into Hyponatraemia-related deaths, and to detail the dates of these discussions. (AQW 2160/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I met with John O'Hara on 31 May 2007 to discuss how the Inquiry into Hyponatraemia-related deaths might be progressed.

Mental Health Directorate

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to establish a Mental Health Directorate outside his department and within the remit of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. (AQW 2188/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I do not accept the need to move responsibility for mental health promotion from my Department to a Mental Health Directorate within the

Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, as recommended by the Bamford Review report, “Mental Health Improvement and Well-Being – A Personal, Public and Political Issue”.

Rather, I consider that the structures we currently have in place and which will be put in place to implement that Review, will help to achieve the objective of multi-agency and cross-sectoral co-ordination of activities and that mental health promotion will be central to this work.

Leukaemia

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people diagnosed with leukaemia in each council area; and to outline the number of cases there have been, per 100 people, in each of the last ten years.

(AQW 2255/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The tables below detail the number of incidences of leukaemia (ICD-10 C91-C95) in Northern Ireland overall and by Local Government District for the last ten years available. Table 1: Incidence of leukaemia in NI, 1996-2005

TABLE 1: INCIDENCE OF LEUKAEMIA IN NI, 1996-2005

Year	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Cases diagnosed	150	193	165	148	167	143	178	122	145	164
Crude Incidence rate per 100,000 population	9.0	11.5	9.8	8.8	9.9	8.5	10.5	7.2	8.5	9.5
European age-standardised incidence rate per 100,000 population	8.5	10.9	9.0	8.0	9.0	7.6	9.5	6.6	7.8	8.5

TABLE 2: INCIDENCE OF LEUKAEMIA BY LOCAL GOVERNMENT DISTRICT

Local Government District	Cases diagnosed from 1996-2000	Cases diagnosed from 2001-2005	Mean annual rate per 100,000 from 1996-2000	Mean annual rate per 100,000 from 2001-2005
Antrim	21	19	8.7	7.7
Ards	35	28	9.9	7.5
Armagh	29	21	10.9	7.6
Ballymena	38	20	13.1	6.7
Ballymoney	10	12	7.8	8.6
Banbridge	12	21	6.1	9.7
Belfast	161	142	11.3	10.4
Carrickfergus	16	14	8.7	7.3
Castlereagh	37	41	11.2	12.4
Coleraine	20	21	7.2	7.5
Cookstown	23	12	14.3	7.2
Craigavon	40	39	10.1	9.5
Derry	48	38	9.1	7.1
Down	32	36	10.2	11.0
Dungannon	17	26	7.2	10.6
Fermanagh	28	28	9.9	9.5
Larne	16	12	10.4	7.8
Limavady	13	11	8.1	6.6
Lisburn	50	60	9.2	10.9

Local Government District	Cases diagnosed from 1996-2000	Cases diagnosed from 2001-2005	Mean annual rate per 100,000 from 1996-2000	Mean annual rate per 100,000 from 2001-2005
Magherafelt	18	18	9.3	8.8
Moyle	8	<5	10.3	<5
Newry & Mourne	36	22	8.4	4.9
Newtownabbey	40	33	10.1	8.2
North Down	41	43	10.8	11.1
Omagh	25	19	10.5	7.7

Notes: Due to small numbers when disaggregating by individual LGD, it is necessary to group leukaemia incidence data for five years to protect the anonymity of individuals. For similar reasons, where cells contain less than 5 incidences, they are labelled as "<5".

A small proportion of incidences (0.6%) could not be assigned to LGD.

This information was provided by the NI Cancer Registry and is the most up-to-date available.

Birth Defects

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people diagnosed with birth defects in each council area; and to outline the number of cases there have been, per 100 people, in each of the last ten years.
(AQW 2256/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of people who have been diagnosed with birth defects is not available. However, information is collected by the Chief Medical Officer

on the number of children born each year in Northern Ireland with any of the following congenital malformations; Anencephalus, Hydrocephalus, Spina Bifida and Downs Syndrome. These figures are provided in the table below for the years 1997 to 2005 (the latest year for which information is available) together with the number of cases per 1,000 registered births.

Notifications of Selected Congenital Malformations: Number and Rate per 1,000 Total Registered Births to Mothers Resident in Northern Ireland, 1997 to 2005

Year	Anencephalus No. (Rate)	Hydrocephalus No. (Rate)	Spina-Bifida No. (Rate)	Downs Syndrome No. (Rate)
1997	3 (0.12)	9 (0.37)	9 (0.37)	45 (1.84)
1998	7 (0.29)	10 (0.42)	11 (0.46)	42 (1.75)
1999	5 (0.22)	13 (0.56)	8 (0.35)	27 (1.17)
2000	0 (0.00)	13 (0.60)	9 (0.42)	32 (1.48)
2001	5 (0.23)	11 (0.50)	13 (0.59)	36 (1.63)
2002	6 (0.28)	8 (0.37)	8 (0.37)	34 (1.58)
2003	4 (0.18)	6 (0.28)	12 (0.55)	38 (1.75)
2004	2 (0.09)	7 (0.31)	11 (0.49)	33 (1.47)
2005	1 (0.04)	6 (0.27)	14 (0.62)	25 (1.12)

Source: Core Tables associated with the Report of the Chief Medical Officer, 2006 which are updated annually and available at http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/phealth/cmo_stats.htm

Downs Syndrome

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people diagnosed with Downs Syndrome in each council area; and to outline the number of cases there have been, per 100 people, in each of the last ten years. (AQW 2257/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of people who have been diagnosed with birth defects is not available. However,

information is collected by the Chief Medical Officer on the number of children born each year in Northern Ireland with any of the following congenital malformations; Anencephalus, Hydrocephalus, Spina Bifida and Downs Syndrome. These figures are provided in the table below for the years 1997 to 2005 (the latest year for which information is available) together with the number of cases per 1,000 registered births.

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Source: Core Tables associated with the Report of the Chief Medical Officer, 2006 which are updated annually and available at http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/phealth/cmo_stats.htm

Rape Crisis Centre

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action is being taken to ensure that funding is provided to the Rape Crisis Centre, Belfast, to avoid its closure. (AQW 2258/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) provided funding to the Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre (NI) Ltd (RCASAC) for many years up to October 2006 when funding ceased. The decision to cease funding for any organisation which provides a service to vulnerable people is never taken lightly. However, on this occasion, the Department was left with no other option.

The Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre had long-standing financial difficulties and was constantly in debt. Departmental Officials worked very closely with the organisation, providing significant support to try and help it meet the required standards.

Despite receiving extensive practical and financial support from the Department over many years, the

RCASAC continually failed to meet the necessary government accounting requirements for the receipt of grants. The Department was left with no option, other than cease funding to RCASAC.

As the Department's priority was to ensure that there was no reduction in services, Departmental funding previously given to the RCASAC was re-directed into quality services for victims of rape and sexual violence, through the Health and Social Services Boards.

Funding for Health and Social Services Boards

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide a pro-rata breakdown of funding for each of the Health and Social Services Boards. (AQW 2265/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The split in percentage terms of the total funding to each of the Health and Social Services Boards in the last full financial year and to date in the current one is as follows:

Health Board	Funding issued to Boards in 2006/07	Funding issued to Boards to date in 2007/08
Northern	23.69%	23.80%
Southern	17.88%	18.35%
Eastern	41.46%	40.67%
Western	16.97%	17.18%

Cardiac Defects in Young People

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social by his department in the early detection of cardiac defects in young people, particularly in relation to plans for heart screening, and other measures aimed at tackling sudden cardiac death; and to detail the advice that he is providing, on this issue, to sporting and other organisations which involve young people. (AQW 2311/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Chief Medical Officer has written to the Chair of the UK National Screening Committee (NSC) to ask if they will prioritise a planned policy review on research evidence on screening for hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. The current evidence does not support the introduction of a screening programme.

A Service Framework for Cardiovascular Health and Wellbeing is due to be published for consultation in April 2008 and the Chief Medical Officer has written to Dr David Stewart, Chair of the group, to ensure sudden cardiac death is addressed within the framework and account is taken of the new Chapter 8 covering arrhythmia and sudden cardiac deaths in the Coronary Heart Disease National Service Framework developed for England.

A workshop, led by the Chief Medical Officer in the Department of Health and Social Services and Public Safety, is being organised by my Department to look at research evidence on heart screening and will include leading health experts in cardiology, clinical psychology, genetics, and research academics within this field along with those from the relevant Government Departments, Public Health Bodies, Sports Council, and Voluntary Organisations.

Once the outcome from the workshop and further advice from the NSC is known, I will be able to take forward the appropriate and proper action to protect those most at risk of sudden cardiac death.

Medical Devices Manufactured by Shelhigh Inc.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the medical

devices manufactured by Shelhigh Inc. which (i) have been used in the Northern Ireland health service in the past 10 years; and (ii) are currently in use in each Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 2343/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: (i) The Royal Victoria Hospital is the only Northern Ireland health service hospital that has used Shelhigh medical devices. The two Shelhigh medical devices that have been used in the past 10 years at the hospital are detailed as follows:

	Shelhigh Product	
	No-React Patch	Pulmonary Valved Conduit
December 1997 - March 1998	0	0
April 1998 - March 1999	4	2
April 1999 - March 2000	9	
April 2000 - March 2001	10	
April 2001 - March 2002	17	1
April 2002 - March 2003	16	
April 2003 - March 2004	15	
April 2004 - March 2005	14	
April 2005 - March 2006	5	1
April 2006 - March 2007	9	
April 2007 - December 2007	2	
Total	101	4

(ii) The above products are available to the Royal Victoria Hospital for current use.

Medical Devices Manufactured by Shelhigh Inc.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the United States' Food and Drug Administration notice of 17 April 2007 to seize all medical devices manufactured by Shelhigh Inc., whether or not he intends to review the use of medical devices manufactured by Shelhigh Inc. (AQW 2344/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), the UK regulator for medical devices and pharmaceuticals, together with other relevant European bodies, has investigated the situation regarding the FDA action regarding medical devices manufactured by Shelhigh Inc. and has concluded that there are no significant deficiencies in the Shelhigh Inc. manufacturing

processes which would in any way compromise the safety of patients.

Medical Devices Manufactured by Shelhigh Inc.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not patients who have received an implant manufactured by Shelhigh Inc. are being monitored for infections, and proper device functioning, over the expected lifetime of the device. (AQW 2345/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Royal Victoria Hospital is the only Northern Ireland health service hospital that has used Shelhigh medical devices. Paediatric patients are reviewed initially by the Consultant Cardiac Surgeon and then a Paediatric Consultant Cardiologist is responsible for the ongoing review of the paediatric patient through to and including adulthood. The frequency of this review is dependant on the complexity of the patient's condition and includes an echocardiogram, chest x ray and electrocardiogram as indicated. Parents are advised should the patient experience fever or poor appetite that they should contact Clark Clinic during the initial discharge period or their General Practitioner thereafter.

For patients who have an initial diagnosis during adulthood and for whom it is appropriate to use such a device, they are reviewed initially by the Consultant Cardiac Surgeon prior to being referred back to the referring Consultant Cardiologist for routine outpatient review. The frequency and duration of which is dependant upon the individual patient symptomology.

Fire and Rescue Service Budget Cuts

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that proposed budget cuts for the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service will not have an adverse effect on the proposals for new fire stations in Cushendall and Ballymena. (AQW 2361/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) has indicated that if its allocation detailed in the draft budget is confirmed, it will undoubtedly have an adverse impact on the proposals for the replacement of Fire Stations no longer fit for purpose, including Cushendall and Ballymena Stations.

Bamford Review

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the

implementation of the recommendations of the Bamford review. (AQO 1036/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Boards and Trusts are already planning and developing services in line with Bamford recommendations. However, implementation of the Review requires a Government-wide response and my Department is leading on this work. The response document will be submitted to the Executive for approval early in 2008, once the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review is known, and will then be issued for public consultation.

Inpatient and Outpatient Waiting Lists

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on inpatient and outpatient waiting lists over the last twelve months. (AQO 1011/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Hospital waiting times in Northern Ireland have been transformed in the last 12 months. At the end of March 2006, there were 74,000 people waiting over six months for a first outpatient appointment, and 6,600 patients waiting over six months for inpatient or daycase treatment. By March 2007, only 32 patients were waiting over six months for an outpatient appointment, and one for inpatient or daycase treatment.

I have set a target to reduce these waiting times further, ensuring that, by March 2008, no-one waits longer than 13 weeks for a first outpatient appointment, and 21 weeks for inpatient or daycase treatment. I am confident that both of these targets will be achieved.

Drug Addiction Treatment

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the amount of funding that has been allocated to treat long term drug addiction; (ii) the breakdown by Health and Social Care Trust, in number and percentage terms; (iii) the residential in-patient facilities for treating patients with severe drug addiction and dependency problems that are available and their capacity; and (iv) the Trust areas that have no such facilities. (AQO 1103/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety provides funding for core addiction services to each of the Health & Social Services Boards. These services cover treatment for both alcohol *and* drug addiction and therefore a separate breakdown for drugs alone is not available. In answer to your specific questions

- (i) The total amount of funding provided to the four Health Boards for the treatment of alcohol and drug addiction in the last financial year for which figures are available was £6,141,184.
- (ii) The breakdown by Board in numbers and percentage –

Northern Board	£1,260,148	(20%)
Southern Board	£714,678	(12%)
Eastern Board	£2,746,944	(45%)
Western Board	£1,419,414	(24%)

- (iii) The residential inpatient facilities for treating patients with severe drug addiction and dependency problems, and their current capacity across the five Health & Social Care Trusts is described thus: The residential inpatient facilities for treating patients with severe drug addiction and dependency problems, and their current capacity across the five Health & Social Care Trusts is described thus:

Trust	Beds	Facility
Belfast	10	Shaftesbury Square
South Eastern	14	Downshire (Ward 15)
Western	7	Tyrone & Fermanagh
Southern	10	St. Luke's Armagh
Northern	10	Carrick 1
Total	51	
Additional beds contracted by trusts	8	Northlands
	6	Carlisle House
Total	14	

- (iv) All five Health & Social Care Trust areas have facilities for in-patient/residential addiction treatment

Sleep Apnoea Service

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his plans to provide a sleep apnoea service for the Northern Trust, to serve the patients of Causeway and Antrim Area Hospitals. (AQO 1007/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is for the 4 Health and Social Services Boards to decide what specific services are provided for their populations and how these services are provided.

Whilst a specialised sleep apnoea service is currently not provided within the Northern Trust area,

patients who are thought to suffer from sleep apnoea may be referred to other Trusts for assessment.

Newly Qualified Nurses

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the proportion of those nurses, who completed their training in the last year, who have secured full-time employment in Northern Ireland. (AQO 1033/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: From information provided in September 2007, out of 359 students who graduated from Queen's University Belfast, this year, 316 or 88% have gained employment in Northern Ireland.

At the University of Ulster, 143 students completed their course in September 2007; final destination statistics are not yet available for these students. However from the 150 who successfully graduated in winter 2006, 130 or 87% are known to have employment in Northern Ireland.

Occupational Therapists

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he will take to address the lack of Occupational Therapists; and to detail the impact this is having on adaptations to dwellings, including back logs in carrying out work. (AQO 1110/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department is currently undertaking a Value for Money Audit of Allied Health Professional services, including Occupational Therapy. This audit will examine the demand for Occupational Therapy services and the capacity to meet this demand on a regional basis and will also examine the staffing levels, skill mix, recruitment and selection of Occupational Therapists in Northern Ireland.

Until this audit is complete, it is not possible to confirm that there is a definite lack of Occupational Therapists. When complete, the findings of the audit will help to promote effective integrated working across the primary, secondary and community care sectors and identify ways of improving efficiency and performance, which will help to reduce the waiting list for housing adaptations.

Furthermore, my Department issued a regional access target in relation to Allied Health Professional services, including Occupational Therapy. The new target will comprise maximum waiting times for access to services, assessment and treatment of 26 weeks by March 2008, falling to 13 weeks by March 2009. Health and Social Care Trusts are working on

reform programmes and implementation plans in order to meet these targets and address assessment and waiting times.

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy

Mr Brady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the reasons why there has been no cognitive behaviour therapy service available in the Newry, South Down and South Armagh area; and to outline his plans to ensure that people in these areas have access to this service. (AQO 1032/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There is a general deficit in all mental health services in Northern Ireland. Newry, South Down and South Armagh are not particularly disadvantaged compared to other areas.

There is a range of psychological therapies offered by the consultant clinical psychologist based in Daisy Hill Hospital. Other members of the mental health teams in Newry have had CBT training, and whilst not designated as specialist cognitive behavioural therapists, these staff will have used these skills within the interventions offered to care for and treat patients. A specialist counsellor employed in the Newry and Mourne Area provides a trauma counselling service on a part-time basis, for individuals who have been affected by the conflict in Northern Ireland.

The Bamford Review recommends greater availability of CBT and the Department has commissioned the Northern Ireland Centre for Trauma and Transformation (NICTT) to map existing training in, and provision of, psychological therapies in Northern Ireland. A draft report is expected by the end of November.

Within CSR allocations, we are proposing to allocate £0.4m, £0.4m and £1.9m to developing psychological therapies.

Heating System at the Ulster Hospital Renal Unit

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm the timescale for the installation of an adequate system of heating for the Renal Unit at the Ulster Hospital. (AQO 1005/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The heating system in the Renal Unit is fully adequate and meets all recognised standards for health buildings. The recommended temperature range under NHS guidance for ward areas in Hospitals is 19-23 degrees. The temperatures recorded by the Building Management System in early November 2007 show that the temperature in patient occupied areas was consistently in the range of 21.5 – 24 degrees.

Locally Based Commissioning

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of the potential for locally based commissioning to improve productivity. (AQO 1050/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is imperative that health and social care services deliver the best possible outcome for all the people of Northern Ireland. To this end I am currently considering how health and social care structures can best be developed to support improvements in productivity, efficiency and value for money. My considerations will include an assessment of the benefits of commissioning at different levels and the role that commissioning can play in achieving the improvements I wish to see.

Lurgan Hospital

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the provision of services at Lurgan Hospital. (AQO 1034/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Lurgan Hospital provides day hospital, assessment, rehabilitation, respite and continuing care services for older people, as well as a range of specialist services including a child development clinic, dermatology inpatient and outpatient services, mammography breast screening services, a stroke rehabilitation unit, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech & language therapy.

I have placed a full list of services available at Lurgan Hospital in the Assembly library.

Mental Health Funding

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the funding that will be devoted to mental health issues over the next three years, based upon the draft Budget proposals for his department. (AQO 1017/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Based upon the draft Budget proposals for the DHSSPS, the funding that will be devoted to mental health issues over the next three years, is likely to be as follows :

2008/2009	£2 million
2009/2010	£3.7 million
2010/2011	£9.6 million

Health Service Administrators

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the changes to the number of Health Service administrators over the last decade. (AQO 1047/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I would refer the member to my answer

to Priority Written Question No. 1950 answered on 26 November 2007.

The information requested is mainly statistical in format and is too detailed to read out. A copy of the information has been placed in the library.

The changes to the number of Health Service administrators over the last decade are set out in the tables attached:

TABLE 1. ADMINISTRATIVE AND CLERICAL STAFF BY GRADE (HEADCOUNT), 1998 - 2007

Grade	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	% change 1998 - 2007	% change 2006 - 2007
1 Clerical and Admin	8,408	8,519	8,842	9,060	9,523	9,910	10,406	10,808	10,862	10,657	26.7%	-1.9%
2 Manager	504	500	579	603	669	767	852	921	964	990	96.4%	2.7%
3 Senior Manager	623	652	710	782	861	972	1,111	1,157	1,182	1,153	85.1%	-2.5%
4 Senior Executives	146	142	156	163	167	171	173	189	196	161	10.3%	-17.9%
5 Board Member	52	57	58	60	118	159	162	162	158	82	57.7%	-48.1%
Total	9,733	9,870	10,345	10,668	11,338	11,979	12,704	3,237	13,362	13,043	34.0%	-2.4%

TABLE 2. ADMINISTRATIVE AND CLERICAL STAFF BY GRADE (WTE), 1998 - 2007

Grade	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	% change 1998 - 2007	% change 2006 - 2007
1 Clerical and Admin	7342.21	7452.41	7703.82	7867.99	8230.06	8538.55	8968.80	9214.05	9276.33	9116.04	24.2%	-1.7%
2 Manager	495.35	485.37	561.20	582.95	639.93	736.34	812.60	882.36	919.21	946.70	91.1%	3.0%
3 Senior Manager	616.08	641.57	697.51	764.40	842.88	952.66	1085.88	1130.66	1152.08	1123.05	82.3%	-2.5%
4 Senior Executives	142.50	138.50	152.50	159.45	166.96	170.27	172.17	186.90	194.19	159.50	11.9%	-17.9%
5 Board Member	48.13	50.13	52.50	54.50	115.00	156.00	159.00	159.00	158.00	82.00	70.4%	-48.1%
Total	8644.27	8767.98	9167.53	9429.29	9994.83	10553.82	11198.45	11572.97	11699.81	11427.29	32.2%	-2.3%

Source: Human Resources Management System

Figures are as at 30th September in each year

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Free Public Transport

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will carry out research into the reasons why a large percentage of eligible citizens in rural areas are not using free public transport. (AQW 1781/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I have no plans at present to commission

research on this issue. On the basis of information which it collected, the policy review of the concessionary fares scheme published earlier this year concluded that take up and usage rates are likely to be higher in places where public transport services are more frequent and convenient. In addition, concessionary fares are not available on the subsidized services provided by rural community transport partnerships.

However, should the decision in the draft budget to extend free travel to those aged 60 and over be confirmed, my Department will work with the relevant representative groups to promote the concessionary

fares scheme and to ensure that as many people as possible benefit from this concession.

Rumble Strips

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the timeframe for completion of the new rumble strips for the entrance roads to Ballygowan. (AQW 1844/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that it is aware that the red textured markings on the Saintfield Road, Ballygowan require refurbishment. The road surface under the markings has, however, deteriorated and resurfacing will be required before the markings can be replaced.

As funding for resurfacing is limited, all schemes must compete for priority within the resources available to Roads Service. At present, the resurfacing of this carriageway does not merit a sufficiently high priority, when compared with other schemes, for inclusion in the resurfacing programme.

Your request has been noted and will of course be kept under review, should additional funding become available.

European Union Structural and Cohesion Fund

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the amount of the grant(s) received from the European Union Structural and Cohesion Fund to assist with the infrastructure improvements in both road and railway networks, over the past five years, and (ii) his Department's plans to submit applications within the next two years. (AQW 1878/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Under the authority of the Northern Ireland Community Support Framework, 2000-2006, the Department received European Union Structural Fund grants amounting to some £78.7 million to assist with improvements in road and railway infrastructure.

Northern Ireland did not receive any Cohesion funding during this period.

Under the European Territorial Cooperation objective of the 2007-13 European Union Structural and Cohesion Fund, the Department has been successful in securing some £6.66 million from the INTERREG IVA programme for cross-border road improvements. The Department has also submitted a bid to the Department for Transport for some £7.2

million TENS funding to assist with the A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue road improvement scheme.

Northern Ireland will not receive Cohesion funding during this period.

Rural Water Supply

Mrs McGill asked the Minister for Regional Development to comment on the accessibility of mains water for residents of dispersed rural areas of West Tyrone, and on how his department plans to address the difficulties experienced in accessing mains water. (AQW 1880/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it is required under Article 76 of the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 to provide a requisitioned water main for domestic purposes subject to certain conditions. One of the conditions, set out in Article 77, requires the persons making the requisition to pay the reasonable costs of providing the water main as determined in accordance with Northern Ireland Water's charges scheme.

Under Regulation 7 of the Water and Sewerage Charges Scheme (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007, Northern Ireland Water is empowered to provide an allowance against the cost of complying with a water main requisition and details are set out in the charges scheme.

My Department has provided additional assistance in respect of existing properties constructed before 1 January 2000 to make it more affordable for householders in rural areas to have their properties connected to the mains water supply. This assistance has raised the allowance from £5,000 to £6,500 per property from 1 April 2007. It is my intention that the level of this assistance will be kept under review.

Article 4 Audits

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of Article 4 audits that have been carried out by his department, in relation to European programmes, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1962/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The table below sets out the number of Article 4 checks carried out in the last five years for projects and schemes which received grant funding assisted from the Building Sustainable Prosperity, PEACE II and INTERREG IIIA EU programmes.

ARTICLE 4 CHECKS COMPLETED

Year	Building Sustainable Prosperity			Peace II	Interreg IIIa	Total
	Measure 1.6A Roads	Measure 1.6B Transport	Measure 5.1 Sustainable Management of the Environment & Promotion of the built Heritage (Water)	Measure 1.1D Business Competitiveness	Measure 2.1D Inter-Regional Economic Infrastructure	
2003	1	2	0	3	0	6
2004	1	1	1	6	2	11
2005	3	1	4	1	1	10
2006	0	1	1	0	0	2
2007	0	1	0	0	1	2
Total	5	6	6	10	4	31

Traffic Calming Measures in King Street, Newcastle

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the timescale within which construction will commence in relation to traffic calming measures in King Street, Newcastle.

(AQW 1968/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that construction of the King Street Traffic Calming scheme commenced on 13 August 2007, however, soon after that date, the contractor encountered some resource problems and was unable to complete the work.

I have been assured that work will re-commence imminently and that all works will be completed before Christmas.

New Railway Lines

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to open any new railway lines or railway stops.

(AQW 2006/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: There are no plans at present to open any new railway lines. A new railway stop at Ballymartin is at the early stages of planning, although it will be at least three years before it will be in operation. However my Department has approved work, which is currently underway, to upgrade all stations and halts on the railways network in accordance with Disability Discrimination legislation and Translink's New Rail Vision.

The draft budget and ISNI announcements will allow improvements to the existing railways network in the form of upgrading of infrastructure and the introduction of new trains to enhance frequency and quality of rail services.

Plans for Bypass at Dungiven

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to (i) outline the progress that has been made in relation to plans for a bypass at Dungiven; and (ii) provide a timescale within which work will commence.

(AQW 2026/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that stage one of the three stage assessment process for the Dungiven Bypass is now complete. This included the development of possible single carriageway bypass routes southwest of Dungiven and the appointment of Consultants to develop a strategy for future dualling of the A6 between Castledawson and Derry, including a dual carriageway bypass of Dungiven. The scheme to build 30 km of dual carriageway from Derry to Dungiven was included in the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTN TP) 2015 and announced in December 2005. The Dungiven Bypass routes will be reviewed and integrated into this larger scheme.

The scheme is currently being progressed through the second stage of the assessment process and it is hoped to announce a preferred route for the 30 km long scheme in 2009, with the publishing of an Environmental Statement and draft statutory orders following in 2010. Subject to the successful completion of the statutory orders and the availability of finance at the time, construction should commence within the latter half of the plan period.

New Ikea Store

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his department's plans to introduce special measures to deal with the traffic that

will be created by the opening of the new Ikea store on 13 December 2007. (AQW 2036/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In preparation for the increased traffic expected to be generated by the opening of the new IKEA store, officials in my Department's Roads Service have had a series of meetings with IKEA officials, the PSNI, Harbour Police and other bodies. A number of measures have been identified and will be implemented to assist with the traffic management in and around the store when it opens later this month. These include:

- rationalisation of the carriageway markings near the store;
- provision of additional temporary direction signs near the store;
- PSNI will provide extensive areas of 'no waiting' cones;
- additional temporary overflow parking provision for the initial period of the store being open;
- use of electronic driver information signs during the week of opening;
- provision of additional CCTV traffic camera adjacent to the store; and,
- traffic conditions will be monitored and necessary adjustments made to the electronic information signs and traffic signal timings.

That said, based on experience at other IKEA stores in GB, I understand that there is likely to be a higher than normal volume of traffic in the early period after opening, and because of this, some congestion can be expected.

Colinglen Road, Dunmurry

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 1495/08, to confirm that, as a result of the route improvement study of the A501 in relation to footway provision, the Roads Service will consider this measure for the Colinglen Road. (AQW 2042/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has considered the provision of a footpath on the Colinglen Road, as highlighted in the route improvement study for the A501. A scheme to provide a footpath on this stretch of road would involve the need for accommodation works, purchase of agricultural land and would also affect residential properties. In addition, the topography surrounding Colinglen Road is such that large scale construction of reinforced earth embankments and retaining walls would be required.

Given the scale and cost of the works to provide a footpath on the Colinglen Road and the relatively low volumes of vehicles and pedestrians that use this stretch of road, the scheme did not rank highly on a prioritised list of Minor Works. Roads Service therefore has no plans to progress the scheme.

Bonfires

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the measures his department plans to put in place to prevent bonfires occurring on its property next year. (AQW 2052/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Member will be aware from previous replies on this matter, that under the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993, my Department has the power to remove any bonfire material near or on a public road, which may constitute a danger to road users. However, bonfire management is an inter-agency issue and it is often difficult to find solutions acceptable to the interested parties, when problems arise. The support, co-operation and involvement of local communities is an important factor, as was recognised in the report of the inter-agency group, which produced guidelines on bonfire management. In these circumstances, my Department's Roads Service will continue to take a joint approach with the other agencies in the management of bonfire sites.

Roads Service experience has been that many of the complaints received from the public are related to the stockpiling of materials on sites adjacent to public roads, which are not owned by Roads Service. On occasions where the overspill from bonfire stockpiles obstructs a public road or footway, Roads Service will remove it or arrange for it to be pushed back off the road onto the bonfire site, in consultation with the police and local communities as necessary. However, Roads Service has a duty of care to its staff and the immediate and ongoing safety of personnel tasked with removal work must be taken into consideration, in consultation with the police and other parties.

In the relatively few instances where bonfires are actually brought onto public roads for lighting, Roads Service will arrange for burnt out debris to be removed and will carry out any repairs to carriageways, footways and street lights that may be needed.

Majors Wall, Newtownstewart

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his department's plans to make improvements to the Majors Wall, Moyle Road, Newtownstewart. (AQW 2068/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service is currently considering engineering solutions to rectify the part failure of the Major's Wall, Newtownstewart. Subject to the availability of funding, it is intended that remedial works will commence in 2008/09. In the interim, public safety is being maintained with single lane traffic control.

Hightown Road Bridge

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, in relation to the demolition and reconstruction of the Hightown bridge, to detail (i) the total estimated cost of the project; (ii) the capital sums provided by the contractor, in advance, to finance the programme of work; (iii) the schedule of repayments of this capital by his department to the contractor (including dates, project milestones and sums involved); (iv) an estimate of the profit the contractor will make under this public private funding initiative; and (v) any penalty clauses. (AQW 2071/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that:

- (i) the reconstruction of Hightown Bridge is part of the M2 Widening Scheme which has a total construction cost of £17.5 million (at 2004 prices). It is not possible to provide the disaggregated cost of an individual element such as Hightown Bridge as requested;
- (ii) the M2 Widening Scheme was included in a package of road improvement schemes which also includes the M1 Westlink and the Antrim Hospital Slip Roads. The contract is a form of Public Private Partnership (Design Build Finance Operate) under which the contractor not only designs and constructs schemes but also finances and carries out certain operation and maintenance functions for thirty years under the supervision of Roads Service. The total construction cost of the schemes in the package is £118.5 million (at 2004 prices) and the Net Present Value of the project is £186 million (at 2004 prices). The finance raised is not provided to the Department but is held on account by the DBFO Company;
- (iii) as is typical in this form of Contract, the DBFO Contractor receives a relatively low payment until such time as the assets are opened to public use. The payments are monthly and will increase when all the schemes are completed and opened to the public. These schemes are expected to be completed in 2009. For reasons of commercial confidentiality it is not possible to provide the information requested. Once the schemes have been completed the DBFO Contractor will receive payments until 2036 subject to satisfactory performance of operation and maintenance, less deductions for carriageway unavailability;
- (iv) for reasons of commercial confidentiality it is not possible for the Department to provide the information requested; and
- (v) the DBFO Contractor has financial incentives to finish in advance of the programme. There are contractual mechanisms under which his performance is monitored not only by the Department but also by the lenders.

Rural Water Supply

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to introduce a policy that will allow rural dwellings, without a mains water supply, to receive a supply free of charge; and to make a statement on the equality issues associated with the absence of this supply for rural dwellers.

(AQW 2100/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Under Article 76 of the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 Northern Ireland Water is required to provide a water main to be used for providing supplies of water for domestic purposes. Article 77 requires the persons making the requisition to pay the reasonable costs of providing the water main as determined in accordance with the company's charges scheme.

Regulation 7 of the Water and Sewerage Charges Scheme (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 makes provision for an allowance against the cost of a water main requisition in respect of an existing dwelling. The level of the allowance is set out in the company's charges scheme.

My Department has provided additional assistance in respect of existing properties constructed before 1 January 2000 to make it more affordable for householders in rural areas to have their properties connected to the mains water supply. The level of assistance was increased from £5,000 to £6,500 per property from 1 April 2007 following a consultation on '*Charges for Connections to the Water and Sewerage Networks*' which was carried out in 2006. This increase was implemented as a mitigation of possible differential equality impacts. It is my intention that the level of this assistance will be kept under review taking account of any recommendations made by the Independent Water Review Panel.

Average Speed of Vehicles on the A8(M), Sandyknowes Roundabout

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an estimate of the average speed of traffic on the A8(M) citybound, on the approach to Sandyknowes roundabout, between 8:00am and 9:30am, Monday to Friday.(AQW 2106/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: As part of the monitoring of the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan, my Department's Road Service conducts biennial Journey Time Surveys on the A8, including the A8(M) section between Corrs Corner and Sandyknowes.

These surveys do not provide data useful for determining the average speed over the A8(M) section alone, as they are intended to determine average speeds over longer sections of the A8, e.g. the stretch between the junction with the A57 at Ballynure and Sandyknowes, which is 10.38km long.

However, recently some survey work was carried out to gauge the effects of the closure of Hightown Bridge, Glengormley, on roads in the local area. While this survey, conducted on a single day, did not provide average speeds on the A8(M), it did provide information on how long it took for a vehicle to travel from reaching the back of the queue on the A8(M) to Sandyknowes roundabout. These times are provided below:

Direction of Survey	Time of survey	Time taken to enter Sandyknowes Roundabout from joining the back of queue
A8M to Sandyknowes	07:32	7 min
A8M to Sandyknowes	07:46	19 min
A8M to Sandyknowes	08:14	31 min ¹
A8M to Sandyknowes	08:49	21 min

¹ Traffic flow on A8 (M) was affected by an incident on M2 Citybound carriageway after 8AM on the morning of the survey

Roads Service also has an automatic traffic counting site on the A8(M), which provides information on traffic volume and speed. The counter, however, will only provide an average speed for traffic passing over it. This cannot be used as a proxy for the average speed over the entire road, because no allowance is made for the length of the traffic queue on the approach to Sandyknowes roundabout. Information from this traffic counting site (June 2007) would suggest an average speed of traffic passing over the counter, in the direction of Sandyknowes, of 40.4 mph, between 8.00 am and 9.00am.

I hope this information is helpful.

Repair of Sewers

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 518/08 and in light of recent commitments given by his department, to provide (i) details of any remedial work carried out recently; (ii) confirmation of any dates when further work will be carried out; and (iii) an estimate of the total cost of repairing the sewers at Bramblewood. (AQW 2107/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that no remedial work has yet been undertaken to bring the sewers at Bramblewood up to adoption standard. Northern Ireland Water was considering the use of its contractor to undertake remedial work, subject to the availability of funding, but the developer has now requested that he be given the opportunity to undertake the work. To facilitate this Northern Ireland Water, in association with my Department's Roads Service, has deferred a decision on the commencement of the work by its contractor until the end of January 2008.

The cost of completing the necessary remedial work to improve the sewers to an adoptable standard is estimated at £200,000.

Part-Time Speed Limits

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 1343/08, what plans he has to include Groarty Controlled Primary School in the pilot scheme to introduce part-time speed limits at schools. (AQW 2118/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service advises that Groarty Controlled Integrated Primary School is not included in the pilot scheme to introduce part-time speed limits at schools.

As you will be aware, Groarty Road is very rural in nature and there is very little frontage development. As such, the road does not meet the criteria for the introduction of a lower speed limit. However, Roads Service will keep the speed limit under review and should circumstances change as the area is developed, officials will consult with the PSNI to determine if a lower limit is appropriate.

Meantime, I am pleased to note that new signs and road markings are currently being installed on the approaches to the school, under my Department's "Safe Routes to School" initiative. I trust that these will greatly enhance the safety of those using the school, until it is re-located to the proposed new site.

Castlebawn Bypass, Newtownards

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide the timescale for the commencement and completion of the Castlebawn bypass, Newtownards. (AQW 2130/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, subject to the successful conclusion of tendering procedures and agreement on a mutually acceptable start date with the successful contractor, it is anticipated that work will commence early next year and will take approximately 12 months to complete.

Water Charges for Charities

Mr Cree asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline any proposals to provide relief for charities who are currently exempt from paying rates, but will be subject to water charges upon their introduction. (AQW 2132/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Following the publication of the Independent Water Review Panel's Strand 1 report on 12 October 2007 the Executive made a number of decisions which I announced to the Assembly on 22 October. This included the proposal that existing metered water customers in the non-domestic sector (which includes charities) would continue to pay charges but new charges would be introduced for sewerage customers and unmeasured customers on the basis of 50% in 2008-09 and full charges in 2009-10. At present there are no proposals to provide relief from charges for any group of non-domestic customers.

The Independent Panel is considering the issue of affordability under Strand 2 of its review. Although this is principally focussed on the domestic sector the Executive will be happy to consider any recommendations made by the Panel in respect of other customer groups.

Staff Bonuses

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of non-pensionable bonuses that were paid to staff in his department in each of the last three years, and what steps is he taking to ensure that such bonuses are not used as a cheaper alternative to an appropriate salary increase. (AQW 2146/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The numbers of non-pensionable bonuses paid to staff in the Department for Regional Development in each of the last three completed financial years are set out

below. The figures take into account staff in Core Divisions and Agencies (including Water Service, which transferred to Government-owned Company status on 1 April 2007).

NUMBER OF NON-PENSIONABLE NUMBER OF NON-PENSIONABLE

Financial Year	bonuses paid to non-industrial staff	bonuses paid to industrial staff
2004/05	1,896	0
2005/06	2,424	57
2006/07	1,697	70

There is no question of non-pensionable bonuses being used as an alternative to salary increases. The policy adopted within the Northern Ireland Civil Service is that not all reward should be in the form of consolidated salary increases, and that non-pensionable bonuses, focused on the assessment of in-year performance, should form an integral part of wider pay strategies.

Hightown Road Bridge

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the alternative measures that have been identified to minimise the effects of the proposed closure of the Hightown Road Bridge for up to 12 months from the end of January 2008; and what consideration will he give to opening a third lane on the M2, for the duration of the work, during peak traffic periods. (AQW 2172/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The 50 year old Road Bridge that carries the Hightown Road over the M2 motorway has been assessed as being under strength and needs to be replaced for safety reasons. This work is being undertaken as part of the contract to widen the M2 motorway at this location. As you are aware, the bridge is planned to close in January next year for 12 months to allow for the demolition of the current bridge and construction of a replacement.

I fully appreciate that closing the Hightown Bridge for 12 months will have a significant impact on people living in the Glengormley area. On 13 November 2007, I met with you and a cross party delegation to discuss the closure and a range of possible measures to reduce its impact. I can advise that, in addition to the provision of a signed diversion route and alterations to traffic signals at key junctions on the diversion route that were in place for the initial closure, my Department's Roads Service is presently considering the feasibility of the following additional measures:

- providing a temporary bridge or keeping the existing bridge partially open during the reconstruction;

- reviewing the arrangements for emergency access, including considering the need for emergency ambulance equipment at a temporary location convenient to the Hightown Road;
 - the need for additional buses for school children in the Hightown and Mayfield areas;
 - reducing the one year closure period by considering the possibility of night time working;
 - additional traffic management measures to mitigate delays on the diversion route; and
 - opening 3 lanes on the M2 city-bound to improve traffic flows leaving Sandyknowes roundabout.
- As you are aware, I have agreed to report back to the cross party group on the feasibility of these options early in January 2008.

The current improvement works on the M2 involve widening the Belfast-bound carriageway of the M2 between Sandyknowes and Greencastle to provide a third lane. I should explain that the widening has to be completed before a third lane on this carriageway can be opened over the full length of the road. This is currently programmed for summer 2009. Roads Service will keep the traffic management arrangements under review as the work progresses and if a portion of widened M2 can be opened to help alleviate the approach from Sandyknowes Junction this shall be utilised, provided it does not compromise safety. The original road layout of two lanes as a minimum will be maintained on this carriageway during the works.

The existing country-bound carriageway of the M2 between Sandyknowes and Greencastle has three lanes. A minimum of two lanes will be maintained on this carriageway, with additional road space being provided when ever possible.

Roads Maintenance

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the total amount spent; and (ii) the amount spent per mile, on structural roads maintenance over the last five years. (AQW 2203/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads has advised that the total annual structural maintenance expenditure broken down per mile over the past 5-years is detailed in the table below:

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/081
Structural maintenance expenditure £000's	82,900	73,800	70,500	65,600	59,700
Total route length (miles)	15437	15478	15515	15561	15623

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/081
Expenditure per mile £/mile	5,400	4,800	4,500	4,200	3,800

Anticipated expenditure

Financial figures have been rounded.

Road Signage for Belfast International Airport

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the action he is taking to ensure that road signage in relation to Belfast International Airport is brought up to international standards on all arterial routes leading to the airport. (AQW 2212/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that directional signage, to the International Airport, is provided on all main approach roads in accordance with the requirements of the Traffic Signs Regulations (NI) 1997 and designed in accordance with the Traffic Signs Manual.

I can also advise that in 2008/09, Roads Service is planning to review the existing signage to the International Airport from the A1 at Sprucefield, to make greater use of the M1 Motorway and the A26 Glenavy Road from Moira. I have asked the Divisional Roads Manager, in Roads Service's Eastern Division, to inform you of the outcomes of this review.

Gender Imbalance in Managerial Posts

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 1559/08, what steps he is taking to address the gender imbalance of staff holding senior management posts in each division within his department. (AQW 2222/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Department for Regional Development is fully committed to promoting equality of opportunity in the recruitment and promotion of senior staff. Every effort is made to encourage women to apply for vacancies at all levels within the Department with positive action measures being undertaken particularly in work areas usually regarded as non traditional areas of employment for women. The Northern Ireland Senior Civil Service is managed by the Department of Finance & Personnel who at corporate level undertake outreach and positive action measures to encourage applications from under represented groups including women.

Corporate outreach measures include extensive use of open recruitment to fill senior posts. Recruitment advertisements for senior posts include a statement

welcoming applications from under-represented groups, including females. Appointments are however based on merit.

Across the NICS, as a whole, the number of female staff at Grade 5 and above has steadily increased from just 9.5% in 1997 to 25.4% in 2007. At Grade 7 level, female representation has increased from 20.6% in 2001 to 34.5% in 2007.

Planning Applications

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the reasons for the delay by the Roads Service in considering planning application N55/2006/1230/F in relation to Colin Valley Golf Driving Range. (AQW 2225/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service acts as a consultee of Planning Service, providing advice and recommendations on roads matters associated with development proposals. Planning applications, such as this, have to fit into the workload prevailing at the time and all applications are dealt with in order.

Roads Service often requires additional information to that submitted before making recommendations. In this particular case Roads Service has liaised with the applicant's agents to ensure that all the necessary information and design details to assess the application are made available.

In order to accelerate the consultation process, Roads Service officials have been in direct contact with the schemes design engineer and I expect that, with the cooperation of the applicant and his designers, the matter will be resolved shortly.

M2 Lane Restrictions

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the reasons why the M2 Belfast bound traffic was reduced to one lane, in relation to works involved in bridge strengthening, during the peak period on the morning of 4 December 2007; and to outline what guidance is in place to ensure that two lanes of traffic flow are maintained on this key route during peak periods. (AQW 2384/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service is presently undertaking improvement works on the M2 Motorway, between Sandyknowes and Greencastle junctions. These works involve widening the Belfast-bound carriageway to 3 lanes between these junctions, widening the country-bound carriageway over the Greencastle Interchange and replacing the Longlands, Hightown and Collin Bridges over this section of the M2.

During the period of construction, the contractor, HMC, is required to maintain two lanes in each direction on the M2 between 6 am and 10 pm Monday to Saturday, and from 11 am on Sundays. In order to maintain two lanes on the Belfast-bound carriageway during the current phase of the road works, traffic is running on the existing hard shoulder.

On 4 December, a manhole cover located in the hard shoulder of the Belfast-bound carriageway collapsed without warning. This required a lane to be closed, so that an emergency repair could be carried out. The lane was closed at 9:30 am and following the repair work, it was reopened at 12:00 noon.

As soon as my Department's Roads Service became aware of the collapsed manhole, officials from its Traffic Information and Control Centre immediately publicised the lane closure through the normal channels, including hourly radio bulletins on the BBC and U105, and web-site updates.

I can also confirm that prior to traffic transferring onto the existing hard shoulder of the M2, an inspection of the road condition was undertaken by HMC. As a result of the recent collapse of the manhole cover, a further inspection and any necessary remedial works will be carried out during a planned night time closure of the M2 this weekend.

Penalty Charge Notices

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2041/08, to detail the number of people in Lisburn city 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 2385/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Pursuant to my answer to AQW 2041/08, from 30 October 2006 to 26 November 2007, a total of 830 Penalty Charge Notices have been issued to vehicles "not parked wholly within the markings of the bay/space" in Roads Service car-parks in Lisburn.

A26 Between Glarryford and Coleraine

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the progress being made on the dualling of the A26, between Glarryford and Coleraine. (AQO 1028/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I can advise that my Department's Roads Service is progressing plans for the provision of a 7km stretch of dual carriageway on the A26 between Glarryford crossroads and the junction with the A44 Drones Road.

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. Commencement of the proposed scheme will be subject to timely and successful completion of the necessary statutory procedures, detailed economic appraisal and the availability of funding at the time.

Extension of Fuel Rebate

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to extend the fuel rebate afforded to Translink to other public hire transport, such as the West Belfast Taxi Association. (AQO 1115/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Rebate on the duty paid on fuel is a key support for road operators to help them provide affordable public transport services. I am keen to help ensure that the Fuel Duty Rebate Scheme is open to all eligible Roads Service Operators including West Belfast Taxis. There are however various conditions to be met before allowing an operator on to the Fuel Duty Rebate Scheme. These include a trial operating period before the operator qualifies for grant payment and a system of scrutiny and assessment against a set audit and record keeping standard.

West Belfast Taxi (Transport) LTD has a current Roads Service Operators License awarded by DOE and thus is eligible to apply. Representatives from West Belfast Taxis have met officials from my Department and supplied documentation and proposals which show that they have the potential ability to meet the terms and conditions of the Fuel Duty Rebate scheme. This includes the ability to produce published timetables, proof of purchases from an authorised fuel supplier and various audit conditions including access to their drivers' accounts.

West Belfast Taxis is also currently trying out a new recording system to produce evidence of trips which is one of the important controls for the scheme.

Taking all the factors into account and assuming future positive assessments of their recording systems, it is my intention that West Belfast Taxis enter into a trial operating period early next year with the possibility of it fully entering the scheme from next April.

Train Punctuality

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline what discussions he has had with

Translink relating to improved punctuality for trains. (AQO 1129/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: At my most recent meeting with the Chairman of NITHC on 29 November, which covered a range of issues relating to the performance of NITHC and Translink, we discussed train punctuality. The Chairman updated me on the measures taken by Translink to improve punctuality and to sustain this improvement into the future.

Road Maintenance Expenditure

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his department expenditure, per kilometer, on road maintenance, and the equivalent figures for England and Wales. (AQO 1058/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has confirmed that its spend on structural maintenance during 2006/07 was equivalent to approximately £2,600 per kilometre. This compares to approximately £13,000 and £7,600 per kilometre in England and Wales respectively during 2005/06. These are the latest figures available.

Water and Sewerage Infrastructure

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps Northern Ireland Water is taking to ensure that water and sewerage infrastructure will meet European Union quality and environmental standards by 2014. (AQO 1003/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that in the three-year period up to 2006/07, an unprecedented £629 million was invested on improvements to the water and sewerage infrastructure. Northern Ireland Water's Strategic Business Plan for the period 2007/2010, provides for a further £900 million of investment, including £230 million of Public, Private Partnership funding. This sustained investment will enable Northern Ireland Water to comply with increasingly stringent EU quality and environmental standards, protect public health, enhance services to customers and provide for growth in demand.

Investment in water treatment, storage and mains improvement will increase compliance with EU drinking water standards to 99.77% by 2009 and investment in improvements to wastewater treatment and collection systems (sewers) will also increase compliance with EU wastewater treatment works to 92.4% by 2009.

Northern Ireland Water's post-2010 budget will depend on the outcome of the regulatory periodic review in 2009 and it is difficult to predict the actual

quality and environmental standards that will apply in 2014. Nevertheless, I have been assured by Northern Ireland Water that it aims to match or exceed the performance of similar GB water companies by 2015.

Ulster - Connaught Road Corridor

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on the development of the Ulster - Connaught Road corridor. (AQO 1068/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The A4 from Dungannon to the border at Belcoo/Blacklion is part of the North's Strategic Road Network and has been designated as a Key Transport Corridor in the Regional Development Strategy, referred to as the South Western Corridor. The Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan 2015 (RSTN TP) identifies schemes to develop the South Western Corridor up to the end of 2015.

Works are due to commence early in 2008 on the £102m dualling of 20.5km of the A4 between Dungannon and Ballygawley. This is scheduled for completion by 2010 and will upgrade this portion of the route to high standard dual carriageway with no central reserve crossings and 6 fly-over type junctions. Works on the A4 at Annaghilla are also due to commence in early 2008, with 3.8km of single carriageway realignment at a cost of £16m. This will include an eastbound 2+1 lane that will provide guaranteed overtaking opportunities.

The RSTN TP also includes an improvement scheme at the A4 Henry Street / Sligo Road junction in Enniskillen. This £2m scheme will provide Henry Street with an additional traffic lane on the approach to the junction. The procurement process, for selecting a contractor to undertake the works, is ongoing.

The consultation document 'Expanding the Strategic Road Improvement (SRI) Programme 2015' highlighted additional schemes that were proposed for inclusion within the current programme. These included Bypasses of Enniskillen and Fivemiletown.

Work on the reassessment of the Strategic Road Improvement Programme is at an advanced stage. The outcome, which will take into account the responses to the consultation document, will align with Budget 2008-2011 and the investment envisaged under the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2008-2018. These documents have been published in draft format for consultation with the final outcome expected to be known early next year.

I am aware that the Irish Government is considering an East-West link and I anticipate that discussions will take place at the North/South Ministerial Council in the future.

Roads Maintenance Budget

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development to give his assessment of the proposed budget allocation for roads maintenance, in relation to road safety issues. (AQO 1069/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The safety of the travelling public is, and will always be, the top priority for my Department's Roads Service.

The proposed budget allocation for structural maintenance would allow Roads Service to give priority to the maintenance of the strategic road network, which carries the greatest volume of traffic and would ensure the overall quality of the network is maintained. Other roads, including rural roads, would receive resurfacing treatments as far as the budget allocation permits.

A system of regular safety inspections is in place to ensure that essential response maintenance is identified and completed as necessary.

In addition to the structural maintenance budget Roads Service also allocates funding to other activities, such as, winter gritting and routine maintenance, keeping sightlines and drainage systems clear and maintaining traffic signals, all of which is targeted to improve road safety.

A1 from Loughbrickland to South of Newry

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm that the announcement, in the Draft Investment Strategy 2008-18, of the dualling of the A1 from Loughbrickland to south of Newry, is identical to commitments contained in Investment Strategies already published under direct rule.

(AQO 1067/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I can confirm that the dualling scheme from A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue, south of Newry, was contained within the original Investment Strategy published in 2005. The scheme forms part of Design Build Finance and Operate (DBFO) Package 2 on which advance works have already commenced on site.

The dual carriageway section from Loughbrickland to Beech Hill was opened to traffic in November 2006, and the section from Cloghogue to the Border and on to Dundalk was officially opened on 2 August 2007.

Funding for the City of Derry/Londonderry Airport

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an indicative time for the

proposed funding for the City of Derry/Londonderry Airport. (AQO 1113/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Now that Derry City Council has adopted a programme for reform of the governance of the airport, I hope that a decision will be taken shortly to release grant aid for the runway safety improvement scheme. The offer of grant funding was made jointly by the British and Irish Governments with a pre-condition on governance. Acceptance of the Council's proposals for reform will require the agreement of other Ministers, north and south. I have set this process in train.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Antisocial Behaviour

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of complaints to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive about antisocial behaviour, broken down by district office area, in the last three years. (AQW 1796/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): The number of cases of anti social behaviour reported to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive by district office area, for the last three financial years is as follows:

District Office	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Belfast East	64	72	80
Belfast West	175	170	316
Belfast North	100	102	71
Belfast Shankill	152	21	11
South	56	72	55
Bangor	241	411	204
Newtownards	156	182	147
Castlereagh	35	93	121
Lisburn	364	444	508
Dairyfarm	241	181	84
Downpatrick	91	77	47
Banbridge	70	92	64
Newry	80	352	314
Armagh	65	68	75
Lurgan	90	53	57
Portadown	53	87	63
Dungannon	61	114	73
Fermanagh	432	223	208

District Office	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Ballymena	264	215	307
Antrim	202	256	215
Newtownabbey 1	128	158	79
Newtownabbey 2	112	38	40
Carrickfergus	182	67	60
Larne	83	95	64
Ballycastle	4	7	28
Ballymoney	93	113	106
Coleraine	143	193	153
Waterloo	133	18	26
Waterside	92	140	76
Collon Terrace	272	160	158
Limavady	37	41	45
Magherafelt	54	88	24
Strabane	121	114	93
Omagh	104	88	54
Cookstown	44	27	32
Total	4,594	4,632	4,058

Housing Executive Properties

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of properties owned by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in (i) Larne; (ii) Carrickfergus; and (iii) Newtownabbey. (AQW 1800/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The total number of properties owned by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive at 31 March 2007 in these areas is as follows:

Larne	1,575
Carrickfergus	1,969
Newtownabbey	4,514

Housing Executive Properties

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties allocated in (i) Larne; (ii) Carrickfergus; and (iii) Newtownabbey, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1801/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The following table details the Northern Ireland Housing

Executive and Housing Association allocations within the administrative areas covered by the Housing Executive's Larne, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey District offices.

Year	Annual Allocations*		
	Larne District	Carrickfergus District	Newtownabbey District
March 2003	208	262	418
March 2004	213	236	423
March 2005	180	218	359
March 2006	154	191	289
March 2007	155	166	313

Review of Town Centre Regeneration

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development, in view of the fact that a number of local authorities already have Town Centre Strategies or Action Plans in place, to clarify whether or not the review of Town Centre Regeneration will consider how her Department can financially support the implementation, content and actions of such plans.

(AQW 1816/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The main objective of Town Centre Regeneration is to maximise investment potential and encourage greater use of town centres by attracting more people back to work, shop and socialise in them. In accordance with its good practice guide, *Vital and Viable*, my Department will aid only those projects identified in locally-planned and supported city and town centre strategies, subject to tests and the availability of resources.

The review referred to has been instigated by the Assembly Committee for Social Development which is conducting an Inquiry into Town Centre Regeneration in Northern Ireland. Officials from my Department recently provided the Committee with written and oral evidence. The Committee intends to report to the Assembly on the matter by March 2008.

Review of Town Centre Regeneration

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development to advise whether or not the review of Town Centre Regeneration will ensure that future support and subvention measures are designed and targeted towards supporting town centre competitiveness and business performance, as well as addressing social issues through the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme.

(AQW 1817/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The main objective of Town Centre Regeneration is to maximise investment potential and encourage greater use of town centres by attracting more people back to work, shop and socialise in them. In accordance with its good practice guide, *Vital and Viable*, my Department will aid only those projects identified in locally-planned and supported city and town centre strategies, subject to tests and the availability of resources.

The review referred to has been instigated by the Assembly Committee for Social Development which is conducting an Inquiry into Town Centre Regeneration in Northern Ireland. Officials from my Department recently provided the Committee with written and oral evidence. The Committee intends to report to the Assembly on the matter by March 2008.

Review of Town Centre Regeneration

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm that the review of Town Centre Regeneration will consider current efforts being made by Town Centre Partnerships towards supporting the economic performance of retailers located specifically within town centres.

(AQW 1818/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The main objective of Town Centre Regeneration is to maximise investment potential and encourage greater use of town centres by attracting more people back to work, shop and socialise in them. In accordance with its good practice guide, *Vital and Viable*, my Department will aid only those projects identified in locally-planned and supported city and town centre strategies, subject to tests and the availability of resources.

The review referred to has been instigated by the Assembly Committee for Social Development which is conducting an Inquiry into Town Centre Regeneration in Northern Ireland. Officials from my Department recently provided the Committee with written and oral evidence. The Committee intends to report to the Assembly on the matter by March 2008.

Benefit Fraud

Mr Donaldson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail how much money has been fraudulently claimed in Social Security Benefits in Northern Ireland, in each of the past five years; and how many claimants have been convicted of fraud in each of those years.

(AQW 1841/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out in the attached tables. Table 1 shows the estimated cost, since 2002/2003, of

fraud in benefits administered by the Social Security Agency. Table 2 shows the estimated cost of Housing Benefit fraud. Costs are also expressed as a percentage of the relevant benefit expenditure. Table 3 shows the total number of people who have been convicted of fraud in Northern Ireland in each of the last 5 years. The data quoted in Tables 1 and 2 was produced on a financial year basis until 2004/2005. The survey period moved to a calendar year from 2005.

**TABLE 1 - SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS (SSA):
ESTIMATED COST OF BENEFIT FRAUD**

Year	Estimated Benefit Fraud (m)	Benefit Expenditure (m)	% of Benefit Expenditure lost
2002-03	£34.5	£3347	1.03
2003-04	£38.8	£3179	1.22
2004-05	£28.8	£3320	0.87
2005	£28.6	£3406	0.84
2006	£18.1	£3501	0.5

**TABLE 2 - HOUSING BENEFIT:
ESTIMATED COST OF BENEFIT FRAUD**

Year	Estimated Benefit Fraud (m)	Benefit Expenditure (m)	% of Benefit Expenditure lost
2002-03	£6.7	£352.6	2.2
2003-04	£0.0*	£365.0	0.0
2004-05	£2.3	£392.2	0.6
2005	£4.0	£403.0	1.0
2006	£3.3	£438.9	0.8

* In this year while error was detected none was attributable to fraud.

TABLE 3 - THE TOTAL NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN CONVICTED OF FRAUD IN NORTHERN IRELAND IN EACH OF THE LAST 5 YEARS IS:

Year	Number
2002-03	310
2003-04	234
2004-05	235
2005-06	234
2006-07	292

Housing Executive Grants Budget

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development if, in view of the proposed cuts in the Housing Executive grants budget for 2008/2009, she can provide reassurance that the scheme planned for the Ard Cairn area of Newry will go ahead. (AQW 1881/08)

The Minister for Social Development: There are two schemes for Ardcarne Park, Newry but as the properties involved are in Housing Executive ownership they are not funded by grants.

The first scheme involves the replacement of kitchens in 37 homes and is currently programmed for March 2009. This will be funded through revenue expenditure and the timescale should not therefore be affected.

The second scheme involves capital environmental improvements such as road works and car parking. This is also currently programmed for April 2009. Since the capital funding allocation falls significantly short of what is needed, all capital programmes are at risk.

Social Housing Projects

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to list the location, number of units and the Housing Association providing all new social housing projects that the Northern Ireland Housing executive are presently aware of in (i) Newtownards; (ii) Comber; (iii) Ballygowan; (iv) Saintfield; (v) Killyleagh; (vi) Killinchy; and (vii) Moneyreagh.

(AQW 1884/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I have placed the requested information in the Assembly Library.

Jobs and Benefits Office, Newtownards

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development what sites in Newtownards are being considered for the proposed new Jobs and Benefits office.

(AQW 1885/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Social Security Agency remains committed to the roll-out of a Jobs and Benefits service in Newtownards to ensure that clients benefit from the same enhanced work focused service which is available elsewhere in Northern Ireland. Two sites, the existing Social Security Office at East Street, Newtownards and a site within the Castlebawn development are currently being considered. 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 Newtownards office will provide a Jobs and Benefits service only or if it will also include a (back-office) benefits processing centre. This will also impact on decisions around the location of the office.

Integrated Development Funding Bodies

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the safeguards her department has put in place to ensure that there are no conflicts of interest, whether real or perceived, in her department's funding of integrated development funding bodies.

(AQW 1918/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Ilex was given the responsibility for marshalling and overseeing a package of bids for the North West area under Integrated Development Funding. My Department and OFMDFM as the sponsor Departments for Ilex monitor governance issues on a regular basis. Ilex under their Management Statement and Financial Memorandum must ensure that a Code of Practice for Board Members is in place. This commits the Chairman and other Board Members to the Nolan seven principles of public life, and includes a requirement for a comprehensive and publicly available register of Board Members' interests. Ilex board members are asked to declare conflicts of interest at each monthly board meeting. Northern Ireland Audit Office recommendations on Good Governance - Effective Relationships between Departments and their Arm's Length Bodies is being applied.

Integrated Development Fund

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development if he will initiate a review of the Integrated Development Fund's delivery mechanism, given that there were no project bids for the fund.

(AQW 1919/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department is administering grant from the Integrated Development Fund through the North West Development Office, Regional Development Office and Belfast Regeneration Office for project bids of over £21.7 million. Further project bids of over £21.5 million are at present being developed or are going through the approvals process. There are currently no plans to carry out a formal review of the delivery mechanism.

Conflicts of Interest

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the safeguards her department has put in place to ensure that conflicts of interest, perceived or otherwise, are risk managed in the delivery of funding.

(AQW 1920/08)

The Minister for Social Development: All Civil Servants are required to declare any conflicts of

interest arising in relation to their duties. Also as part of my Department's Governance arrangements a register of interests of Departmental Management Board Members is held and reviewed regularly. In addition, Board Members are required to provide the secretariat of the Board with details of any potential new interests, which would include those relating to funding to be included in the register as and when they should arise. Similar arrangements exist with our Department's Non- Departmental Public Bodies which are also required to maintain an up-to-date register of interests.

Pension Credit Advisers

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of pension credit advisers employed by social security offices in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1952/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The number of Pension Advisers employed by the Social Security Agency in the last five years is detailed in the table below.

2003/04	35 (commencing October 2003)
2004/05	35
2005/06	35
2006/07	35
2007/08	35 reduced to 20 from 1 October 2007

In addition to the complement of 35, a further 11 Pension Advisers were employed during the period 1 February 2004 to 31 July 2005 as a short-term measure to meet urgent business needs in improving Pension Credit performance.

Social Security Advisers

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of advisers in social security offices that (i) are currently employed; and (ii) have been employed in each of the last five years, to provide advice on benefits to potential claimants under the age of 60.

(AQW 1953/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information is not available in the format requested as Social Security Offices/Jobs & Benefits offices do not have dedicated information and advice staff. However, all frontline/processing staff provide information and advice on the benefits administered directly from these offices; Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance and Social Fund. In addition they also provide general information and advice about a range of other social

security benefits to both existing and potential customers regardless of age. The number of frontline/processing staff working in Social Security Offices/ Jobs & Benefits offices currently and in each of the last five years is shown in the table below.

Year	No. of Frontline/Processing Staff in Social Security/ Jobs & Benefits Offices
Current	1402
2006	1506
2005	1645
2004	1539
2003	1694
2002	1874

Article 4 Audits

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Article 4 audits that have been carried out by her department, in relation to European programmes, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1963/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The table below shows the number of Article 4 audits carried out by the Department within the timescales requested:

Year	Total
2003	5
2004	22
2005	12
2006	43
2007	20
Total	102

Advertising Expenditure

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the amount spent by her Department on advertising in each of the last five years. (AQW 1965/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The following amounts were spent on advertising in the last four years:

2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007
£107,793	£98,766	£99,354	£172,466

Figures for 2002/2003 have not been recorded in this format and could only be provided at a disproportionate cost.

The figures provided are compiled using the total media spend for all forms of advertising.

Christmas Benefit Bonus

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to increase the Christmas bonus of £10 to qualifying benefit recipients.

(AQW 1981/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The amount of the Christmas bonus has remained unchanged since it was introduced in 1972. Social security benefits are paid at the same rates in Britain and Northern Ireland, and it is estimated that to restore the value of the Christmas bonus to its original level would cost well in excess of £1bn per year. Successive administrations have taken the view that the available resources could be better used in other ways. For example, the majority of those receiving the Christmas bonus are pensioners, and a range of measures have been introduced to secure their incomes levels including Pension Credit which ensures that no pensioner has to get by on less than £119.05 per week (£181.70 for a couple) and the Winter Fuel Payment (currently £200 or £300 for over age 80).

The Pensions Bill currently before the Assembly proposes measures to improve the coverage and generosity of basic State Pension by providing for it to be uprated annually in line with earnings and by making it easier to qualify for a full basic pension. The measures in the Bill are expected to increase spending on pensioner benefits in Northern Ireland to £4.6bn per year by 2020. There are currently therefore no plans to increase the Christmas bonus.

Gambling Laws

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1588/08, what consideration she will give to undertaking an urgent review of the gambling laws. (AQW 2045/08)

The Minister for Social Development: While there are no plans at present for a wider review of the gambling laws, I am currently considering the policy issues surrounding betting and gaming and will be setting out how I wish to proceed shortly. Any future consideration of the need for a wider review would be fully explored with the Social Development Committee and the Executive.

Disability Living Allowance and Incapacity Benefit Appeals

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1515/08, to explain her department's policy in determining whether or not a person is entitled to an appeals hearing either in, or near, their home. (AQW 2047/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Entitlement to an appeal hearing in a customer's home is determinant on the customer being totally housebound and unable to attend doctor or hospital appointments. The suitability of the customer's home to accommodate a full Tribunal Hearing must also be considered.

A hearing nearer to a customer's home will be facilitated where there are accepted medical reasons why the person cannot travel to the designated venue and remain for the duration of the hearing.

Incapacity Benefit and Disabled Living Allowance Appeals

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answers to AQW 1517/08 and AQW 1545/08, to detail her reasons for requiring Incapacity Benefit and Disabled Living Allowance appeals, by people living in the Strangford constituency, to be heard in Belfast; and to provide her assessment of the impact of this new arrangement on those who already have health problems. (AQW 2072/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I would refer the Honourable Member for Strangford to the replies I gave in AQW 1515/08 and AQW 1516/08 on 18 November 2007

Disabled Living Allowance and Incapacity Benefit Appeals

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to attendance at Disabled Living Allowance and Incapacity Benefit appeals' hearings in Belfast, to detail the arrangements for, and amounts payable, in relation to (i) compensation for loss of earnings of carers accompanying the appellant; and (ii) reimbursement of travel costs, including parking. (AQW 2073/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The arrangements for compensation for loss of earnings of carers accompanying an appellant to an appeal hearing are that evidence of loss of employed earnings must be provided in the form of a detailed letter from the employer. A statement from a self-employed carer

to the effect that they have lost money by being absent from their business will normally be accepted.

Current rates of compensation are £31.00 for up to 4 hours loss of earnings and £60.50 for loss of earnings of 4 hours or more.

Travel costs, including parking, can be claimed and reimbursed on provision of proof of expenditure incurred. Travel to a Tribunal Venue by private motor vehicle is reimbursed at a set rate of 12p per mile.

Bookmakers' Opening Hours

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her plans to introduce legislation that will allow bookmakers' offices to open seven days per week. (AQW 2182/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I am at present carefully considering the arguments for and against a change in the law to allow bookmaking offices to open for business seven days per week, other than Christmas Day and Good Friday. I intend to seek the views of the Social Development Committee before taking a decision on the way forward.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the total amount paid out by her department in winter fuel payments in each of the last five years. (AQW 2196/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Expenditure on Winter Fuel payments was as follows:

Financial Year	Expenditure
2002/2003	£42.6m
2003/2004	£48.1m
2004/2005	£49.9m
2005/2006	£50.2m
2006/2007	£50.6m

Fuel Poverty

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail what additional action she plans to take to tackle fuel poverty. (AQW 2239/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Much has been achieved on alleviating fuel poverty, 97% of properties in Northern Ireland now have some form of central heating. Research published by my Department last month in its report 'Fuel Poverty, Climate and Mortality', also indicated a considerable drop in deaths

linked to cold in recent years. I remain committed to alleviating fuel poverty in Northern Ireland and will find ways to ensure that whatever funding is available continues to help those in greatest need. 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.

Public Housing Units

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of public housing units constructed within the last five years in (a) Monkstown, Ballyduff, Rathfern and New Mossley; (b) Greenisland, Carrickfergus and Whitehead; and (c) Larne and Islandmagee; and (ii) the number of public housing units to be constructed in these areas in the next five years. (AQW 2285/08)

The Minister for Social Development:

- (i) the information requested is contained in the following table:

Year	Housing Association	Scheme	Units
2002/03	Fold	Eden Orlits Ph1 Carrickfergus	30
2003/04	Fold	Eden Orlits Ph2 Carrickfergus	31
	Homeless provision by NIHE	Marine Court, Carrickfergus	25
2004/05	Homeless provision by NIHE	Marine Court, Carrickfergus	5
	Trinity	Bridewell, Carrickfergus	12
	Trinity	Hawthorne Grove, Carrickfergus	2
	Trinity	Gardenmore Place, Larne	14
	Triangle	Carn Way, New Mossley	5
2005/06	Fold	Barn Halt Cottages, Carrickfergus	26
2006/07	BIH	1-3 Victoria Street, Carrickfergus	5

- (ii) Provision has been made in the current 5 year Social Housing Development Programme for the following schemes:

- 20 units for the elderly in 2011/12 at Cashel Drive and Devenish Road Monkstown
- 22 units in 2007/08 at Green Walk, in the Rathcoole/Rushpark/Rathfern area of Newtownabbey
- 18 units in 2010/11 at Rathcoole Gardens, Rathcoole.

No schemes are currently programmed for New Mossley over the next five years. The position will be reviewed annually.

Three general needs schemes containing a total of 34 units are currently programmed for Carrickfergus over the next five years.

No schemes are currently programmed for Whitehead and Larne. Should sites become available additional schemes will be added to the later years of the programme provided sufficient funding is available.

Should sites become available in the Rathcoole/Rushpark/Rathfern area, Carrickfergus Whitehead or Larne additional schemes will be added to the later years of the programme, provided sufficient funding is available.

Housing Executive Development Programme

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to encourage the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to earmark sites in Monkstown as suitable locations for dwellings to enable senior citizens to remain within that community and release current housing stock so as to reduce the waiting list. (AQW 2291/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Two schemes for the elderly at Cashel Drive and Devenish Road are included in the current development programme for 2011/12. The Housing Executive is also investigating the potential for developing sites within New Mossley and Monkstown estates, but these sites will be subject to PPS8 Planning Policy.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister for Social Development to give her assessment of the functions of her department that will be transferred to local government under current proposals on the Review of Public Administration. (AQO 1088/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Under the current RPA proposals, my Department will transfer

delivery of urban regeneration and local community development functions to local government. This amounts to almost three quarters of what is transferring to local government and carries a sizeable budget. Furthermore, these functions will contribute significantly to the development and implementation of the community planning process, playing a central role in fulfilling the shared vision for strong local government.

Shared Future Housing Schemes

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an update on the introduction of shared future housing schemes. (AQO 1072/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The residents of the first Shared Future social housing project at Carran Crescent in Enniskillen have settled in and are developing a Shared Neighbourhood Programme and I intend to visit this project in the near future.

The second scheme will be located in Loughbrickland on land currently owned by the Housing Executive and Ulidia Housing Association is progressing design options. The scheme is currently programmed to go on site in 2008/09.

Two further potential sites have been identified in Banbridge and Magherafelt and further opportunities will continue to be explored.

Social Housing

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the system used for the registration of potential social housing opportunities on behalf of Housing Associations, including the criteria that is applied; and to confirm whether or not land can be registered for social housing without the agreement of developers or owners of the site. (AQO 1006/08)

The Minister for Social Development: In order to progress a potential social housing opportunity a Housing Association must first register the site with the Housing Executive. To do so, it must have prior confirmation from the Housing Executive's Area Planner that there is a specific housing need in the area and provide a timetable for development. It is a requirement of registration that the Housing Association must have the agreement of the vendor and is required to certify to that effect. A second request for registration of the same site would not be permitted unless for whatever reason the first registration was withdrawn. This system prevents Associations competing against each other for the same site.

Social Housing

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to address the chronic social housing shortage in North Lurgan. (AQO 1136/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The current five year Social Housing Development Programme makes provision for five schemes totalling 66 units in North Lurgan. The programme is in the process of being rolled forward and the new five year Development Programme will issue in January 2008.

Homelessness

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Social Development to give her assessment of the provisions of the draft Budget in relation to addressing homelessness. (AQO 1080/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department faces a shortfall in funding for the Social Housing Development Programme over the next three years under the proposed allocations in the draft Investment Strategy. Existing commitments carried forward to next year could mean the proposed capital allocations may not allow for any new starts next year. The fact is that the aspiration of providing up to 10,000 new homes over the next five years cannot be delivered within the proposed allocation. This could lead to significant increases in the number of people accepted as homeless on the waiting list.

As I have often said I need the support of my Ministerial colleagues to ensure a sufficient budget is provided to tackle the scourge of homelessness. I for my part will be addressing the question of additional land sales but I must have a guarantee of retention of these receipts for the Housing Budget from the Minister for Finance and Personnel.

Sale of Potential Housing Development Sites

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail how many potential housing development sites have been sold by NIHE in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area, in the last five years. (AQO 1082/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has sold no sites in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area in the last five years, however one at Oakfield Drive has just been placed on the market for sale.

Meetings with Private Developers

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development to report on any meetings held with private developers in relation to land owned by the department in the West Belfast constituency, in the last twelve months. (AQO 1140/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Since taking up appointment as Minister for Social Development, I have had one meeting with a private sector developer in relation to their interest in redeveloping the site of the former Andersonstown Barracks in West Belfast.

My officials in Belfast City Centre Regeneration Directorate and the Belfast Regeneration Office together with colleagues in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive meet regularly with private sector developers, property developers and representatives of development companies in respect of land owned by the Department and privately owned land scheduled for development in the line of their everyday work.

Co-Ownership Housing

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Social Development for an assessment of how the Executive's draft budget will provide the resources to meet the demand for co-ownership housing. (AQO 1084/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I have already highlighted to the Social Development Committee the very significant shortfall in capital funding over the next 3 years. The draft budget creates a huge deficit across all Housing areas and some hard choices will have to be made on how best to use the money available.

Social Security Agency Workforce

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development what is her assessment of the impact on the delivery of services by her Department in relation to proposals to make 40% cuts to the current workforce in the Social Security Agency. (AQO 1145/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Social Security Agency does not have to make cuts of 40% to the current workforce. This figure was based on the headcount reductions required by Budget 2004 of 13 % coupled with an initial response to Budget 2007 equating to a further 27% reduction. However indications are that the Agency will be able to reduce the impact in the current budget to around 14% as a result of indicative allocations.

The Agency faces a very challenging period but is committed to maintaining the quality of its frontline

services and driving out efficiencies that will not detriment its customers.

Enterprise Park at Pomeroy

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Social Development to provide details of the proposed development of an Enterprise Park at Pomeroy, led by Pomeroy Community Developments. (AQO 1078/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The proposed Enterprise Park at Pomeroy is the Core Project of a CRISP scheme. The park will provide over 13,000 square feet of workspace on a site being purchased from the Forest Service. With a total cost of approximately £1.2 million, it is being funded by DSD, IFI, DETI and Pomeroy Development Projects Ltd. My Department has recently issued its Contract for Funding and it is hoped that the development will be under way early in the new year.

Economy 7 Tariff

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development for her views on the 14% increase in the Economy 7 tariff recently imposed by NIE. (AQO 1089/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I am very disappointed at the recent price increase announced by Northern Ireland Electricity. This will affect around 5% of households who use Economy 7 as their main form of heating. I recently met Northern Ireland Electricity and urged them to do more to minimise the impact of this increase on the fuel poor.

Social Housing

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development to outline her plans to make available land owned by her department for the purpose of social housing, or affordable housing, developments. (AQO 1079/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The issue of the disposal of surplus land is under consideration and no decisions have been made at this stage. As you will be aware from previous statements that I have made, I have commissioned a review to see how my Department can maximise the value of existing land we hold, how to ensure the receipts from our sold assets go back into housing and generally how to provide for future needs. The Review will also explore how to maximise opportunities for private sector developers to plan, deliver and fund projects for housing and regeneration and how a more holistic approach to planning can be achieved.

Markets Development Association

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the level of funding allocated to the Markets Development Association for each of the last three years. (AQO 1024/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Over the past three years the Belfast Regeneration Office has funded the posts of Community Development Officer and Administrator/Development Support Worker in the Markets Development Association through its Neighbourhood Renewal (NR) and Making Belfast Work (MBW) programmes. In the financial year 2004/2005 this totalled £27,978.75, in the financial year 2005/2006 it totalled £44,700.44, and in the financial year 2006/2007 funding of £46,025.54 was provided.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Paper Used in the Assembly

Mr W Clarke asked the Assembly Commission to detail the amount of paper that has been used in the running of the Assembly since the restoration of devolution on 8 May 2007. (AQW 1797/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): Since 8 May 2007 the amount of paper which has been used in the running of the Assembly is as follows :

- 7,525 Reams of white plain paper
- 370 Reams of Assembly crested and continuation cream coloured paper
- 2,546 Reams on Assembly publications such as the Official Report, Written Answers Booklet, Committee reports, draft Equality Scheme.
- 56 ad hoc jobs such as passes, business cards, Christmas cards, Speaker's invitation cards, education programme materials. Figures are not available for the quantity of paper used.

There are 500 A4 sized sheets per ream of paper.

You may be interested to know that the contract for Printing, Publishing and Related Services expires in March 2009 and that a root and branch review of printing requirements will be carried out early next year to inform the tender specification.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 14 December 2007

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Response to Correspondence

Mrs I Robinson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the longest period of time it 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 1605/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley and Mr M McGuinness): In the period since March 2007, during preparations for devolution and following the restoration of institutions, the longest period of time it has taken for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide a full response to a letter received is set out below;

- a Member of Parliament, 43 working days;
- a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly, 60 working days;
- a Councillor, 61 working days; and
- a member of the public, 66 working days.

The period of days is calculated from the date the letter was received by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to the date when a final response was issued.

Freedom of Information Requests

Mr G Robinson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the cost to the department of dealing with Freedom of Information requests, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1666/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The right to request information under the Freedom of

Information (FOI) Act 2000 came into effect on 1 January 2005. The information requested is not currently held.

EU Directives

Mr Storey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to the answers to AQW 624/08, AQW 626/08 and AQW 631/08, for its assessment of whether or not the degree of flexibility available to (i) member states; and (ii) devolved assemblies, allows for any changes to be made to proposals included in public consultations on European Union directives. (AQW 1826/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The basic principle for implementing EU Directives is that effect must be given to what they require. Sometimes the Directive will expressly, or by implication, leave a margin of discretion to Member States for legislation matters within their competence. In other cases it will be apparent that a uniform result is intended and there is very little scope for discretion.

A public consultation alerts interested parties to proposals for implementing EU Directives. It also provides interested parties with an opportunity to express an opinion on the implementation of a Directive and consultation responses can be taken into account when policy decisions are being finalised, within the margins permissible in the Directive.

UN Climate Change Conference

Mr B Wilson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in the light of the recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change, in which experts have declared climate change as unequivocal and stated that it may bring abrupt and irreversible impacts on the world community, to advise whether or not the First and deputy First Minister will attend the UN global climate talks in Bali in December 2007. (AQW 1846/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We do not intend to travel to the UN Climate Change Conference.

Community Relations Council

Mr Moutray asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the amount of (i) core; and (ii) project, funding awarded by the Community Relations Council in each of the last five years. (AQW 2244/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The Community Relations Council awards core and project funding from monies provided by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and by the European Union's Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (Peace II). The detail of the funding awarded from these sources is shown below.

- (i) In each of the last five years the Community Relations Council has awarded the following core funding:

(A) COMMUNITY RELATIONS CORE FUNDING

Community Relations Core Funding				
2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
£1,315,835	£1,250,289	£1,318,109	£1,330,446	£1,391,000

(B) VICTIMS/SURVIVORS CORE FUNDING

Core Funding for Victims and Survivors				
2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
£334,313	£1,059,653	£1,813,195	£1,933,673	£2,057,733

(A) PROJECT FUNDING FOR COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Project Funding for Community Relations				
2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
£638,246	£785,314	£781,246	£745,702	£810,571

(B) PROJECT FUNDING FOR VICTIMS/SURVIVORS

Project Funding for Victims/Survivors				
2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
£43,275	£340,645	£614,372	£653,807	£866,554

(C) PROJECT FUNDING UNDER PEACE II

Project Funding under Peace II				
2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
£7,896,409	£8,747,089	£9,017,407	£9,239,876	£6,551,399

The information provided above excludes funding awarded by the Community Relations Council under the International Fund for Ireland's Community Bridges Programme.

Freedom of Information Act

Mr Durkan asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to the review of the Freedom of Information Act, announced by the First Minister in the Assembly on 8 October 2007, to detail (i) what work has been carried out to date on

this review; (ii) a timescale within which it will be concluded; and (iii) whether or not this report will be published. (AQW 2376/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The First Minister did not announce a review into FoI

The Executive has not, to date, held any discussions on reviewing the operation of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. However, OFMDFM officials monitor each government department's compliance with the legislation on an on-going basis, and report regularly to Ministers. They also liaise regularly with officials from the Ministry of Justice on common issues concerning FOI policy and procedures. In addition, quarterly meetings are held with representatives from the Office of the Information Commissioner to discuss general issues arising from FOI complaints.

Freedom of Information Act

Mr Durkan asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the number of occasions that the Executive has discussed the review of the Freedom of Information Act, since the announcement of this review by the First Minister in the Assembly on 8 October 2007. (AQW 2377/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The First Minister did not announce a review into FoI.

The Executive has not, to date, held any discussions on reviewing the operation of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. However, OFMDFM officials monitor each government department's compliance with the legislation on an on-going basis, and report regularly to Ministers. They also liaise regularly with officials from the Ministry of Justice on common issues concerning FOI policy and procedures. In addition, quarterly meetings are held with representatives from the Office of the Information Commissioner to discuss general issues arising from FOI complaints.

Freedom of Information Act

Mr Durkan asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussion the review team has had with the Office of the Information Commissioner, in carrying out the review of the Freedom of Information Act, announced by the First Minister in the Assembly on 8 October 2007. (AQW 2379/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The First Minister did not announce a review into FoI

The Executive has not, to date, held any discussions on reviewing the operation of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. However, OFMDFM officials monitor each

government department's compliance with the legislation on an on-going basis, and report regularly to Ministers. They also liaise regularly with officials from the Ministry of Justice on common issues concerning FOI policy and procedures. In addition, quarterly meetings are held with representatives from the Office of the Information Commissioner to discuss general issues arising from FOI complaints.

Freedom of Information Requests

Mr Durkan asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the number of Freedom of Information requests refused by each government department, since 1 January 2005, on the grounds of (i) vexatiousness or repetition; (ii) excessive cost; and (iii) statutory exemption. (AQW 2380/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The table below sets out the number of Freedom of Information requests refused by each government department, on the grounds of (i) vexatiousness or repetition; (ii) excessive cost; and (iii) statutory exemption. Figures provided are for requests received between 1 January 2005 and 30 September 2007 and include requests made under the Environmental Information Regulations 2004.

For cases where statutory exemptions applied, these requests have been divided into those which were refused in full and those where some information was disclosed. The total number of requests received by each department has also been included. Only 7 per cent of requests received by departments have been refused in full.

Freedom of Information Act

Mr Durkan asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions they have had with the Ministry of Justice, as part of the review of the Freedom of Information Act, announced by the First Minister in the Assembly on 8 October 2007.

(AQW 2382/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The First Minister did not announce a review into FoI.

The Executive has not, to date, held any discussions on reviewing the operation of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. However, OFMDFM officials monitor each government department's compliance with the legislation on an on-going basis, and report regularly to Ministers. They also liaise regularly with officials from the Ministry of Justice on common issues concerning FOI policy and procedures. In addition, quarterly meetings are held with representatives from the Office of the Information Commissioner to discuss general issues arising from FOI complaints.

Ministerial Statement on 'Outlining a Vision for our Education system'

Mr B McCrea asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail when, and how, it was first notified of the Ministerial Statement, 'Outlining a Vision for our Education system'; and to confirm whether or not either the First Minister or deputy First Minister had discussions with the Minister of Education on the subject matter of the statement before it was issued.

(AQW 2419/08)

Department	Total number of requests received	i. Vexatiousness or repetition	ii. Excessive cost	iii. Statutory exemption	
				a) Information fully exempt	b) Information partially exempt
DARD	639	2	0	88	122
DCAL (inc PRONI)	1436	0	1	17	75
DE	411	0	4	17	40
DEL	292	0	0	12	52
DETI	262	1	3	26	30
DFP	990	3	1	101	139
DHSSPS	373	0	0	28	32
DOE	2894	0	11	167	598
DRD	881	19	0	56	40
DSD	466	0	1	26	45
OFMDFM	285	0	0	4	24

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The intention of the Minister of Education to make a statement to the Assembly on the education system was notified to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister at official level on the afternoon of Monday 3 December. This information was subsequently conveyed to us at the time of visiting the United States.

While the deputy First Minister and the Education Minister had discussed the statement on the education system in a party political context, we can confirm that neither of us had ministerial discussions with the Minister of Education about this statement before it was issued.

Junior Ministers

Ms S Ramsey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the work of the junior Ministers in the last 3 months with specific reference to meeting groups which advocate for children and young people. (AQO 1251/08)

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 a number of individual voluntary sector organisations that advocate for children and young people. In addition, the Junior Ministers met 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 are driving forward children's issues and will be bringing children-related PSA targets to the Executive early in the New Year. They are also taking the lead in reviewing and revising as necessary the 10-year strategy for children and young people. All Departments will be involved in setting special targets over the next three years which will be published in a revised children and young people's action plan which will be approved by the Junior Ministers.

Severe Child Poverty

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide a precise definition of the term "severe child poverty" in relation to the target contained in the PSA document. (AQO 1191/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The PSA target which the Member refers to in relation to child poverty is one of a number of targets which an

anti-poverty strategy, once agreed by the Executive, will aim to achieve.

A range of poverty measures will be considered by the Executive in this context in order to monitor change in child poverty including:

- relative income poverty;
- a mixed measure, combining material deprivation and low income which provides a wider measure of people's living standards; and
- absolute poverty reflecting whether the very poorest families are seeing their incomes rise in real terms.

However, in agreeing its strategy to tackle poverty and social exclusion, as required under Section 16 of the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006, the Executive will decide which indicators, using one or all of these statistics, best measures the number of children in greatest objective need.

This is currently being considered within the Department. We would hope to bring proposals to the Executive on an anti-poverty strategy, including details on how we propose to measure its effectiveness, in the near future.

We in OFMDFM together with the Executive are committed to tackling poverty and social exclusion in Northern Ireland. This is outlined in both our draft Programme for Government and budget documents which include a commitment to reduce child poverty by 50% by 2010.

Draft Programme for Government

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to state the date on which the Executive (i) first considered the draft Programme for Government; and (ii) approved the draft Programme for Government. (AQO 1196/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

Since devolution was restored on 8 May, the Executive has taken forward work to develop and agree a Programme for Government which sets out our priorities and plans for 2008-11. In taking that work forward, we have sought to ensure that our Programme for Government is clearly focused on addressing the key economic, social and environmental challenges we face if we are to build a better future for all our people.

This draft Programme for Government is a highly strategic document which is more accessible to the public, and easier to read, than the previous Programme for Government documents. However, do not think that because this document is short and strategic, that a considerable amount of work has not gone into its preparation and agreement. Nothing could be further from the truth in that respect.

The Executive first considered its approach to a draft Programme for Government on 24 May. This allowed officials to progress the draft proposals during the summer and further consideration was given to the priorities to be included in the draft Programme for Government at the Executive Strategy Day on the 6 September.

A draft of the Programme for Government was considered by the Executive at its meeting on the 27 September and following a series of Ministerial bilaterals, a revised draft was agreed on the 23 October. The draft Programme for Government was launched on 25 October in conjunction with the draft Budget and draft Investment Strategy.

You should also note that the priorities in the draft Programme for Government are supported by the draft Public Service Agreement framework. This sets out in detail the policies and programmes that this administration will be taken forward over the next three years and beyond, to achieve its aim to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland, with respect for the rule of law.

Efficiency Measures

Mr O'Loan asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the reasons why the proposed efficiency measures contained within its proposed budget have not yet been ratified.

(AQO 1255/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Given the new strategic direction of the Executive and the new departmental priorities initiative we have initiated a review of the proposed efficiency measures, which may result in alternative proposals coming forward.

Shared Future Policy

Mrs Long asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether or not the Shared Future Policy remains an adopted policy of the current Executive.

(AQO 1197/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are fully committed to promoting the interests of the whole community towards the goal of a shared future and a prosperous, peaceful and settled society.

Having considered progress made, we are currently drawing up detailed proposals for a programme of cohesion and integration to set out our strategy for a shared and better future. Key objectives, actions and targets will be developed in the context of these proposals.

Maze Site

Mr P Ramsey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the date on which a decision be made in relation to the regeneration of the Maze site.

(AQO 1259/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The multi-party consultation panel recommended unanimously that the development of the site should be centred 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.

10-Year Strategy for Children and Young People

Mrs M Bradley asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans are in place to implement the 10-year strategy for children and young people; and to detail the funding that is available to facilitate this implementation.

(AQO 1187/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Work to ensure the implementation of the 10-Year Strategy for Children and Young People is ongoing by all departments.

The Children and Young People's Action Plan details specific time-bound actions by Executive departments, the NIO and Court Service designed to deliver on the aims of the Strategy.

The Junior Ministers will be bringing forward, in the new year, a revised three-year plan which will work towards the overall achievement of the strategy.

Integrated Development Fund

Mr Adams asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm its support for the safeguarding of resource funding pledged to projects from West Belfast and Greater Shankill, through the pilot integrated development fund.

(AQO 1219/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Under the current arrangements, all outline pilot projects supported by the Integrated Development Fund (IDF), will have an entitlement to funding of the amount previously agreed by Ministers, subject to the provision and approval of the required economic appraisals for the respective projects.

Any further funding applications for individual projects, above the agreed amount or beyond the specified timescales, will be a matter for relevant lead Departments. Departments will consider such applications on the basis of their competing priorities and available resources.

Devolved Powers

Mr McNarry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail any discussions it has had with its counterparts in (i) Scotland; (ii) Wales; and (iii) Westminster, on the extension of the powers devolved to each of the devolved legislatures. (AQO 1166/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Ministers have had no discussions with either the First Minister of Scotland, the First Minister of Wales or the Government at Westminster about the extension of powers devolved to these legislatures.

Junior Ministers: Visit to Brussels

Mr K Robinson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to make a statement on the recent visit of the junior Ministers to Brussels. (AQO 1156/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Junior Ministers Gerry Kelly and Ian Paisley Junior led a delegation to Brussels on 22 November to strengthen Northern Ireland's links with Europe.

The delegation consisted of officials from a number of Departments who held meetings with their Commission counterparts to discuss priorities and develop ideas for increased participation in European opportunities. These meetings prepared the ground for the forthcoming inward visit by the European Commission Taskforce for Northern Ireland planned for early December and also for the planned visit to Brussels by us in January. Officials also held meetings with Northern Ireland's MEPs and with the UK and Irish Permanent Representatives. A total of 31 meetings took place, including the Ministerial engagements. Gerry Kelly also hosted an evening reception in the Executive's Brussels Office for Commission Taskforce members and other influential figures in Brussels based institutions.

The Junior Ministers also met with Catherine Day, Secretary-General of the Commission, and Dirk Ahner, Director-General of DG Regional Policy. Both gave assurance of the continuing high level support in the Commission for a successful outcome to the work of Commission President Barroso's Northern Ireland Taskforce. A Taskforce report is expected by the end of January.

Fair Employment Monitoring Regulations

Mr Neeson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans it has to undertake a review of Fair Employment Monitoring Regulations. (AQO 1206/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Reviewing the Fair Employment Monitoring Regulations is an ongoing commitment and will be considered as part of the review of equality legislation.

Older Persons' Commissioner

Mr Spratt asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline what progress has been made in relation to an Older Persons' Commissioner. (AQO 1174/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Ministers have received an interim report from the independent organisation appointed to assist with the review into the case for establishing an Older People's Commissioner.

It is hoped that following consideration of the interim report Ministers will be in a position to issue a statement later this week.

Junior Ministers

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the steps taken by junior Ministers to increase participation in, and understanding of public affairs by children. (AQO 1178/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Junior Ministers recently launched the Participation Network which is a new initiative funded by our Department and aims to support statutory agencies, local government and all departments to effectively engage with children and young people in public decision making. The mechanisms it will put in place will help us to reach out and talk to our young people so that they can have a say in our joint futures.

On the 20th November the Junior Ministers along with other MLAs met with 108 young people on the steps of Parliament Buildings to hear what their issues were. By listening to children and young people we hope to improve the quality of their lives as well as ensuring we deliver services that meet their needs.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Sea Bass Stocks

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the estimated size of sea bass stocks in the waters around the island of Ireland. (AQW 2093/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Since bass is no longer targeted commercially in Ireland data collection on the stock is difficult and the size of the stock is unknown. However the Marine Institute in Galway reports on bass stocks based on recreational angler records. These indicate that the bass stock is greatly depleted compared to the 1970s. Sea bass are mainly distributed in the warmer waters at the southern part of the island.

Fishing Vessels

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of (i) under 10-metre vessels; and (ii) over 10-metre vessels, that belong to Northern Ireland fishermen. (AQW 2178/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There are 191 under 10 metre and 143 over 10 metre fishing vessels owned by the North's fishermen, both here and elsewhere.

Biodiesel

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the research being carried out in relation to converting tallow into biodiesel. (AQW 2180/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department is not supporting any research into converting tallow to biodiesel, at present.

DARD published a Renewable Energy Action Plan in January 2007. 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.

Based on the Renewable Energy Action Plan, DARD sponsored research is currently focussed on the use of waste and biomass as a potential renewable energy feedstock.

Farm Grants

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of farms in the North Down constituency that have received grants from her department in each of the last five years. (AQW 2292/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am unable to provide this information as the Department does not hold grant and subsidy details classified by constituency. The data is currently held by county/postcode and, when programming resources permit, the Department will develop its systems to be able to collate information by constituency.

Single Farm Payments

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is being done to expedite the processing of single farm payments. (AQO 1226/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: This year, we have taken a number of steps to ensure that as many farm businesses receive their Single Farm Payment as early as possible within the payment window. These include:

Reducing the number of on farm inspection visits by approximately 800 when compared to the 2006 visits.

Increasing the de minimis level for recovery purposes from £10 to £65. This means that these types of cases can be paid more quickly.

Encouraging farmers to tell us of changes to maps and accepting these without penalty.

I am pleased to report that the 2007 inspections are progressing well and the inspection programme will be completed by end of December. This year, as far as payments are concerned, these started to hit bank accounts from 6 December. We are ahead of where we were last year and 900 more farmers will receive their full payment in time for Christmas.

Testing Cattle for Tuberculosis

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her plans to introduce a new system for testing cattle for tuberculosis. (AQO 1182/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The bovine Tuberculosis (TB) testing programme of cattle in the North is based on the use of the tuberculin skin test, in accordance with the provisions of EC Directive 64/432. All cattle herds in the North are routinely tested every year. The gamma

interferon blood test is also used as a supplementary diagnostic test for TB in cattle in certain circumstances here. No new tests are being considered for TB at present, and I have no plans to introduce new tests at this time.

TB testing in the North is delivered by a combination of veterinary officers from my Department and private veterinary practitioners. My Department has had a review carried out of the existing arrangements for delivering TB testing here, and I intend to seek the view of stakeholders in the New Year on the conclusions of that review. No decisions will be taken on future arrangements for delivering TB testing until after the consultation process has been completed.

Aqua Culture

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the role of her department in the promotion of aqua culture in Northern Ireland. (AQO 1152/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The role of my Department is to promote the sustainable development of aquaculture in a manner that is consistent with environmental standards, and to licence fish and shellfish farms under the provisions of the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966. My Department has provided financial assistance under the Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance (FIFG). Assistance for the construction, expansion, equipping and modernisation of aquaculture installations should continue into the future under the European Fisheries Fund (EFF). The Department will be issuing a consultation paper early next year on an Operational Programme for the implementation of European Fisheries Fund (EFF) here, and all stakeholders will have the opportunity of contributing to the development of the various measures within the programme.

Rural Businesses

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her department's priorities in relation to the £45 million put aside in the draft Budget to assist rural businesses. (AQO 1208/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Draft Programme for Government 2008-2011 states that we will invest £45million by 2013 to improve the competitiveness of the agricultural sector, which includes assistance to rural businesses. I can confirm that the £45million relates to the four Measures within Axis 1 of the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2007-2013. The specific aim of Axis 1 of this Programme is to

improve the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector and therefore it will be a priority of my Department to implement the four Measures across Axis 1 as approved by the European Commission earlier this year. The Measures which account for the £45million will provide for investment in Vocational Training, Agricultural and Forestry Processing and Marketing Grant Scheme/Agricultural and Forestry Marketing Development Scheme, Modernisation of Agricultural Holdings and a Supply Chain Development Programme.

Food Labelling

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the progress she has made in relation to 'country of origin' labelling on food sold at retail outlets, and on restaurant menus. (AQO 1150/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I can advise that my Department has responsibility for the labelling of beef, under EU Beef Labelling Regulations. DARD inspectors, along with local authority Environmental Health Officers, ensure that all beef on sale at retail level, but excluding the food service sector, is correctly labelled with origin and traceability information.

My Department is working with key stakeholders on the development of a voluntary pilot scheme involving origin labelling of beef in a number of local restaurants. This study will provide valuable information on consumer attitudes and preferences and will help inform future policy decisions.

The labelling of other food products is the responsibility of the Foods Standards Agency (FSA). 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.

Administration Reductions

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she is taking to ensure that her department meets the target of reducing the administration faced by farmers by 25%, as set out in the draft Programme for Government. (AQO 1168/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: On 12 November, Environment Minister, Arlene Foster and I issued a joint Press Release signalling the launch of the Better Regulation and

Simplification Review. The Review is being conducted by an Independent Panel, which provides skills and experience in the areas of governance, agriculture, the environment and legal. The Review Panel met for the first time on 22 November and has delegated a number of tasks to the relevant regulatory areas within DARD and DOE to take forward.

The output from the Review will be a Simplification Plan with the aim of making it easier for everyone concerned with the agri-food industry to comply with the relevant regulations and I am confident that the target of a 25% reduction in administrative burden by 2013 can be achieved.

Good Relations Policy

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail how her department is contributing to the Good Relations policy.

(AQO 1198/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The policy “A Shared Future – Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland” was published in March 2005. The subsequent Shared Future Triennial Action Plan 2006 – 2009 detailed the practical actions that Government Departments have committed themselves to in order that the Strategy vision on good relations takes shape over the three year period and beyond.

The ethos of “The Shared Future/Triennial Action Plan and the Racial Equality Strategy Implementation Action Plan” underpins DARD’s Strategic Plan for 2006-11. A key Vision statement of the Strategy is “in the delivery of all our services and in implementing our policies, we want to promote all aspects of equality and good relations”. The Strategy specifically promises that DARD will include “good relations building outcomes in rural communities within the capacity of the European Rural Development Regulations”, and goes on to refer to community capacity building work in rural estates. The Strategy also undertakes to remain committed to the actions of the Racial Equality Strategy in its delivery.

My Department has two actions in the Shared Future Action Plan:

- (1) *Develop projects for European Programmes which include actions on good relations within rural communities within Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme 2007 – 2013 (RDP).*

The RDP will be delivered by a partnership approach of District Councils and based on locally developed needs. DARD will ensure that these Partnerships will be pro-active in reflecting the Shared Future agenda in their strategies so that good relations outcomes will be

a key feature of programmes funded under the relevant measures.

- (2) *With the NIHE, will take forward community relation issues within the Rural Estates Programme to improve programme structure and provide tangible community relations outcomes.*

The work of the Rural Community Estates Programme (RCEP) has been continuing in community estates (in 13 council areas across rural NI) which have a history of high levels of disadvantage and low levels of community infrastructure. Community development workers have been building and improving relationships within largely single identity estates to help develop the community development capacity. The work is gradual, but a key, encouraging outcome has been that community groups involved are now being linked to the Rural Community Network (RCN) with its wide Rural Support Network (RSN) infrastructure. As such, they will integrate with wider community development activities, and be exposed inexorably to the broader horizons of the Shared Future agenda. As this programme is now almost completed the lessons learned have been captured in a “Practice to Policy” evaluation which is currently being considered.

On a more general note Race Equality is now a standard agenda item for the quarterly meetings of the Department’s Equality Steering Group, which comprises the Grade 5 Heads of all DARD Divisions and is chaired by the Permanent Secretary. Anna Lo MLA ex CEO of the Chinese Welfare Association attended the meeting in January 2007 and gave a presentation on the key issues facing the growing number of ethnic minority communities living in Northern Ireland, the problems they face and ways of improving communication with these communities. Patrick Yu, Director of the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities has accepted our invitation to address the next meeting of this Group.

In the Year 2 draft of DARD’s Race Action Plan, there are a number of positive and helpful new actions. In the critical area of capacity building there is potential offered for the new Rural Development Programme to benefit those from ethnic communities living in rural areas. To ensure the key issues were addressed from the outset, Rural Development Division and Equality Branch (including the Race Champion) held some informal pre-consultation meetings with groups such as NICEM and the Chinese Welfare Association in April 2007, prior to the issue of the consultation paper.

DARD, like all public bodies has equality duties to meet under Section 75 of the NI Act 1998. These statutory duties make equality and good relations considerations central to the whole range of public policy and decision-making. Completion of High Level Impact Assessments (HLIAs) by Departments is

an important part of compliance with mainstreaming equality considerations into the Priorities and Budget process. DARD has carried out a comprehensive programme of High Level Impact Assessments (HLIA) to ensure that equality and good relations considerations are mainstreamed into all aspects of our business decisions; and where appropriate mitigations are incorporated.

Department Officials

Mr Burnside asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of officials currently employed by her department. (AQO 1165/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department currently employs 3,111 staff consisting of 2,655 non-industrial and 456 industrial staff.

Animal Diseases Bill

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide an update on the Animal Diseases Bill, as outlined in the Programme for Government. (AQO 1195/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am considering a number of animal health measures to protect our livestock industry. I want to ensure that we have effective biosecurity measures in place to prevent the introduction and spread of disease. That is the first line of defence. I also want to ensure that powers are available to deal quickly and effectively with any disease outbreaks in order to minimise the impact on the agri food industry and protect vital export markets.

I intend to seek the views of industry and key stakeholders early in the New Year on detailed proposals for a Diseases of Animals Bill.

Provided no substantial amendments are required to the draft Bill as a result the consultation process, it is my intention to introduce the draft Bill during the 2007/08 session.

Rivers Agency

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make a statement on the work of the Rivers Agency within the West Belfast constituency. (AQO 1221/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Rivers Agency is the statutory drainage and flood defence authority for the North of Ireland with the primary aim of reducing risk to life and property

from flooding from rivers and the sea. In support of this aim the Agency identifies flooding risk and executes viable works to minimise such risk, maintains a network of free flowing watercourses and administers advisory and enforcement procedures to protect the drainage function of watercourses.

Two drainage improvement schemes for West Belfast are proposed. One for the Whiterock Stream costing approx £250k. Rivers Agency is currently undertaking investigatory and preparatory works in relation to this scheme. The other proposed scheme relates to the permanent culvert replacement on the Blackstaff River costing approx £30k. This follows Emergency repair works on a collapsed culvert on the Glen Road undertaken by the Rivers Agency in late 2005. Both Schemes are due to commence in Spring 2008.

The Agency has 2 squads of industrial staff allocated to the West Belfast area engaged in maintenance of 33 designated watercourses and grille inspection/clearance weekly or more frequently in light of predicted heavy rainfall.

Rivers Agency within its consultancy and consenting role has assessed and approved the realignment of the Clowney River and the Blackstaff River as part of the major improvements to the Westlink.

The Agency provides an emergency response to watercourse related flooding incidents and undertakes follow up investigations to establish the source of flooding and identify any remedial works required.

Rivers Agency has a statutory duty to ensure equality of treatment of drainage throughout the North.

Environmental Protection Agency

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is her assessment of the administrative and financial implications for her department of proposals to introduce an Environmental Protection Agency. (AQO 1163/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The realignment of environmental responsibilities in central and local government, recommended by the Review of Environmental Governance, presents some complex issues for DARD and its sponsored bodies.

The Foundations for the Future report recommended the establishment of an independent Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). However, the report's recommendations were not costed. Minister Foster has commissioned those costings, and until they are available it is impossible to say for certain what the administrative and financial implications for my department will be.

I can assure the Member that my officials and I will scrutinise any costed proposal closely.

Alpha Nortestosterone Enquiries

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what plans she has to compensate farming families who were subject to house-raids during the alpha nortestosterone enquiries of 2006, in view of the fact that these families have been vindicated in the review of these events, carried out by Joan Ruddock. (AQO 1151/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have no plans to pay compensation to farmers who had their houses searched. You will be aware that the Department is required by law to enforce EU residues legislation and is permitted to do so without incurring legal liability to pay compensation.

In spite of this, and in recognition of the fact that farmers have lost animals without any evidence of wrong-doing on their part, I made the decision to make a good-will payment to all farmers who had on farm emergency slaughter male animals condemned as a result of a positive test. The payment was based on the market value of the animal at the time of slaughter and over £87,000 has been paid out to farmers. This was purely a gesture of good-will towards the farming community and went beyond our statutory obligations. I also met with affected farmers and apologised personally for the distress caused by the on-farm investigations.

Joan Ruddock concluded in her review that DARD's actions in respect of the surprise on-farm searches were in compliance with legislation and were reasonable in the context of the scientific evidence of the time and also in the context of recent experience of illegal administration. Recommendations were also made on how DARD could improve its approach to enforcement activity in future and I have already given assurances that all the recommendations in the Ruddock Review will be fully implemented.

DARD Direct

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the progress that has been made in developing DARD Direct facilities for farmers; and (ii) how much it will cost to establish this service. (AQO 1159/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: DARD Direct is my Department's new service delivery approach that has been tested and positively evaluated at Inishkeen House in Enniskillen. Feedback on the pilot was very good with farmers welcoming the

new 'one stop shop' approach to customer service. The Department proposes to establish a network of 10 DARD Direct offices across Northern Ireland within a reasonable distance of our customers' businesses. This proposal came about following DFP approval of an economic appraisal which recommended that 10 offices, strategically located throughout the North, is the most favourable option.

No decisions have been taken yet on the locations of these offices, with the exception of Inishkeen House as it has already been modified to test the DARD Direct service delivery model. The capital costs associated with the refurbishment work to be completed in the 9 other DARD Direct offices are estimated at £4.92m.

My Department is currently undergoing a pre-consultation exercise with key stakeholders and section 75 groups on the DARD Direct roll out proposals. This will inform an EQIA/consultation that is due to take place in 2008. Following this, I will be in a position to make decisions on where the DARD Direct offices will be located.

Environmental Protection Agency

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail any discussions she has had with the Minister of the Environment in relation to proposals to establish an independent Environmental Protection Agency. (AQO 1184/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I noted the publication of the report, Foundations for the Future, issued by the Review of Environmental Governance in June 2007. At the time, I indicated to the Minister of the Environment that the Executive should take time to weigh up all the options and their related costs and benefits, and assess the implications for the balance of responsibilities across Departments, agencies, and other public authorities.

Minister Foster was clear that she would take the time needed to consider the issues raised by the report, and the best way forward. I will be happy to discuss the report with the Minister and our Executive colleagues in due course, when the costs associated with the creation of an independent EPA have been assessed.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Sport NI

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the projects in North Antrim that

have been funded by Sport NI, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1626/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): I am aware that this Question was due for Answer on 26 November 2007 and I apologise to the Member for the delay.

The table below details the projects in North Antrim that have been funded by Sport Northern Ireland in each of the last 5 years.

FUNDING TO PROJECTS IN NORTH ANTRIM

Year	Applicant Organisation	Project title	Grant Amount (£)
2002/03	Ballymena United FC Ballymena Showgrounds Warden Street Ballymena BT43 7DR	Major Works Year 3	20,000.00
2002/03	Ballymena United FC Ballymena Showgrounds Warden Street Ballymena BT43 7DR	Safety Management	2,685.00
2002/03	Glenravel Environmental Improvement Assoc 14 Old Cushendun Road Newtowncrommelin Ballymena BT43 6RJ	Construction of Multi- use games area with floodlighting	80,000.00
2002/03	Knights Wheelchair Basketball Club c/o 44 The Knockans Broughshane Londonderry BT43 7LQ	Purchase of 20 Basketball Wheelchairs	15,300.00
2003/04	Ballymena United FC Ballymena Showgrounds Warden Street Ballymena BT43 7DR	Safety Management	3,010.00
2003/04	Ballymena Borough Council 80 Galgorm Road Ballymena BT42 1AB	Community Sport Programme	8,888.78
2003/04	Ballymena Borough Council 80 Galgorm Road Ballymena BT42 1AB	Community Sport Programme	38,100.00
2003/04	Ballymena Borough Council 80 Galgorm Road Ballymena BT42 1AB	Community Sport Programme	40,031.00

Year	Applicant Organisation	Project title	Grant Amount (£)
2003/04	Ballymena RFC Eaton Park 209 Raceview Road Ballymena BT42 4HU	Refurbishment of pitches	95,603.00
2003/04	Moyle District Council Skeskburn House 7 Mary Street Ballycastle BT54 6QH	Community Sport Programme	12,350.00
2003/04	Moyle District Council Skeskburn House 7 Mary Street Ballycastle BT54 6QH	Community Sport programme	38,325.00
2003/04	Moyle District Council Skeskburn House 7 Mary Street Ballycastle BT54 6QH	Community Sport Programme	40,241.00
2003/04	Moyle District Council Skeskburn House 7 Mary Street Ballycastle BT54 6QH	Coach Education Generic, Sports specific training and coaching programmes	3,683.00
2003/04	Moyle District Council Skeskburn House 7 Mary Street Ballycastle BT54 6QH	Coach education generic, sports specific training and coaching programmes	4,695.00
2003/04	St Brigids GAC 111 Marlborough Park Central Belfast BT9 6HP	Construction of pitch	70,000.00
2004/05	Ballymena United FC Ballymena Showgrounds Warden Street Ballymena BT43 7DR	Safety Management	3,230.00
2004/05	Ballymena Borough Council 80 Galgorm Road Ballymena BT42 1AB	UEFA Under 19 Championships	20,000.00
2004/05	Ballymena North Partnership c/o 4 Wellington Court Ballymena BT43 6EQ	Construction of four court sports hall.	500,000.00

Year	Applicant Organisation	Project title	Grant Amount (£)
2004/05	Ballymena RFC Eaton Park 209 Raceview Road Ballymena BT42 4HU	Refurbishment of pitches	95,603.00
2004/05	Ballymoney Borough Council Riada House 14 Charles Street Ballymoney BT53 6DZ	Community Sport Programme	108,588.00
2004/05	Ballymoney Borough Council Riada House 14 Charles Street Ballymoney BT53 6DZ	Skills 4 Sport	4,504.00
2004/05	Moyle District Council Skeskburn House 7 Mary Street Ballycastle BT54 6QH	Coach education generic, sports specific training and coaching programmes	3,683.00
2004/05	North West Mountain Rescue Team 24 Glassmullan Road Glenariffe Antrim BT44 0QX	Challenge Fund	8,012.00
2004/05	St Brigids GAC Land diagonally opposite 182 Ballyveely Road Cloughmills Antrim BT44 9BG	Construction of pitch	70,000.00
2005/06	Ballymoney Borough Council Riada House 14 Charles Street Ballymoney BT53 6DZ	Causeway Coach Management Scheme	6,435.00
2005/06	North West Mountain Rescue Team 24 Glassmullan Road Glenariffe Antrim BT44 0QX	Exchequer Grant	11,750.00
2005/06	North West Mountain Rescue Team 24 Glassmullan Road Glenariffe Antrim BT44 0QX	Exchequer Grant	24,150.00

Year	Applicant Organisation	Project title	Grant Amount (£)
2005/06	North West Mountain Rescue Team 24 Glassmullan Road Glenariffe Antrim BT44 0QX	Exchequer Grant	12,338.00
2005/06	St Brigids GAC Land diagonally opposite 182 Ballyveely Road Cloughmills Antrim BT44 9BG	Construction of pitches	161,770.00
2006/07	Ballymena United FC Ballymena Showgrounds Warden Street Ballymena BT43 7DR	Stadia Safety Programme	161,636.00
2006/07	Ballymena United FC Ballymena Showgrounds Warden Street Ballymena BT43 7DR	Safety Management	3,684.00
2006/07	Ballymena United FC Ballymena Showgrounds Warden Street Ballymena BT43 7DR	Safety Management	3,006.00

400th Anniversary of the Plantation of Ulster

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his department's plans to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the Plantation of Ulster. (AQW 1871/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am aware that this Question was due for Answer on the 4th of December, and I apologise to the Member for the delay.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure anticipate the Ulster-Scots Agency taking plans forward on this matter and the Agency are considering a number of events to commemorate this period in our history. Plans are to be finalised on this issue by May 2008.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail any Northern Ireland Events Company funding allocated to (i) the recent Rally Ireland event in November; and (ii) any previous motorsport events conducted between 2005 and 2007. (AQW 2131/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Northern Ireland Events Company did not allocate any funding to the Rally Ireland event which took place in November 2007. Government funding for this event was provided through Sport Northern Ireland.

The Company has allocated the following amounts to motorsport events conducted between 2005 and 2007:

Financial Year	Event	Amount Allocated
2005/06	Mid Antrim 150	£7,000
2005/06	North West 200	£78,179
2005/06	Rally Ireland 2005	£385,265
2005/06	Sunflower Trophy	£2,000
2005/06	Tandragee 100	£2,464
2005/06	Ulster Grand Prix	£50,000
2005/06	Motocross Grand prix of Northern Ireland	£419,000
2005/06	Supermoto Grand Prix of Northern Ireland	£299,250
2006/07	All Ireland Golden Karting Championships	£9,000
2006/07	Rally Ireland 2006	£581,496
2006/07	Sunflower Trophy	£3,000
2006/07	Tandragee 100	£4,286
2006/07	Circuit of Ireland	£100,000
2006/07	Motocross Grand Prix of Northern Ireland	£374,272
2006/07	Supermoto of Nations	£366,413

Cultural Policy Funding

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the mechanism through which monies allocated in the draft Budget under ‘cultural policy’, will reach individual artists and arts organisations. (AQW 2186/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The cultural policy allocation in the draft budget refers to funding allocated to the Ulster Scots Academy, the Irish Language Broadcast Fund, initiatives to promote British and Irish Sign Languages and a number of other linguistic and cultural diversity initiatives.

Funding to artists or arts organisations would fall under the Arts allocation contained within the draft Budget.

TURAS Initiative

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the take-up to date of joint funding

of both arts councils on the island of Ireland under the TURAS initiative launched earlier this year.

(AQO 1246/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The total budget for the TURAS initiative was £60,000, divided equally between the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and An Chomhairle Ealaíon. Of this, £48,533 was allocated to the following projects:

Organisation Name	Project Title	Grant Amount (£)
Patricia Daly	A Journey of Discovery (in partnership with Stefano Uberti)	10,000
Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann (Glens of Antrim Branch)	Exchange trip between Glens of Antrim Comhaltas and Ballyduff Comhaltas (Waterford)	9,943
Ceoltai Eireann	An Beirinneach – Songs and Music of an Irish Harper (in partnership with Aibhlin McCrann)	9,000
Otto Schindwein	Descendants (in partnership with Declan Sheehan)	8,360
Jim MacFarland	Emigration Songs (in partnership with Jackie Boyce)	7,450
Marcas O Murchu	The Flight of the Earls – Imirce na nIarlai (in partnership with Oisín MacDiarmada)	3,780

Ulster Scots

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm his department’s proposed allocation for Ulster Scots for the financial year 2008/09. (AQW 2264/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Ulster-Scots Agency operates its financial year on a calendar year basis, in line with all North/South Implementation Bodies. The financial allocation for the Ulster-Scots Agency for 2008 year as outlined in the draft budget amounts to approximately £2.6 million, 75% of which will be met by my Department and the other 25% by the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

There is £2.4m allocated for the Ulster Scots Academy for the 2008-2009 financial year.

Irish Language Broadcasting

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to his answer to AQW1755/08, to confirm that he will give full consideration to any possible divisiveness relating to Irish Language broadcasting before he comes to a final position on this matter. (AQW 2323/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The full implications of Government expenditure proposals, including their impact on equality and social inclusion, are carefully considered before a final position is reached.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the contracts that were signed by the Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Events Company after 20 September 2007; (ii) the period of time over which these events will take place; and (iii) the amount of money involved. (AQW 2409/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Since 20 September 2007 there has been one contract signed by the Acting Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Events Company. This is in regard to the Tennis Legends event to be held over 4 days in February 2008 and the amount of money involved is up to £50,000.

Festival Funding

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to ensure that district councils will provide matched funding for festivals. (AQW 2445/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It will be a stipulation of the funding agreement between the Department and each local Council that matched funding is provided.

There will be a requirement for each Council to make a report to the Department at the end of each year, detailing the festivals supported and the level of funding allocated.

Festival Funding

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action he is taking to provide increased funding for festivals. (AQW 2446/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: With the transfer of the Community Festivals Fund to Local Councils from April 2008, I will be asking Local Councils to match the amount of funding provided by my Department.

Festival Funding

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action he is taking to ensure that the Community Festival Fund will pay back monies owed to Féile an Phobail; and to provide a timescale for this. (AQW 2447/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Community Festivals Fund is administered on behalf of my Department by the Northern Ireland Events Company, which is currently the subject of a comprehensive and authoritative audit of its financial affairs.

It is my intention that all commitments made by the Community Festivals Fund will be honoured as soon as possible, but by the end of March 2008 at the latest.

Funding for Modernisation Process

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the funding that will be available when the current funding for modernisation process for both the Ulster Council of the Gaelic Athletic Association and Ulster Rugby runs out in March 2008. (AQO 1242/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland is responsible for the development of sport including the distribution of funding to sport. For the past 3 years, Sport Northern Ireland, with the support of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, has been providing significant, time bounded funding to the Ulster Council of the Gaelic Athletic Association, the Ulster Branch of the Irish Rugby Football Union and the Irish Football Association to assist them in re-developing their sports and delivering on modernisation and coaching initiatives. The time bounded funding for Gaelic and Rugby is due to end in March 2008. DCAL and Sport Northern Ireland are currently in discussion with both sports about what they achieved as a result of this time bounded investment. As part of these discussions the needs of Gaelic and Rugby beyond March 2008 are being considered within the parameters of the draft Budget published on 25th October 2007.

Community Funding

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the sums awarded to organisations for community funding, by his department in the last year. (AQO 1177/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department's funding for community organisations is

administered mainly through our Non-Departmental Public Bodies and other funded bodies.

In 2006/07 the Arts Council of Northern Ireland awarded £1,720,782 revenue funding and £1,153,256 capital funding to community organisations.

The Northern Ireland Events Company awarded £254,565 to community organisations through the Community Festivals Fund.

In addition to this my department provided transitional funding to 3 community festivals in Belfast, totalling up to £145,400.

The Northern Ireland Screen Commission awarded £115,000 of funding to Third Party Organisations in the community sector.

My Department, through the DSD led initiative Renewing Communities programme, provided a sum of £7,114 to the Ulster Historical Foundation for a local and family History Workshops project, awarded £50,000 to W5 for the Sound & Vision Project and £388,000 to the Northern Ireland Screen Commission for Studio On, Northern Visions and the Intergenerational Film project.

Its annual budget of around £3.6million is used to promote and develop good community relations in the education and youth service sectors in the age range 4 to 25.

Funding targeted at making young people aware of the dangers of interface violence has however been provided by our Department in two ways:

- First, North Belfast – Special Intervention programme - £250,000 of which some £200,000 has already been allocated to consortia of groups in North Belfast to collaborate on the design and delivery of developmental activities for young people in the area. A further 4 proposals are under consideration;
- Secondly, the Community Relations council has provided £220,000 to organisations working specifically with interface communities, including youth.

Ulster-Scots Language

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide an update on progress in taking the Ulster-Scots language forward from Part II to Part III status under the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. (AQO 1229/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: A draft road map has been developed by the Ulster Scots Academy Implementation Group Partnership Board outlining how the criteria could be met for Ulster-Scots to attain Part III status. Government Departments have considered the document and responded accordingly.

A revised document was submitted for further consideration by the Interdepartmental Charter Implementation Group (ICIG). A further revised document will be considered at the next meeting of the group.

‘Our Shared Heritage’ Lecture Series

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans he has to disseminate the contents of the joint lectures series entitled ‘Our Shared Heritage’, that he referred to in his Ministerial statement on 20th November, to a wider audience.

(AQO 1203/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Responsibility for this series of lectures rests with the two Agencies which comprise the North/South Language Body (Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge). Any further information relating to the joint lectures series titled “Our Shared Heritage” can be obtained from either of the Agencies.

National Stadium

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the correspondence he has received from the main sporting bodies in relation to a national stadium design and its proposed business plan.

(AQO 1188/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The governing bodies of the three sports (Soccer, Rugby and Gaelic Games) have worked closely with DCAL and its advisers in finalising and agreeing a Business Plan for the Multi-Sports Stadium. I am pleased to advise that each of the three governing bodies have recently confirmed, in writing, their intention to commit to the development and use of the Multi-Sports Stadium at the Maze/Long Kesh and the associated financial contributions to annual running costs.

In terms of design the Stadium Design Team is continuing to work, with the input of the governing bodies, to develop a design that meets the needs of all three sports. This is at an advanced stage, with all three sports having recently indicated that they were content with the way the plans were developing, subject to minor refinements.

Museum Policy

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide a timescale within which the Assembly can expect delivery of a museum policy, with particular reference to independent museums.

(AQO 1147/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department had considered the development of a museums policy for Northern Ireland and had taken the process as far as producing draft Terms of Reference and consulting key stakeholder bodies on these terms of reference.

However in light of the draft CSR settlement and other pressing priorities I have looked at this matter and have concluded that resource pressures within the department are such that the development of a museums policy will not be possible, at this time. I've asked the NIMC to bring forward a paper to consider options for developing a policy, with reference to independent museums, in the future.

Olympic Events

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail those Olympic events that will be taking place in Northern Ireland.
(AQO 1237/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: As set out in London's Candidate File, if Northern Ireland builds its planned multi-sports stadium, this venue will be strongly 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.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether or not he plans to keep the management of events under the remit of his department, rather than the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, in light of the financial difficulties relating to the Northern Ireland Events Company.
(AQO 1238/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Now that the decision has been taken to wind up the Northern Ireland Events Company we will need time to reflect on the most appropriate arrangements for the effective delivery of the events function in the future. I will be consulting with my Executive colleagues on this issue.

Funding for Modernisation Process

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action he is taking to provide suitable funding to the Gaelic Athletic Association, Irish Rugby Football Union and Irish Football Association, to facilitate the development of their modernisation and coaching programmes.
(AQO 1240/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland is responsible for the development of sport including the distribution of funding to sport. For the past 3 years, Sport Northern Ireland, with the support of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, has been providing significant, time bounded funding to the Ulster Council of the Gaelic Athletic Association, the Ulster Branch of the Irish Rugby Football Union and the Irish Football Association to assist them in re-developing their sports and delivering on modernisation and coaching initiatives. The time bounded funding for Gaelic and Rugby is due to end in March 2008. DCAL and Sport Northern Ireland are currently in discussion with both sports about what they achieved as a result of this time bounded investment. As part of these discussions the needs of Gaelic and Rugby beyond March 2008 are being considered within the parameters of the draft Budget published on 25th October 2007.

Elements of funding for the Irish Football Association have yet to be released as the Association is still in the process of implementing its modernisation and coaching programmes.

South Eastern Education and Library Board

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions he has had with the Minister of Education in relation to the transfer of powers, from the commissioners appointed in July 2006, to the South Eastern Education and Library Board.
(AQO 1169/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I wrote to the Education Minister in June of this year expressing concern at the governance arrangements of the Board due to the appointment of Commissioners. I have been assured by the Education Minister that the matter is under review and she will keep me informed of developments.

Library Funding

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount of funding to be allocated to libraries in the next financial year, broken down by parliamentary constituency.
(AQO 1212/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Based on the Draft Budget published on 25 October the allocation to libraries is £30.8 million recurrent and up to £4.1 million capital next year dependant on receipts of £1 million.

Once the budget is finalised, most of the funding will be allocated to the five Education and Library

Boards on a per capita basis, taking social and rural needs into account. The funding will be distributed on an equitable basis across Northern Ireland at Board level but a breakdown will not be available by parliamentary constituency.

Northern Ireland Football Team Home Fixtures

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he is taking to ensure that the scheduled home fixtures of the Northern Ireland football team, in the World Cup 2010 qualifying campaign, will be played in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 1209/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

Responsibility for ensuring that the scheduled home fixtures of the Northern Ireland football team, in the World Cup 2010 qualifying campaign, will be played in Northern Ireland rests with the Irish Football Association which is the governing body of football in Northern Ireland. As part of its forward planning, the IFA is seeking to ensure that better and more modern football facilities are available in Northern Ireland. This includes facilities that would enable the Northern Ireland team to play its World Cup 2010 qualifying home fixtures in Northern Ireland. Sport Northern Ireland, which is responsible for the development of sport including the distribution of funding, is assisting the IFA in this process with the support of my Department.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail emerging findings from the investigation into the financial affairs of the Northern Ireland Events Company.

(AQO 1234/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am in the process of commissioning an independent comprehensive review of all the circumstances surrounding the deficit accumulated by the Northern Ireland Events Company. I will report back to the House at the earliest opportunity on the findings of this review.

EDUCATION

Priory Integrated College

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education to outline what further information is required to be submitted from (i) Priory Integrated College; and (ii) the

South Eastern Education and Library Board, in relation to the proposed new build campus for the college.

(AQW 1836/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): The Department is in contact with the South Eastern Education and Library Board on the sustainability of provision in the area. No additional information is required from the College at this stage.

A development proposal would be required if the site for the new school was located outside its existing catchment area and thereby potentially impacting on other existing educational provision. It is not required in this instance.

There is an approved development proposal for the amalgamation of Holywood and Redburn Primary Schools on the site currently occupied by Priory College.

Priory Integrated College

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education to confirm that the Department is in receipt of a development proposal in relation to the amalgamation of Holywood Primary School and Redburn Primary School on the site currently occupied by Priory Integrated College.

(AQW 1838/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department is in contact with the South Eastern Education and Library Board on the sustainability of provision in the area. No additional information is required from the College at this stage.

A development proposal would be required if the site for the new school was located outside its existing catchment area and thereby potentially impacting on other existing educational provision. It is not required in this instance.

There is an approved development proposal for the amalgamation of Holywood and Redburn Primary Schools on the site currently occupied by Priory College.

Priory Integrated College

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education to report on whether or not a development proposal is required for a project relating to the rebuilding of a school, such as Priory Integrated College.

(AQW 1839/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department is in contact with the South Eastern Education and Library Board on the sustainability of provision in the area. No additional information is required from the College at this stage.

A development proposal would be required if the site for the new school was located outside its existing catchment area and thereby potentially impacting on other existing educational provision. It is not required in this instance.

There is an approved development proposal for the amalgamation of Holywood and Redburn Primary Schools on the site currently occupied by Priory College.

Derryboye Primary School

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to give a timeframe within which work will commence on the car park for Derryboye Primary School, and to give the completion date for the scheme.

(AQW 1909/08)

The Minister of Education: The South Eastern Education and Library Board has responsibility for this project and has advised that, subject to agreement being reached with the land owner, the Board expects that the scheme should be on site next summer. The Board will confirm the completion date as soon as it is known.

Priory Integrated College

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to provide a timeframe within which she intends to announce a decision on the new build proposals for Priory College in Holywood.

(AQW 1956/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department is in touch with the South Eastern Education and Library Board on anticipated needs in the area and the sustainability of provision which are relevant to a decision on this scheme. I intend to take a decision as soon as possible.

Upgrading Schools

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to undertake a co-ordinated programme for the upgrading of inner-city schools, and schools with catchment areas comprising large re-settlement estates, in the boroughs around Belfast.

(AQW 1978/08)

The Minister of Education: Any proposals for building works at schools are a matter for the relevant school authorities to consider and bring forward in the first instance. I would encourage increased co-ordination both within and across sectors, taking account of catchments and patterns of enrolment, in proposals for upgrading schools to meet anticipated needs in an area.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Ten Year Children's Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to confirm whether or not he will implement all the commitments by his department included in the ten year Children's Strategy.

(AQW 2274/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I am pleased to confirm that my Department has already implemented the specific commitments it agreed to under the strategy and will continue to review and monitor progress.

In attempting to raise the percentage of young people moving into or re-engaging with education, training and employment and the percentage of leavers achieving a recognised qualification my Department has jointly with DE, launched for consultation an all-age Careers Education Information, Advice And Guidance Strategy and also developed a policy for provision for 14-19 year olds to prepare them for work and life in the 21st century; in September 2007 introduced the new Training for Success provision to replace Jobskills a key feature of which is to target hard to reach groups; and in terms of the quality of Further Education and training organisations in the full inspection year to 2007 saw 80% of providers achieving either grade 1 or grade 2.

Non-EU Students

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of students from outside the European Union studying at (i) Queen's University, Belfast; and (ii) the University of Ulster, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2294/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The number of student enrolments from outside the European Union at (i) Queen's University, Belfast; and (ii) the University of Ulster, in each of the last five years, for which data are available, is given in the table below: -

	Queen's University of Belfast	University of Ulster
2001/02	860	500
2002/03	875	600
2003/04	935	615
2004/05	1,035	545
2005/06	1,005	565

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

Notes: Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5.

EU Students

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of students from each European Union country, excluding the United Kingdom, studying at (i) Queen's University, Belfast; and (ii) the University of Ulster, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2295/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The number of student enrolments from each European Union country (excluding UK) at (i) Queen's University, Belfast; and (ii) the University of Ulster, in each of the last five years for which data is available is given in the following table:

EU Countries	Queen's University, Belfast					University of Ulster				
	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06
Austria	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	5	5
Belgium	5	5	5	5	5	0	5	5	0	5
Cyprus	N/A	N/A	N/A	0	5	N/A	N/A	N/A	10	10
Czech Republic	N/A	N/A	N/A	0	5	N/A	N/A	N/A	0	0
Denmark	0	0	0	5	0	0	5	5	5	5
Estonia	N/A	N/A	N/A	0	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	0	0
Finland	5	5	5	5	5	10	10	10	5	5
France	50	40	40	50	50	20	35	35	35	25
Germany	40	40	40	40	35	25	30	45	55	30
Gibraltar	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Greece	10	10	10	10	10	30	35	35	30	30
Hungary	N/A	N/A	N/A	5	5	N/A	N/A	N/A	0	0
Irish Republic	1,310	1,260	1,160	1,310	1,090	2,125	2,230	2,490	2,535	2,735
Italy	20	25	25	25	20	10	15	20	20	10
Latvia	N/A	N/A	N/A	0	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	0	0
Lithuania	N/A	N/A	N/A	0	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	0	0
Luxembourg	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Malta	N/A	N/A	N/A	0	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	25	30
Netherlands	0	0	0	5	5	0	0	5	0	5
Poland	N/A	N/A	N/A	5	15	N/A	N/A	N/A	5	10
Portugal	0	5	0	5	0	5	5	5	5	5
Slovak Republic	N/A	N/A	N/A	0	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	0	0
Slovenia	N/A	N/A	N/A	0	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	0	0
Spain	55	90	55	40	30	10	15	10	30	15
Sweden	10	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

Notes: Figures are rounded to the nearest 5 with 0, 1, 2 rounded to 0.

N/A – Not Applicable – Not part of the European Union until 2004.

Staff Undergoing Disciplinary Procedures

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the reasons for the high number of staff in his department, compared to other government

departments, undergoing disciplinary procedures as a result of an unacceptable sickness record.

(AQW 2326/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:
The figures provided in answer to Assembly Question

1629/08 do not represent the totality of disciplinary cases resulting from unacceptable sickness records across all Government Departments as Executive Agencies, with the exception of DARD, are not included. Also, the figures are not presented in terms of percentages of total staff who fall within the scope of the reply. This explains the apparent disparity in the figures with DEL presenting considerably higher figures than other Departments.

Uptake of Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths Subjects

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps his department will take to increase uptake of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) subjects as referred to in PSA2, Objective 4 of Annex 1 to the draft Programme for Government 2008-11. (AQW 2439/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department for Employment and Learning, in conjunction with the Department of Education, has initiated a Review of STEM Policy. As part of this, a government led working group is currently considering a strategy for the further development of STEM subjects in schools and Further Education colleges. The group is considering issues such as teacher supply, a comparative lack of integration amongst the components of STEM and a need to better develop the links between schools, further education and industry, particularly in respect of careers guidance and improving the general public's understanding of the importance of STEM to the economy and wider society in general.

SEMTA, the science, engineering and manufacturing technologies Sector Skills Council, has included an Action Point on improving careers promotion and sector attractiveness, in its Sector Skills Agreement Action Plan for Northern Ireland. It is recognised that this can only be achieved through the co-ordination of careers activities, strengthening employer links with the Universities and employer support for careers initiatives.

Northern Ireland Universities are working to complement the work of Government in aiming to increase the number of high quality school-leavers going on to take STEM subjects at university. The Queen's University of Belfast has launched a scholarship scheme – the first of its kind in the United Kingdom – which will help to ensure future economic competitiveness and attract high-quality students. The scheme, for students entering the University in 2008, offers awards of £1,000 to all students achieving three As at A-level who go on to study a STEM subject (except Medicine and Dentistry) at Queen's University.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

All-Island Single Electricity Market

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans are in place to facilitate net metering, for those who generate small amounts of renewable energy, to be incorporated into an all-island single electricity market. (AQW 1861/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): The arrangements in Northern Ireland for the metering of electricity exported and imported by small renewable generators, which were in place prior to the introduction of the Single Electricity Market ("SEM"), are unaffected by the operation of the new market.

There are no plans to change these arrangements which allow small generators, in the first instance, to use output from their generating station to meet their own consumption needs without reference to a licensed supplier. Any electricity that they export to, or consume from, a licensed supplier is separately recorded by a meter. Payment arrangements for both imports and exports are subject to the supplier's terms and conditions of contract. A specific obligation is placed on NIE Energy Ltd to offer a regulated 'spill' tariff for small scale generation.

Small scale renewable generators in Northern Ireland also benefit by having access to tradeable Renewables Obligation Certificates (NIROCs) under the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation in respect of their generation.

Tourist Board Signature Projects

Mrs McGill asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the funding provided by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to its five signature projects (i) Giant's Causeway/Antrim and Causeway Coast Area; (ii) Titanic (Maritime) Belfast; (iii) The Walled City of Derry/Londonderry; (iv) St Patrick/Christian Heritage; and (v) The Mourne, over the last five years. (AQW 2110/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) identified five key "Signature Projects" as part of the Strategic Framework for Action 2004 – 2007. No figures are available for 2003 as it predates the specific designation of the projects. During 2004 to 2007 NITB has administered a number of funding programmes including the Tourism Development Scheme, International Fund for Ireland, Integrated

Development Fund and EU Peace Programme. Calendar year funding provided by NITB is as follows:

Year:	Causeway / Antrim Coast and Glens:	Titanic / Maritime Belfast:	The Walled City:	St. Patrick / Christian Heritage:	The Mournes:
2004	£69,541	0	£10,532	0	£10,000
2005	£42,090	0	0	£40,266	£13,382
2006	£247,837	£136,784	£1,834,746	£41,060	£132,066
2007	£732,794	£275,327	£155,590	£59,978	£20,000
Total	£1,092,262	£412,111	£2,000,868	£141,304	£175,448

Overall Total: £3,821,993

Additional funding has been identified under the Programmes for Government to progress the development of the signature projects over the next three years.

Biofuel Businesses

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline what action he is taking to promote and sustain biofuel businesses; and to outline what assistance his department is providing to local biofuel businesses in relation to selling their products in the more developed market in the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 2216/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Production of biofuels to date in Northern Ireland has been small scale. The availability and cost of raw feedstock, transportation costs, cheap US imports of biofuels as well as economies of scale issues make it difficult for NI biofuels producers to compete.

In terms of financial support, biofuel producers, across the UK, receive a 20p per litre rebate on the road fuel tax duty and, from April 2008, the introduction of the Renewable Transport Fuel Obligation will provide a further subvention of around 15p per litre. Meantime, in the Irish Republic, the Mineral Oil Tax Relief Scheme, which has been operating since 2005, offers, on a competitive basis, full excise duty relief to producers supplying the Irish Republic market. NI biofuels producers were eligible to apply but none were successful and the Scheme is now closed.

DETI is currently leading a cross Departmental Group, which includes Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and Invest NI, to identify the opportunities for Bioenergy, including biofuels, and is commissioning work to assess the current scale, future sustainable growth potential and optimum size and scale of the sector in NI. This should lead to the development of a co-ordinated Bioenergy strategy.

Pending the outcome of this work, Invest NI has continued to provide technical and legislative advice

to over 40 individuals/companies on the production of biofuels using current technology and will provide further advisory support to biofuel producers, in particular, to develop and export second generation technology biofuels. Due to issues around the viability and sustainability of individual biofuel business proposals, Invest NI policy is to encourage the sector through development of collaborative business opportunities and the facilitation of cross border energy clusters, rather than intervene financially in the direct production of biofuels.

Tourism in Portaferry

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he is taking to ensure that the planning application for apartments on the Narrows site will not impact adversely on the tourist potential of Portaferry. (AQW 2278/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Portaferry is featured as a key location along the St. Patrick's Trail, a prime touring route currently being developed from Bangor to Armagh as part of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's (NITB) St. Patrick/Christian Heritage Signature Project.

DOE Planning Service has confirmed that two applications were received on 5th November 2007 for the Narrows site. One is for full planning permission (X/2007/1268/F) for a housing development including 13 apartments and parking. The second application (X/2007/1267/CA) is for demolition of all buildings on the site to enable re-construction at 8, 10, 12 Shore Road, Portaferry. The site lies within the Portaferry Conservation Area.

Both applications are at an early stage in the planning process and will be assessed in accordance with prevailing policies and procedures. Material considerations will be taken into account prior to the final determination of the applications.

NITB will be contacting DOE Planning Service to reinforce the role Portaferry plays within the St. Patrick's Trail and the need for any proposed developments to complement the overall visitor experience the St. Patrick/Christian Heritage Signature Project is aiming to create.

Grants to Regency Spinning Limited, Newtownards

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail any grants paid by his department or its agencies, other than Invest NI, to Regency Spinning Limited in Newtownards, in each of the last five years, and to indicate whether or not the potential exists for the clawback of these public funds. (AQW 2287/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

No grants have been paid by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment or its agencies, other than Invest NI, to Regency Spinning Limited, Newtownards, in any of the last five years.

Money from Invest NI to TYCO

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the amount of money TYCO received from Invest NI in each of the last five years; and (ii) his department's plans to recoup this money. (AQW 2324/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

(i) Invest NI made one offer of assistance to Tyco Healthcare UK Manufacturing Ltd (Tyco) in the last five years. The offer related to training assistance via the Company Development Programme (CDP). The offer was made in January 2005 and was for the amount of £218,623 of which £160,002 was paid.

(ii) Invest NI will not seek repayment of the training assistance given the success of the training programme and the fact that the skills are considered transferable. It is expected that these skills should provide a future economic benefit.

In the case of Tyco the CDP programme was successful:

- 103 operators achieved a full NVQ2 in Performing Manufacturing Operations;
- 13 staff achieved ILM2 and
- 11 staff achieved ILM3.

The company has advised that each worker completed an additional 2 units for the NVQ2 qualifications – which require a minimum of 4 units - to ensure flexibility across all skills.

(NVQ – National Vocational Qualification ILM – Institute of Leadership and Management)

Stress Amongst Public Sector Workers

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to confirm whether or not the Health and Safety Executive has recently been commissioned to undertake a comprehensive survey relating to stress amongst public sector workers in Northern Ireland. (AQW 2371/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI) has not been commissioned to undertake a survey relating to stress amongst public sector workers. HSENI has however an ongoing programme of

engagement with the public sector including the Civil Service, aimed at assisting management to reduce sickness absence attributable to stress.

Northern Ireland Tourist Board grants

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the grants paid by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to the Portaferry Hotel, and The Narrows, Portaferry. (AQW 2401/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) issued a capital grant of £179,940 on 1st January 1992, on behalf of the International Fund for Ireland, to the Portaferry Hotel, Portaferry.

NITB issued a capital grant of £168,711 on 13th January 1995, on behalf of the International Fund for Ireland, to the Narrows Guest House, Portaferry.

NITB issued a grant of £10,634.71 on 15th March 1996, on behalf of the European Union under the Marketing Support Scheme, to the Portaferry Hotel, Portaferry.

In April 2002 the Capital Investment Programme for tourism accommodation development moved from the NITB to Invest NI. Since then, Invest NI has not provided any further grant assistance to either of the above businesses.

Wi-Fi

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail when and where wi-fi will be turned on in Belfast. (AQW 2460/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: The telecommunications sector is a privatised and independently regulated sector. There is already a number of wi-fi nodes operating on a commercial basis across Belfast and the decision to roll-out further nodes will be a commercial decision for operators. As well as in Belfast, wi-fi services are available across Northern Ireland including in hotels, cafes, railway stations and airports. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) does not maintain a list of these locations, however a range of internet sites can easily be accessed to assist customers in locating these nodes.

Economic Task Force

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he will take to establish an

economic task force to address the recent job losses in Limavady. (AQW 2481/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest Northern Ireland, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Social Security Agency have well established procedures for dealing with large scale redundancy situations.

Invest NI has, for a number of years, worked with local stakeholders to agree priorities and plans for the economic development of the region through the North West Action Plan. This approach has secured growth against all targets, both concerning indigenous and foreign investment in the region.

I therefore believe that this existing mechanism, already involving local stakeholders, is the most appropriate and efficient way forward.

ENVIRONMENT

Exemption Certificates for Vehicles

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the reasons why the Driving and Vehicle Agency no longer issues exemption certificates in relation to vehicles that cannot be tested, due to backlogs of work at test centres; and to indicate whether or not she will reinstate the issuing of these certificates until such backlogs are addressed. (AQW 2176/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): Certificates of Temporary Exemption were introduced to deal with the backlog arising from strike action in 2004. This was very much a temporary measure to enable vehicles to be licensed and legal on the roads. The certificates were withdrawn in December 2006 as the situation had returned to normal and the Agency was in a position to offer appointments within the average waiting time target. Given that the average performance across Northern Ireland is currently within the published target of 21 days there are no grounds to reintroduce such certificates.

Planning Application Process

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the procedures which planning officials follow when a planning application has been deferred; and to make available (i) the guidance which was issued to the Chief Executives of Councils, and Divisional Planning Managers; and (ii) the advisory circular which was issued to Planning Service staff. (AQW 2204/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The procedures which planning officials follow when a planning application has been deferred are set out in Planning Circular PC 16/06 entitled 'Guidance on Consulting Councils about planning applications'.

These procedures are also based on the document that issued to the Chief Executives of Councils entitled 'Guidance on Consulting Councils about Planning Applications'. More recently the Chief Executive of Planning Service issued further guidance to Councils specifically for draft PPS14 applications. This was copied to Divisional Managers.

A copy of the advisory circular issued to Planning Service staff and the documents issued to Chief Executives of Councils are available in the Assembly Library.

Planning Application Process

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment what action she is taking to ensure that a consistent approach applies across all district councils, in relation to the deferral of planning applications.

(AQW 2206/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Planning Circular PC 16/06 issued to all Planning Service staff in November 2006. It provides information and clarification on the operation of the deferral procedure and consultation arrangements with Councils. It sets out the detail of the agreed procedures between Planning Service and the NILGA workgroup that should be followed. Guidance on Consulting Councils about planning applications was issued to the Chief Executives of Councils in November 2006.

In addition, the Chief Executive of Planning Service has written to all Councils about additional arrangements relating only to draft PPS 14 applications.

Following these agreed arrangements should ensure consistency across the Divisions in relation to the deferral of planning applications.

Strategic Projects Unit

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the criteria used by the Strategic Projects Unit to process (i) non-Article 31 applications; and (ii) Article 31 applications. (AQW 2207/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Non-Article 31 applications which are processed by the Strategic Projects Unit are those which are generally considered to be of economic and/or social significance. These include commercial and infrastructure projects – such as those included in the Investment Strategy for

Northern Ireland 2005-2015 (ISNI) – as well as projects identified by Invest NI.

The Strategic Projects Unit may also be responsible for processing smaller scale health and education projects such as those which form part of a wider ISNI infrastructure programme.

Article 31 of The Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 enables the Department to deal with major applications under special process arrangements where they:

- involve a substantial departure from the development plan for the area to which they relate;
- are of significance to the whole or a substantial part of Northern Ireland;
- affect the whole of a neighbourhood; or

consist of or include the construction, formation, laying out or alteration of a means of access to a trunk road or of any other development of land within 67 metres of the middle of such a road, or of the nearest part of a special road.

Planning Application Process

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment to detail whether or not there is a policy in relation to the timescale within which an office meeting will be held after a deferral has been granted; and if not, what plans she has to introduce such a policy in order to improve the efficiency of the planning application process. (AQW 2217/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Revised guidance in respect of the Deferral Process issued to both Planning Service staff and the Chief Executives of Councils in November 2006. To allow a degree of flexibility in this process, the guidance does not stipulate any specific timescale within which an office meeting will be held after a deferral has been granted.

A review of revised council consultation arrangements is ongoing. When the final report is received, its recommendations will be carefully considered in due course.

Threemile Water River Basin, Newtownabbey

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the action she is taking to ensure that (i) planning applications to develop housing or commercial locations, which lie within the catchment area and feeder streams that drain the Threemile Water river basin in Newtownabbey, do not have an adverse impact on the salmonid status of the river; and (ii) surface water and sewage disposal plans for potential develop-

ments in this area meet the highest standards.

(AQW 2286/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Planning Service consults Northern Ireland Water and the Department's Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) on all planning applications to develop housing or commercial locations in Newtownabbey. Planning Service also routinely consults DCAL Inland Waterways and Inland Fisheries on planning applications in river basins and DARD Rivers Agency on applications on land liable to flooding from a watercourse.

Separately all development which involves a discharge of trade or sewage effluent (including site drainage liable to contamination) to a waterway requires consent from EHS under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999. Failure to comply with the conditions of a discharge consent is an offence.

The consultation responses to Planning Service are material to whether the proposal is refused or approved with conditions and/or informatives.

Where a waterway has been designated as salmonid, consent conditions will be set to ensure that the environmental quality standards in the EC Directive are maintained. If the assessment shows that the waterway in question could not sustain the discharge without an adverse impact on water quality, consent may be refused.

Car Clamping

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of cars clamped in the past 12 months; and to provide a breakdown of the reasons for these cars being clamped. (AQW 2319/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The number of vehicles clamped and/or seized in the past 12 months was 5,358. Vehicles are clamped and/or seized and impounded for the offence of being unlicensed while on a public road.

Illegal Dumping

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of prosecutions for illegal dumping in each council area in each of the last three years; and the total amount imposed in fines.

(AQW 2338/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The number of successful prosecutions against those convicted of illegal dumping in each District Council area in each of the last three years is set out at Annex 1 below. The total amount of fines imposed is £477,880.

PROSECUTIONS FOR ILLEGAL DUMPING IN LAST THREE YEARS

District Council	2005	2006	2007 (to date)	Total
Antrim	4	9	-	13
Ards	-	8	3	11
Armagh	3	1	2	6
Ballymena	2	2	3	7
Ballymoney	7	12	2	21
Banbridge	-	-	-	-
Belfast	5	8	-	13
Carrickfergus	1	-	-	1
Castlereagh	-	-	-	-
Coleraine	3	13	2	18
Cookstown	1	4	4	9
Craigavon	-	2	-	2
Derry	3	5	1	9
Down	2	1	2	5
Dungannon	5	4	10	19
Fermanagh	1	4	4	9
Larne	1	2	-	3
Limavady	4	4	1	9
Lisburn	7	8	4	19
Magherafelt	3	3	-	6
Moyle	-	3	3	6
Newry and Mourne	3	1	1	5
Newtownabbey	1	1	1	3
North Down	-	1	-	1
Omagh	1	7	4	12
Strabane	3	7	4	14

Farmers Affected by Flooding

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment whether or not emergency financial assistance will be made available to farmers affected by the flooding in the Glens during the summer. (AQW 2360/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance to District Councils, which closed on 12 September 2007, did not extend to the farming industry. It was limited to supporting district councils in their clean-up activities and to making immediate payments of £1,000 available to householders. This was an offer of practical assistance

following the severe flooding, to assist in making homes habitable as quickly as possible.

Financial Incentives for Recycling

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to encourage recycling by introducing financial incentives for those district councils that increase their recycling output. (AQW 2422/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has no plans to introduce financial incentives for those district councils that increase their recycling output.

The Northern Ireland Waste Management Strategy 2006-2020 "Towards Resource Management" gives a commitment that, by 2009, my Department will consult on the use of financial incentive schemes as a means of motivating recycling. However such schemes, if adopted, would be aimed at providing financial incentives to businesses and the public rather than to district councils.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL**European Union Peace and Reconciliation Programmes**

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the projects funded by the European Union Peace and Reconciliation Programmes, during the last five years, addressing the needs of (i) former members of the security forces; and (ii) ex-prisoners. (AQW 2067/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): (i) The table below details funding awarded under the EU PEACE II Programme during the last five years to projects addressing the needs of former members of the security forces.

Year	Organisation Name	Total Commitment £
2002-03	Disabled Police Officers Association Ltd	89,762
2003-04	Derry and Raphoe Action	27,000
	Disabled Police Officers Association	9,810
	Prison Service Trust	64,039
2004-05	Conflict Trauma Resource Centre	9,837
2006-07	Organisation for Ex-servicemen and women Teoranta (ONET)	24,690
Total		225,138

(ii) The table below details funding awarded under the EU PEACE II Programme during the last five years to ex-prisoners' groups.

Year	Organisation Name	Total Commitment £
2002-03	Abhaile Aris	447,844
	Amach Agus Isteach	150,466
	An-Eochair Ex-Prisoner Support Group	260,740
	Ar Ais Aris	146,011
	Aráis Aris ar an Omaigh	35,600
	Cairde Strabane Republican Ex-prisoners Group	221,154
	Coiste Na N-Iarchimí	697,407
	Cumann na Meirleach Ard Mhaca Theas	414,373
	Expac (Ex-Prisoners Assistance Committee Ltd)	391,927
	Failte Abhaile	437,007
	Failte Cluain Eois	404,152
	Goitse	141,268
	Iar Cimi Liatroma Teoranta	399,078
	Iarchimí Fhearmanach	261,529
	Lisburn Prisoners Support Project	549,308
	North Belfast Prisoner's Aid	93,242
	Prisoners Enterprise Project	217,639
	REACT (formerly EPIC Mid Ulster)	323,890
	REACT Northwest	123,217
	Tar Abhaile	300,549
	Tar Anall	219,325
	Tar Isteach	152,067
	Teach na Failte	414,329
	Trá Ghearr	132,570
2003-04	AAI Construction Ltd	106,315
	An-Eochair Ex-Prisoner Support Group	29,911
	Áras Tar Abhaile	427,919
	Cairde Strabane Republican Ex-prisoners Group	9,439
	Cumann na Meirleach Ard Mhaca Theas	111,073
	Failte Abhaile	131,200
	Goitse	5,420
	Iarchimí Fhearmanach	10,000
	Lagan Valley Ex-Prisoners Support Group	6,543
	Lisburn Prisoners Support Project	68,149

Year	Organisation Name	Total Commitment £
2003-04	North Belfast Prisoner's Aid	41,712
	Prisoners Enterprise Project	15,185
	REACT Northwestww	10,000
	Tar Anall	252,729
	Tar Isteach	8,280
	Teach na Failte	24,433
	Trá Ghearr	10,000
2004-05	Ar Ais Aris	66,125
	Coiste Na N-Iarchimí	124,587
	Cumann na Meirleach	61,094
	EPIC (Ex Prisoners Interpretative Centre)	4,000
	REACT (formerly EPIC Mid Ulster)	15,572
	Tar Anall	26,727
2005-06	Abhaile Aris Teo	357,230
	Coiste Na N-Iarchimí	387,000
	Expac (Ex-Prisoners Assistance Committee Ltd)	238,751
	Failte Abhaile	319,856
	Fáilte Chluain Eois	221,148
	Iar Cimi Liatroma Teoranta	252,370
	REACT	132,976
	Tar Isteach	197,730
2006-07	Ar Ais Aris	76,403
	Cairde Strabane Republican Ex-prisoners Group	10,133
	Coiste Na N-Iarchimí	283,157
	Expac (Ex-Prisoners Assistance Committee Ltd)	74,286
	Failte Abhaile	78,820
	REACT	20,800
	REACT Armagh	115,786
	Teach na Failte	108,460
Total		11,376,011

In addition, the following organisations (although not specifically ex-prisoners' groups) have been awarded EU PEACE II funding in the last five years for projects addressing the needs of ex-prisoners.

Year	Organisation Name	Total Commitment £
2002-03	Cavan Family Resource Centre Ltd.	223,710
	Clonoe Community Development Association	5,000
	Comharchumann Finn Thiar Teo	9,677
	New Lodge Forum	216,212
	Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO)	89,800
	Rossinver Community Development Company Ltd.	118,492
	Upper Springfield Development Trust	186,687
2003-04	Educational Trust	302,276
	New Lodge Forum	9,291
	Trademark	59,753
	University of Ulster	60,919
2004-05	Armagh College of Further and Higher Education	66,646
	Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre	339,993
	Upper Springfield Development Trust	32,000
2005-06	Iar Cimi Liatroma Teoranta	252,370
2006-07	CHARTER for Northern Ireland	121,152
Total		2,093,978

Non-Pensionable Bonuses

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of non-pensionable bonuses that were paid to staff in his department in each of the last three years; and what steps is he taking to ensure that such bonuses are not used as a cheaper alternative to an appropriate salary increase.

(AQW 2145/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There is no question that non-pensionable bonuses are being used as an alternative to salary increases. The policy adopted within the Northern Ireland Civil Service is that not all reward should be in the form of consolidated salary increases, and that non-pensionable bonuses, focussed on the assessment of in-year performance, should form an integral part of wider pay strategies.

The number of non-pensionable bonuses paid to staff in DFP in each of the last three years is detailed in the attached table.

Year	Number of Non-consolidated, Non-pensionable Bonuses	Number of Special Bonuses
2005/06	2303	424
2006/07	2519	390
2007/08	2389	275

Population in Ballywalter, Carrowdore and Greyabbey

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide a breakdown of the people living in the Ballywalter, Carrowdore and Greyabbey areas, by the following age groupings (i) 0-5 years; (ii) 5-10 years; (iii) 10-20 years; (iv) 20-40 years; (v) 40-60 years; and (vi) 60 plus years old. (AQW 2171/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The table below provides a breakdown by age of the people living in the Ballywalter, Carrowdore and Greyabbey settlements.

Breakdown by age of the people living in Ballywalter, Carrowdore and Greyabbey settlements (Source: 2001 Census)

BREAKDOWN BY AGE OF THE PEOPLE LIVING IN BALLYWALTER, CARROWDORE AND GREYABBEY SETTLEMENTS (SOURCE: 2001 CENSUS)

Age Grouping	Ballywalter	Carrowdore	Greyabbey
Aged 0 to 4 years ¹	84	69	61
Aged 5 to 9 years	81	57	71
Aged 10 to 19 years	152	107	98
Aged 20 to 39 years	360	272	293
Aged 40 to 59 years	357	186	256
Aged 60 years and over	382	125	232
All people	1416	816	1011

¹ The upper limits of the age grouping should be interpreted as follows: Aged 0 to 4 years means all those aged up to but not including 5 years.

Influenza

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of deaths in Northern Ireland from influenza in each of the last five years. (AQW 2242/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The table below gives the number of deaths registered each year between 2002 and 2006 where the underlying or main cause of death was recorded as influenza¹.

Registration Year	Number of deaths where influenza was the main cause of death
2002	1
2003	4
2004	1
2005	0
2006 ^p	1

¹ International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes J10-J11.

^p Provisional data.

Land and Property Services Agency

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm whether or not the Land and Property Services Agency uses offices outside Northern Ireland for the handling and processing of details and correspondence from people in Northern Ireland, with regard to rates collection matters. (AQW 2289/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The IT suppliers for Land and Property Services, ICS Computing Ltd, have a contract with Adare Limited, based in Huddersfield, to provide a secure, operational print management service for printing and issuing bills and related correspondence to ratepayers in Northern Ireland.

Ministerial Statement on ‘Outlining a Vision for our Education System’

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail when, and how, he was first notified of the Ministerial Statement, ‘Outlining a Vision for our Education system’; and to confirm whether or not he had discussions with the Minister of Education on the subject matter of the statement before it was issued. (AQW 2418/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I was first notified of the content of the statement the Minister for Education made to the Assembly on Tuesday 4 December outlining her vision for the education system in Northern Ireland when it was received in my Private Office at 10.51am on the same day and brought to my attention immediately thereafter.

The Education Minister met with the Chair of the Education Committee on Monday afternoon, 3 December, to brief him on the issue. I also attended this meeting.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Respite Beds

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of respite beds within the Western Health and Social Services Board; their location; and the frequency of their occupation, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1741/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Information on the number of respite beds, their location and frequency of occupation is not collected centrally.

Community Information Branch (CIB) within the Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety, requested the information from the Chief Executive for Western Health & Social Services Board (WHSSB). The information provided by the WHSSB is detailed in the following table.

Location		2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Foyle HSS Trust	No. of Respite Beds	10	10	10	10	11
	*Occupied Bed Days	4,890	4,292	4,312	3,537	4,272
Sperrin Lakeland	No. of Respite Beds	6	6	6	7	7
	*Occupied Bed Days	3,242	4,049	3,531	5,035	4,431
WHSSB	No. of Respite Beds	16	16	16	17	18
	*Occupied Bed Days	8,132	8,341	7,843	8,572	8,703

- Occupied Bed Day figures include a range of provision over and above its correlation with the number of Respite Beds.
- As a consequence, the multiple of 365 days per year in relation to the number of Respite Beds is less than the Number of Occupied Bed Days.

Administrators Within the Health Service

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of administrators currently employed within the Health Service in Northern Ireland; and to outline how the number has changed over the last decade.

(AQW 1950/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Tables 1 and 2 below give details of the numbers of Administrative and Clerical staff in each grade group in Northern Ireland Health and Social Care organisations over the last 10 years, and the percentage change over time.

TABLE 1. ADMINISTRATIVE AND CLERICAL STAFF BY GRADE (HEADCOUNT), 1998 - 2007

Grade	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	% change 1998 - 2007	% change 2006 - 2007
Clerical and Admin	8,408	8,519	8,842	9,060	9,523	9,910	10,406	10,808	10,862	10,657	26.7%	-1.9%
Manager	504	500	579	603	669	767	852	921	964	990	96.4%	2.7%
Senior Manager	623	652	710	782	861	972	1,111	1,157	1,182	1,153	85.1%	-2.5%
Senior Executives	146	142	156	163	167	171	173	189	196	161	10.3%	-17.9%
Board Member	52	57	58	60	118	159	162	162	158	82	57.7%	-48.1%
Total	9,733	9,870	10,345	10,668	11,338	11,979	12,704	13,237	13,362	13,043	34.0%	-2.4%

TABLE 2. ADMINISTRATIVE AND CLERICAL STAFF BY GRADE (WTE), 1998 - 2007

Grade	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	% change 1998 - 2007	% change 2006 - 2007
Clerical and Admin	7342.21	7452.41	7703.82	7867.99	8230.06	8538.55	8968.80	9214.05	9276.33	9116.04	24.2%	-1.7%
Manager	495.35	485.37	561.20	582.95	639.93	736.34	812.60	882.36	919.21	946.70	91.1%	3.0%
Senior Manager	616.08	641.57	697.51	764.40	842.88	952.66	1085.88	1130.66	1152.08	1123.05	82.3%	-2.5%
Senior Executives	142.50	138.50	152.50	159.45	166.96	170.27	172.17	186.90	194.19	159.50	11.9%	-17.9%
Board Member	48.13	50.13	52.50	54.50	115.00	156.00	159.00	159.00	158.00	82.00	70.4%	-48.1%
Total	8644.27	8767.98	9167.53	9429.29	9994.83	10553.82	11198.45	11572.97	11699.81	11427.29	32.2%	-2.3%

Source: Human Resources Management System

WTE – Whole=Time Equivalent

Figures are as at 30th September in each year

Prescription Charges

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the spend per head on prescription charges in Northern Ireland; and how this compares with England, Scotland and Wales. (AQW 1985/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is provided below. The data relates to 2005/2006 which is the most recent financial year for which information is available.

TABLE 1

Prescribing Period 2005/2006 financial year	Northern Ireland	England	Wales	Scotland
Income from prescription charge receipts / population	£13.2 million / 1.7 million	£427million / 51 million	£24.5 million / 3 million	£46 million / 5 million
Average spend per head on prescription charges.	£7.76	£8.37	£8.17	£9.20

Sources: Information and Analysis Branch, DHSSPS
Central Services Agency, Northern Ireland
Central Services Agency, Scotland
Dept of Health, London
Dept of Health, Wales

Cost of Hospital Procedures

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the unit cost of hospital procedures in Northern Ireland; and how this compares with England, Scotland and Wales. (AQW 1986/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In Northern Ireland and England reference unit costs at Healthcare Resource Group (HRG) level are returned by Trusts annually. A given HRG category attempts to aggregate a cohort of patients for whom treatment is provided which are similar in resource consumption and where treatment relates to a similar body system. This approach is used to ensure that costs do not have to be derived for thousands of possible procedures or other hospital stays but for a more manageable level of groupings.

There are over 600 possible categories of HRGs each of which can occur across three patient types (elective inpatient, daycase and non-elective inpatient) for maternity, acute and elderly specialties. This leads to a significant number of different unit costs of hospital procedures. HRGs do not apply to outpatient, mental health or learning disability hospital services.

Caution should be used in comparing costs where there are only few instances of a particular procedure, because the costing is a top down process of apportionment. Caution should also be used in respect of national comparisons because of differences in timing or of funding flows.

Cost information on hospital procedures at HRG (Healthcare Resource Group) level in Northern Ireland for 2005/06 is published online at:
http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/dhssps_reference_costs_2005-06_-narrative.pdf

Cost information on English hospital procedures at HRG level for 2005/06 is published online at:
http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/idcplg?IdcService=SS_GET_PAGE&siteId=en&ssTargetNodeId=566&ssDocName=DH_062884

Our most recent understanding is that in Wales a reference cost collection on a HRG basis has been in place for three years. However it is not directly comparable because critical care is not excluded from HRG groupings in Wales, as it would be in England and Northern Ireland.

In Scotland, retrospective HRG level unit costs are not collected from Health Boards or Hospitals on a HRG basis. Costs are collected and published at specialty level only.

Hospital Stays

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average length of hospital stays in Northern Ireland; and how this compares with England, Scotland and Wales. (AQW 1987/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the average length of hospital stays in each of the four UK countries, for all specialties, for the last five years is detailed in the following table.

Year	Average Length of Stay (in days) – All Specialties			
	Northern Ireland	England ¹	Scotland	Wales
2002 - 2003	7.8	7.9	9.7	8.7
2003 - 2004	7.8	7.4	9.1	8.6

Year	Average Length of Stay (in days) – All Specialties			
	Northern Ireland	England ¹	Scotland	Wales
2004 - 2005	7.6	7.1	8.7	8.5
2005 - 2006	7.3	6.6	8.4	8.3
2006 - 2007	6.8	N/A	8.0	8.0

¹ – Information relating to the position in England for 2006-07 is not currently available.

Source: Departmental Return KH03a, Department of Health, Social Service & Public Safety, Northern Ireland.
Hospital Episode Statistics (HES), Information Centre for Health & Social Care (England).
ISD (S)I, ISD Scotland, NHS National Services Scotland.
QSI, StatsWales, Welsh Assembly Government.

Note: Day case admissions are excluded from the calculation.

Cost of Prescription Items

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average cost per prescription item in Northern Ireland; and how this compares with England, Scotland and Wales.
(AQW 1988/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is provided below.

The data provided refers to calendar year, except for the Scottish data which is provided for the financial year ending March 2007.

TABLE 2

Prescribing Period 2006	Northern Ireland	England	Wales	Scotland 2006-07
Average cost per item	£12.87	£10.90	£9.74	£11.97

Sources: Information and Analysis Branch, DHSSPS Central Services Agency, Northern Ireland

Staff Productivity in the Health Service

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the present level of staff productivity in the Health Service in Northern Ireland; and how this compares with England, Scotland and Wales.
(AQW 1989/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: To date no global measure of workforce

productivity exists for health or social care in Northern Ireland and no official estimates have been produced comparing the performance in each of the UK countries.

The accurate measurement of workforce productivity, in a complex business area such as the provision of health and social care, is far from straightforward. Aside from issues concerned with adequately capturing the total volume of activity which takes place in a diverse range of settings, and taking into account the changing skill mix of the workforce, any robust productivity measure must also take into account changes in the quality of services. My Department is currently taking work forward on all of these fronts with the UK Centre for the Measurement of Government Activity (UKCeMGA) who are at the leading edge of developments in the measurement of Government productivity.

Staff productivity comparisons are only available in the hospital sector and following the work in the Appleby Review a Productivity Working Group of DHSSPS and DFP officials now assess that there is a difference of between 9 and 11% between here and England. There are many possible explanations for this differential, including the structure and scale of hospital provision and the extent to which this can be closed is unclear.

The potential for improving staff productivity is a key element of the Department's efficiency agenda.

Comparisons with Scotland and Wales are not available.

Ambulances

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of ambulances based in stations in West Tyrone which are available for 999 calls.
(AQW 2066/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The following table sets out emergency ambulance resources based at Omagh, Strabane and Castlederg Ambulance Stations:

	Omagh	Strabane	Castlederg
Resources	6 A&E ambulances 1 Rapid Response Vehicle	2 A&E ambulances	2 A&E ambulances

	Omagh	Strabane	Castlederg
Cover	Mon-Sun: 0800-1600hrs 3 x A&E crews Mon-Sun: 1600-2300hrs 3 x A&E crews Mon, Tues, Wed, Thurs 2300-0800 hours 2 x A&E crews Friday and Sat: 2100-0800hrs 3 x A&E crews Rapid Response Vehicle Mon- Sun: 0800-2000 hours	24/7 1 A&E crew Ambulance cover is provided by Altnagelvin on Thursday between 0800hrs - 2000hrs	Mon-Sat: 0800-1700hrs 1 x A&E crew Mon-Sun: 2300-0800hrs 1 x A&E crew Ambulance cover is provided by Strabane/ Omagh: Mon-Sat 1700-2300hrs Sunday between 0800-2300hrs

Cigarette Purchases

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether or not his department has conducted any research into the demographic most likely to purchase (i) ten-pack cigarettes; and (ii) cigarettes from vending machines; and to detail his plans to publish this information. (AQW 2076/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has not commissioned research in these areas. Research carried out in England in 2004* found that, of all 11-15 year olds who had successfully purchased cigarettes from a shop on their most recent attempt, 55% had bought 10 cigarettes and 36% had bought 20 cigarettes. Children, in particular, are known to purchase cigarettes from a variety of sources and the 2004 findings identified the main sources of cigarettes obtained by 11-15 year old smokers as follows.

Source	Regular Smokers	Occasional Smokers
Shops	77%	41%
Given by friends	51%	73%
Bought from other people	42%	25%
Vending machines	24%	8%
Given by siblings	16%	6%
Given by parents	10%	1%

Smokers were invited to name as many sources as applied to them.

* Smoking Drinking and Drug Use Among Young People in England in 2004

Cigarette Legislation

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration he is giving to the introduction of legislation to limit the availability of, or ban, (i) cigarette vending machines; and (ii) ten-pack cigarettes. (AQW 2077/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Children and Young Persons (Protection from Tobacco) (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 requires the publication of warning statements on vending machines to the effect that the machine is only for the use of people aged 16 or over.

My Department's Five Year Tobacco Action Plan includes a commitment to work with local councils to ensure that the placement of tobacco vending machines complies with the voluntary code produced by the National Association of Cigarette Machine Operators. In addition, the duties of 12 additional enforcement officers appointed earlier this year include enhanced activity in relation to underage sales.

UK Health Departments remain concerned about the levels of smoking among young people and the Department of Health last week announced its intention to consult on banning the sale of tobacco in vending machines and reducing cigarette displays in shops. I have asked my officials to discuss these issues and the scope for further action to tackle children's smoking with their counterparts in Great Britain when they next meet in January.

Prescription Charges

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to examine the possibility of abolishing prescription charges, in line with similar proposals for Wales. (AQW 2085/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The issue of prescription charges was debated in the Assembly on the 15th May when I announced that I was setting up a cost and benefit review to inform the way forward on the current system of prescription charges. The abolition of prescription charges will be one of the options examined in the review. The review is to due report back to me by the end of the year, and I shall bring proposals for the way forward to the Executive early in 2008.

Community Care Assistants

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current hourly rate paid to community care assistants in each

of the five Health and Social Care Trust areas for the provision of (i) personal care; (ii) practical care; and (iii) sitting services. (AQW 2096/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are a wide range of staff groups which could fall within the description of community care assistants. This includes home helps, domiciliary care workers and community nursing assistants. Under the Agenda for Change arrangements now in operation in all five Health and Social Care Trusts these staff groups would fall into one of the following pay ranges, depending on the skills required to do their jobs: Band 1 (minimum hourly rate £6.23 – maximum hourly rate £6.78), Band 2 (minimum hourly rate £6.43 – maximum hourly rate £7.94) or Band 3 (minimum hourly rate £7.38 – maximum hourly rate £8.83).

Care Workers from External Agencies

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current hourly rate paid to external agencies in each of the five Health and Social Care Trust areas for providing (i) personal care; (ii) practical care; and (iii) sitting services. (AQW 2097/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not held centrally by my Department. External agencies are not contracted on the basis of the hourly rates of pay paid to their employees. This is an employment matter between the agency and their employees.

Community Care Assistants

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current weekend rates of pay and mileage allowance paid to community care assistants providing community care in each of the five Health and Social Care Trust areas.

(AQW 2098/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are a variety of methods used to calculate payments to reward staff in the HSC who work outside normal hours and at the weekends. These range from a percentage increase on the basic pay to overtime rates at time and a half. There are however plans under the Agenda for Change arrangements to unify payments to all non-medical staff for working in the evenings and at the weekends. These new arrangements will be introduced from 1 April 2008.

Where HSC staff are required to undertake business travel in order to carry out their work, they are compensated by their employer. This level of compensation depends on them satisfying particular criteria on the

number of miles undertaken, the engine capacity of the vehicle and the appropriate form of transport. The rates payable are set out below and do not vary for weekends.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT MILEAGE RATE

Public Transport mileage is payable at 23p per mile where the employer deems that standard or regular user rates do not apply.

STANDARD RATE

Engine Capacity	Up to 1000cc	1001cc to 1500cc	Over 1500cc
Up to 3,500 miles	34p	43p	53p
Thereafter	16.2p	18.3p	20.5p

REGULAR USER ALLOWANCE

Engine Capacity	Up to 1000cc	1001cc to 1500cc	Over 1500cc
Lump Sum	£508	£626	£760
Up to 9000 miles	27p	33.5p	40p
Thereafter	16.2p	18.3p	20.5p

Care Workers from External Agencies

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current weekend rates of pay and mileage allowance paid to external agencies providing community care in each of the five Health and Social Care Trust areas.

(AQW 2099/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not held centrally by my Department. Rates of pay and mileage allowances paid by external agencies will vary and are a matter for the agency and their employees.

Healthy Living Centres

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how the network of healthy living centres in Northern Ireland has been further developed in the last seven months.

(AQW 2104/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Healthy Living Centre (HLC) initiative was funded by the Big Lottery. Healthy Living Centres operate at local level in some parts of Northern Ireland. At local level the Health and Social Services Boards have made or are considering arrangements to match fund extra money made available through Big Lottery to assist with sustaining those Healthy Living Centres currently in existence, at

least in the short term. Agreements with the Boards are subject to monitoring and compliance, and further evaluation will be undertaken to build the evidence base as to the effectiveness of Healthy Living Centres.

At regional level the Department has recently met the HLC Regional Alliance and discussed the role of Healthy Living Centres in tackling health inequalities. The Department is willing to continue with this engagement. The possibility of any additional funding for enhancement must await the final outcome of budget negotiations and would be in any case the responsibility of local commissioners.

Outpatient Waiting Lists

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of money spent on reducing outpatient waiting lists.
(AQW 2117/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In April 2006, 74,000 people were waiting over six months for a first outpatient appointment. By 31 March 2007 this had been reduced to only 32 people.

The achievement of this transformation in performance required a substantial increase in activity. This increase was provided partly through additional evening and weekend sessions, and also by independent sector providers.

During 2006/07, approximately 43,000 people were transferred to independent sector providers for a first outpatient assessment at a cost of £6.3m. Further transfers are taking place in 2007/08 to help ensure the achievement of a 13-week maximum waiting time for outpatients by March 2008.

I consider that supplementing health care capacity with the independent sector is an appropriate short term measure that will continue to be necessary while waiting times are further reduced and backlogs exist, and while any shortfalls in health service capacity are identified and addressed.

MRSA

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps are being taken to eradicate the MRSA bug from hospitals and care homes.
(AQW 2122/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The problem of MRSA, like all healthcare-associated infections, needs to be tackled by a range of policies, both medium and long term. The policy aim is to achieve reductions in incidence, rather

than eradication because there is a consensus among professionals that eradication is not possible.

A considerable number of policies are already in place, the most recent of which I announced on 11 September 2007. I have set reduction targets for two particular healthcare associated infections found in hospitals. This is the first time that this has been done in Northern Ireland. The first of the new targets requires a drop of 10% in the numbers of people in hospital with *Staphylococcus aureus* bloodstream infections, including MRSA, by March 2009. The baseline for measurement of the reduction is to be the financial year 2006/7. At the same time I launched a new regional leaflet and poster advising patients on measures they can take to prevent infection, and encouraging visitors, in particular, to go straight to the hand sanitiser when entering wards. These have gone out to all hospitals.

Regulations which came into effect in 2005 place a requirement on care home proprietors to have in place arrangements to minimise the risk of infection and the spread of infection between residents and staff. In addition, care standards, due to be published this month, set minimum requirements for infection prevention and control arrangements which must be met in all care homes. The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority registers and inspects all care homes and will take account of the new standards.

Each of the four Health and Social Services Boards has a Health Protection Nurse whose role includes providing advice to care homes.

Enhanced staff training on infection reduction is ongoing, as is work on a regional infection control web-based manual. A dress code policy is now out for consultation. Extended screening of hospital patients for MRSA is also under consideration. Extra funding has been provided this year through the appointment of five new Infection Control Nurses for Trusts, part of whose job is to address community infection, including in care homes.

New South Eastern Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of Manager positions in the (i) Down and Lisburn Trust; and (ii) Ulster Community and Hospital Trust, before they were merged into the new South Eastern Trust.
(AQW 2123/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Down Lisburn Trust had 241 manager positions and the Ulster Community Hospitals Trust had 199 manager positions before they merged into the South Eastern HSC Trust.

Cancelled Outpatient Clinics

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (i) outpatient clinics cancelled in each of the five Health and Social Care Trusts; and (ii) appointment slots that were available for these cancelled clinics, for each of the last four years. (AQW 2126/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on (i) the number of cancelled clinics in each of the five Health and Social Care Trusts for the last four years is detailed below. Information on (ii) the number of appointment slots that were available for these cancelled clinics is not available.

Trust	Number of Cancelled Clinics			
	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007
Belfast	5,648	5,979	6,081	5,292
South Eastern	2,154	2,276	2,489	2,157
Northern	1,768	1,901	2,077	2,065
Southern	1,936	2,069	2,215	2,439
Western	1,559	1,770	1,909	1,894
Northern Ireland	13,065	13,995	14,771	13,847

Source: Departmental Return KH09, Department of Health, Social Service & Public Safety, Northern Ireland.

Note: Any clinic that has patients already booked into it and that has to be cancelled is counted as a cancelled clinic. Where a clinic has no patients but is scheduled within the next 6 months, then if this clinic is cancelled it is counted as a cancelled clinic. Where a clinic has no patients but is scheduled more than 6 months ahead, then if this clinic is cancelled it is not counted as a cancelled clinic

There has been a year-on-year reduction in the number of patients who did not attend an outpatient appointment without informing the hospital (Did Not Attend rate) in NI since 2000/01. The DNA rate in Northern Ireland for 2006/07 is 11.4%. This is comparable with performance in England during the same period (10.8%). I am not complacent about this however, and we continue to take all possible steps to reduce non-attendance and clinic cancellation rates. New, more patient-focused, booking arrangements are currently being put in place across all specialties which will further reduce the likelihood of patients not attending their appointments.

Proposed Funding

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any proposed funding to organisations offering advice on sexual orientation, in each of the next three years. (AQW 2133/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Subject to the availability of resources, it is anticipated that my Department will make available the following amounts to voluntary organisations offering advice on sexual orientation, in each of the next three years:

	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
*Core Funding	£220, 031	£220,031	£220,031

In addition, it is anticipated that my Department will provide in the region of £440,000 to Health and Social Services organisations in each of the next three financial years to support work on sexual health promotion.

* Does not take account of the annual pay and prices uplift.

Proposed Funding

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any proposed funding to organisations offering family planning advice, in each of the next three years. (AQW 2137/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Subject to the availability of resources, it is anticipated that my Department will make available the following amounts to voluntary organisations offering family planning advice, in each of the next three financial years:

	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
*Core Funding	£117,703	£117,703	£117,703
Project Funding	£41,200	£41,585	NIL

In addition, it is anticipated that my Department will provide in the region of £840,000 to Health and Social Care bodies in each of the next three financial years to support work on sexual health promotion and reducing teenage pregnancies.

* Does not take account of the annual pay and prices uplift.

Efficiency Measures

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of money his department expects to save as a direct result of efficiency measures in each of the next three years. (AQW 2148/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department is currently finalising challenging efficiencies amounting to £118m, £233m, £344m for the CSR period from 2010/11, as part of the Executive's agreed approach to the comprehensive spending review. This figure reflects 3% of the baseline annually. Within it are included the 5% savings on Administrative costs within the Department. This builds on £146m of efficiencies already achieved under the previous CSR.

Residential Facility for Addicts

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline any consideration given by his department to developing a residential facility for those with addiction problems under the age of 18 years. (AQW 2156/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Developing appropriate services for young people in respect of substance misuse is a key priority within the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs. Therefore, a range of treatment and counselling services have been put in place for young people under 18 years in Northern Ireland, and these services essentially follow the four tier model of service provision, in line with what is considered to be best practice in this area.

The majority of dedicated services are targeted and orientated towards Tiers 2 and 3, and these involve drug education, assessment and referral at Tier 2 and a multi-disciplinary response of counselling and treatment services at Tier 3, especially for young people with complex needs.

There are currently no dedicated in-patient facilities (Tier 4) for those aged under 18 with substance misuse problems. Demand for such a service is limited and is currently being met by the use of other sources.

We are aware that the Inter Church Addiction Project (ICAP) has a particular interest in this issue, officials have had constructive discussions with ICAP on the issue and these discussions are ongoing.

Services for Disabled Children

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what actions he is taking to improve services for disabled children. (AQW 2157/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department is working in partnership with user and carer groups, the statutory, voluntary, and community sectors to develop a Physical and Sensory Disability Strategy and to conduct a Review of Autism Services. Regional working groups have been established to review the provision of wheelchair and sensory impairment services. Further working groups will be established as required to address other key strands of the strategy. The Physical and Sensory Disability Strategy is expected to be ready for consultation by 31 March 2008. The Final Report of the Review of Autism Services will be produced by 31 March 2008. My Department is also preparing the Government's Response to the Bamford Review of Mental Health & Learning Disability which will be released for public consultation in early 2008.

My Department is also currently involved in a number of improvements to services for children with a learning disability including expansion of community based treatment and assessment, provision of early intervention multi disciplinary teams, transition planning, reviewing services for children with autistic spectrum disorder and investment in the development of seamless services.

A review of speech & language therapy services is also underway and is due to be completed in January 2008. This will impact on service delivery for disabled children.

Music Therapy

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of funding allocated for music therapy provision, for children and young people with special educational needs and mental health problems, in each of the last five years. (AQW 2158/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The amount of funding allocated for music therapy provision, for children and young people with special educational needs, in each of the last five years is outlined below. No funding has been allocated for music therapy provision in respect of children and young people solely with mental health problems.

CORE FUNDING TO NORTHERN IRELAND MUSIC THERAPY TRUST –

2003/2004	£14,580
2004/2005	£14,944
2005/2006	£15,392
2006/2007	£15,854
2007/2008	£16,250

PROJECT FUNDING TO THE NORTHERN IRELAND MUSIC THERAPY TRUST'S ARIOSO PROJECT

Sept 2003/Aug 2004	£30,000
Sept 2004/Aug 2005	£99,211
Sept 2005/Aug 2006	£129,527
Sept 2006/Aug 2007	£111,227
Sept 2007 to date	£36,065

Specialised Mental Health Treatment

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to

AQW 1461/08, to detail (i) the number of children and young people who have been sent for treatment; (ii) the types of treatment they received; and (iii) the healthcare facilities in which they received the treatment. (AQW 2174/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of children and young people who have been sent for treatment outside Northern Ireland are as follows:

2002/03	11
2003/04	8
2004/05	14
2005/06	15
2006/07	18

The complex range of mental health conditions which these young people may suffer from includes Severe Behavioural Problems, Eating Disorders and Acquired Brain Injury. To give more detailed information could compromise a patient's anonymity.

Ambulance Hygiene

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to undertake an assessment of the current hygiene and cleaning regimes for all ambulance services in Northern Ireland; and to detail the action he is taking to ensure that the highest standards of hygiene are maintained within the service. (AQW 2177/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I would refer the hon Lady to the reply I gave the hon member for West Tyrone on 10 December 2007. AQW2065/08

Healthy Living Centres

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to enhance the network of Healthy Living Centres. (AQW 2189/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Healthy Living Centre (HLC) initiative was funded by the Big Lottery. Healthy Living Centres operate at local level in some parts of Northern Ireland. At local level the Health and Social Services Boards have made or are considering arrangements to match fund extra money made available through Big Lottery to assist with sustaining those Healthy Living Centres currently in existence, at least in the short term. Agreements with the Boards are subject to monitoring and compliance, and further

evaluation will be undertaken to build the evidence base as to the effectiveness of Healthy Living Centres.

At regional level the Department has recently met the HLC Regional Alliance and discussed the role of Healthy Living Centres in tackling health inequalities. The Department is willing to continue with this engagement. The possibility of any additional funding for enhancement must await the final outcome of budget negotiations and would be in any case the responsibility of local commissioners.

Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to implement the recommendations of the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability. (AQW 2190/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Boards and Trusts are already planning and developing services in line with Bamford recommendations. However, implementation of the Review requires a Government-wide response and my Department is leading on this work. The response document will be submitted to the Executive for approval early in 2008, once the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review is known, and will then be issued for public consultation.

Early Intervention Service Provision

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to enhance the level of early intervention service provision. (AQW 2191/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department has been working with HSC Boards to develop new arrangements for the more effective management of people with chronic conditions. These arrangements will include education for patients in self-management of their condition, and provision for early intervention, aided where appropriate by new technology which will enable healthcare professionals to remotely monitor the vital signs of their patients and identify problems before they become serious, and so, where necessary, trigger remedial action through community-based support teams. At each stage of a patient's illness, the focus of primary care teams is to assess need and provide prompt intervention that will reduce or delay deterioration.

The recent Bamford review of mental health and learning disability services also highlighted the importance of early intervention in these fields and

this will be taken forward as part of the wider work in response to Bamford.

Music Therapy

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on strategic policy development for music therapy provision. (AQW 2192/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Currently music therapy services are provided through short-term contracts and project funding. These services are mainly provided through the Northern Ireland Music Therapy Trust (NIMT). NIMT keep the Department informed of their project involvement with the HSC and this information is used to assess the need for future strategic development. In addition, music therapists are represented on the Department's Central Advisory Committee for Allied Health Professions

Health and Social Care Trusts

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of savings made following the merger of the nineteen Hospital Trusts into the five Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQW 2198/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The merger of the nineteen Hospital Trusts into the five Health and Social Care Trust only took place from 1 April 2007, so it's too early to advise on the exact levels of savings being achieved.

What I can advise is that the merger of 19 Trusts to just 6 has reduced the number of Directors by more than 50%. That's a reduction of 80 of the most senior staff and real savings will be made at each level of staff as the new Trusts agree their structures.

I expect Trusts and Boards to make savings of £53m per annum from RPA by 2010-11, of which £39m will be from the merger of Trusts.

Management Costs for Hospital Trusts

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the management costs for the nineteen Hospital Trusts, in the month preceding their merger into the five Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQW 2200/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate costs.

Management Costs for Health and Social Care Trusts

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the management costs for the five Health and Social Care Trusts, in the month following the merger of the nineteen Hospital Trusts. (AQW 2201/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate costs.

Taxi Expenditure

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount spent by the Health Service on taxis for the collection of medical records, equipment, staff, and patients over the last four years. (AQW 2202/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate costs.

Healthcare Assistants for Special Schools

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount spent per capita, on the provision of healthcare assistants for special schools, in each Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 2211/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Basic salary costs of healthcare assistants employed by Health and Social Care Trusts are outlined in the table below. Information is not collected on a per capita basis as healthcare assistants in special schools in Northern Ireland provide support in a variety of ways. Healthcare assistants may provide one to one support on an individual basis to children with complex needs, or they may provide support to an entire special school.

Trust	Approx salary costs for healthcare assistant provision in special schools
Northern	£100,000
South Eastern	£15,000
Belfast	£44,000
Southern	£134,000
Western	£0

Note: Western Trust does not currently employ any healthcare assistants.

Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 PART III, to detail (i) how many improvement notices have been issued; (ii) those establishments and individuals to which such notices have been served; and (iii) any prosecutions resulting from inspections and other work conducted by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority. (AQW 2214/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No improvement notices have been issued in relation to Part III of the Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003.

However, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority has issued 93 Failure to Comply notices to 21 establishments since April 2005. Details of the establishments and individuals to which such notices have been served are provided in the table overleaf.

No prosecutions have taken place.

Name of Home	Provider
Ardlough Nursing Home	Four Seasons
Armagh Care (Nursing) Home	Four Seasons
Ashbrooke Nursing Home	Southern Cross
Bangor Care (Nursing) Home McKeown Suite	Four Seasons
Barrhall Residential Care Home	Barrhall
Cherry Tree House Nursing Home	Dr D Harron
Clairville Residential Care Home	Mrs V Reid
Cromore House Nursing Home	Four Seasons
Dhu Varren House Children's Home	Northern HSC Trust
Domnall Nursing Home	Four Seasons
Drumragh Nursing Home	Four Seasons
Flaxfield Children's Home	South Eastern HSC Trust
Galliagh House Residential Care Home	Praxis Care
Glenwood Residential Care Home	South Eastern HSC Trust
Greenville Manor Nursing Home	Four Seasons
King's Castle Nursing Home	Messana Investment Ltd.
Laurelhill Residential Home	South Eastern HSC Trust
Mount Lens Nursing Home	Four Seasons
South Parade Residential Care Home	Mr I Emerson

Name of Home	Provider
Templemoyle Nursing Home	Southern Cross
Victoria Nursing Home	Dr & Mrs Lynass

Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 PART III Regulation of Establishments and Agencies, to (i) detail how many individuals and establishments have had their registration cancelled; (ii) list those individuals and establishments; and (iii) detail the reason for the cancellation; and in relation to Article 21 of the same Order, to detail the number of cancellations that were made. (AQW 2215/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: To date, no individuals or establishments have had their registration cancelled under Part III of the Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003.

Radiotherapy Services in the North West

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what plans he has to establish radiotherapy services in the North West. (AQW 2231/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Radiotherapy for the population of Northern Ireland is provided at the Cancer Centre in Belfast. The Cancer Centre was developed to meet the radiotherapy needs of the population of Northern Ireland 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 Northern Ireland population beyond 2015. Any future development of radiotherapy services will of course be subject to a full economic appraisal.

Improved Performance

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the action he is taking to encourage improved performance across the health service. (AQW 2234/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department is working closely with Boards and Trusts in taking forward a comprehensive programme of reform and modernisation to improve performance across the health service.

I have set a range of challenging performance targets to improve services for patients and put in place robust performance management arrangements underpinned by comprehensive management information systems to ensure that organisations and individuals are held accountable for their delivery. A Service Delivery Unit has also been established to support Boards and Trusts to implement good practice and deliver improved performance.

We are already seeing the impact of these actions with significant improvement in patients' access to elective care services and unscheduled care. I am confident that this approach will in time lead to similar improvements across a wider range of services.

Appleby Report

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the recommendations of the Appleby Report that he has implemented. (AQW 2235/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Full details are given below. Most of Professor Appleby's recommendations proposed a requirement for further research. My Department has substantially delivered on the research required by the recommendations and in many instances has already brought about real change on the ground. The joint steering group chaired by the DFP and DHSSPS Permanent Secretaries will sign a recommendation off as met when research has been carried out and the way forward in terms of using it to improve performance is agreed.

Recommendation 1: In the light of suggested future funding (see Recommendation 3), in-year monitoring additions to health and social care budgets should cease other than in exceptional circumstances and solely on a one-off basis

The review of HPSS financial control and allocation arrangements has been approved and its recommendation signed off by the Steering Group. Changes implemented include controlling the use of late in-year funding allocations by ensuring that reduced requirements are declared at an earlier stage in the financial year. This will ensure HSS financial stability.

Recommendation 2: Over and above the need to track spending for reasons of financial probity, the main performance policy monitoring focus should be on tracking outcomes, not spending per se. A programme

budgeting approach - as currently being developed in England for 23 disease/service groups- in addition to traditional accounting would be of help with this.

The annual Strategic Resource Framework process forms a good basis for tracking expenditure. An annual comparison of NI and English actual expenditure by Programme Budgeting Category has been established. This recommendation was signed off by the Joint DFP-DHSSPS Appleby Steering Group in July 2007.

Recommendation 4: Further work is needed to investigate the usefulness of employing direct measures of health status (for example, as derived from instruments such as EQ-5D) in resource allocation models.

A report was produced, and peer reviewed, evaluating alternative direct health measures, both in comparison to the English formula and their usefulness in resource allocation work. It was agreed by the interdepartmental steering group that the key outcome for both recommendation 4 and 5 would be a robust assessment of relative health and social care need between each UK country which could reasonably inform resource allocation decisions. This recommendation was therefore signed off by the Steering Group in January 2007.

Recommendation 5: Future work on pan-UK resource allocation model would provide a more empirically-based answer to relative shares of resources. Such work should be open, and draw on extensive experience in the areas of resource allocation models of research groups across the UK.

Acceptance of this recommendation would require the agreement of HM Treasury and all the other UK administration. In the absence of such agreement, the work by DHSSPS and DFP carried out on this recommendation has attempted to follow, as closely as possible, the methodology employed in England to allocate health and social services funding and peer review by Matt Sutton has now been formally finalised. Professor Appleby and DFP have provided a further challenge function at each stage of progress.

This work indicates a health-only index, adjusted for market forces, of 10%. That is, for every pound spent in England on health services, a further ten pence would be needed here to achieve the same level of health in the population. The personal social services work indicated that the index for these services would be 36%, with a combined health and PSS index of 16%.

A final short report is to be produced for the Appleby Steering Group in respect of some outstanding issues which are mainly outside of the English formula. In my Department's view, pending this consideration, this work is now substantially complete and has been subject to independent peer review.

Recommendation 7:

- (a) Routine collection of self-assessed health status data at population level would yield useful comparative data on population health status.
- (b) In addition, the potential for routine collection of patient related outcome measures in health care services should be explored

Plans are being made to include more self assessed data in future health surveys and to consider ways of improving the usefulness of such measures. It is also proposed that patient related outcome measures will be developed and monitored as part of the overall development of the target-setting and performance management approach to improving outcomes for service users. An action plan will be agreed at the next Steering Group meeting.

Recommendation 8: On the basis of current lifestyle data, the funding recommendations based on the Wanless 'fully engaged' scenario imply considerable effort will be needed to engage the Northern Ireland population through expanded public health services and other means (Section 3.2) Wanless fully engaged scenario.

It has been agreed with DFP that a separate interdepartmental group can take this forward. An independent review of the cross departmental Investing for Health strategy will take place next year.

My Department's bids for the new CSR period have been consciously aimed at producing an enhanced level of public health improvement but progress will be limited if the draft Budget allocations are not improved.

Recommendation 9: Further investigation is required of very high

A&E use to explore reasons and find ways for reducing likely inappropriate use.

A comprehensive regional audit of A & E Services has been carried out and a major programme of service improvement including redesign of services and changes in working practices across the whole system has been put in place to achieve better A&E times.

On the ground there has been real change. This time last year, there were typically 300-400 patients each week waiting longer than 12 hours on trolleys in A&E departments across Northern Ireland. Performance in this area has improved significantly in recent months and trolley waits are now a thing of the past. Performance against the four hour target is also greatly improved, from 81% in March 2007, to 92% currently. The Ulster Hospital in particular has made considerable progress against this target. This time last year around 75% of patients attending the Ulster's A&E Department were treated and discharged, or admitted to a ward within four hours of their arrival,

this has increased to 98% in the last two weeks of November this year.

These improvements have been achieved through the introduction of improved ways of working and robust performance management arrangements. No additional funding has been invested in unscheduled care over the last year.

Recommendation 10: Detailed analysis is needed into hospital activity trends as part of a broader analysis of the dynamics of waiting times and lists.

Recommendation 12: Adopt a multi-pronged long-term strategy to reduce waiting times, including long-term targets (with milestones) backed by strong incentives.

Recommendation 15: Investigate scope for further reduction in length of stay and avoidance of hospital admissions.

Our response to these recommendations, which included consultants sharing waiting lists and treatment in strict chronological order have been fully signed off by the Appleby Steering Group. Published hospital statistics show the following:

- Between 2005/06 and 2006/07 the number waiting for an outpatient appointment has decreased by 43.4%, or 78,495 people, bucking the five year trend which was of increasing waits.
- As at the end of 2006/07 only 32 people were waiting more than five months for an outpatient appointment, compared to 73,915 the previous year.
- Between 2005/06 and 2006/07 the number waiting for inpatient treatment has decreased by 8.4%, or 3,470 people
- Length of stay has decreased by 7.1% in the last year, equating to half a day per discharge, correspondingly throughput per bed has increased by 7.1%. Likewise throughput increased 14.3% in the last 5 years and LOS decreased 12.6% or a day.

Appleby Recommendation 11: DHSSPS should develop a more coherent strategy towards partnerships with the Private Sector.

Work is ongoing to complete this recommendation.

Appleby Recommendation 13: Investigate ways to reduce unit cost variations through incentive mechanisms such as tariff-based activity payment/budget setting systems.

The Department has been considering how best to revise the current finance regime and an independent report on this area is to be completed by December 2007. I will be considering its implications in the context of the structural reform.

Appleby Recommendation 14: Further investigation is needed to explore possible reasons for high unit costs at the Royal and Green Park Trusts.

In response to this recommendation the Department commissioned an independent review of the cost variations in these two former Trusts. Final reports were published in early Autumn 2007 and confirm that there is already clear evidence of improvement in the comparative costs of both organisations from the position in 2002/03 as analysed in the Appleby Report. Nonetheless the reports also confirm that much can still be done to increase productivity and thus reduce costs in both former Trusts, and suggest some ways of tracking performance which can be incorporated into work on Recommendation 16. Recommendation 14 was therefore signed off in July 2007.

Appleby Recommendation 17: An assessment should be carried out on the implementation of the GMS contract in Northern Ireland to examine whether the actual improvements in quality outweigh the cost. In light of the finding, the GMS contract should be revised as far as practicable.

This assessment was signed off by the Steering Group in September 2007, having outlined an approach to NI's input to future four nations' discussions on GMS negotiation.

Appleby Recommendation 18: New mechanisms involving greater use of sanctions are needed to tackle high prescribing costs and to encourage greater use of generic drugs.

Mechanisms to tackle high prescribing costs and encourage greater use of generic drugs were identified and the recommendation was subsequently signed off.

Since the report, £55m has been saved in the community drugs budget through efficiencies from generic prescribing and related measures and it is anticipated that more will be achieved during the new CSR period.

Appleby Recommendation 19: The integration of health and social services should be re-examined with an initial first stage being the implications of ring fencing of funding for social services from the acute sector. There should however be scope for financial sanctions when inefficiency in one part of the system impacts negatively on another e.g. lack of social services provision causing delayed discharge from hospital.

The Appleby Steering group signed off on this recommendation in September 2007, primarily on the basis that new models of care require professionals to work together in new structures and that emerging best practice evidence shows there is no sound case for departing from the integrated approach.

Also we have adopted other ways of managing the hospital: social services relationship such as weekly monitoring of discharges.

Appleby Recommendation 20: Contracting for services from independent/voluntary sector organisations should be reviewed to consider whether it can be put on a more strategic basis

A new policy was issued and work on a fair rate for care and on service specifications is continuing. This recommendation was signed off in September 2007.

Appleby Recommendation 21: Further investigation is required of possible reasons for relatively low labour productivity.

The way forward has been agreed and the recommendation has been cleared subject to approval of an Action Plan which is to be presented in December 2007.

Appleby Recommendation 22: Health and social care workers in Northern Ireland should formally come under the remit of the GB Pay Review Bodies.

Implementation is complete.

Performance Management

Recommendation 16: Aim in medium term to use outcome-based productivity measures

Work is ongoing to complete this recommendation.

Recommendation 23: There is a need to develop an explicit performance management system with rewards and sanctions which provide enough 'bite' to encourage change and innovation in the health and social care system. There are many options for the types of incentives that could be introduced and their design for Northern Ireland. There should however be a commitment to such reform coupled with further investigation of how incentives can be strengthened.

Recommendation 24: Separation of the tasks of service provision and commissioning is an important factor in sharpening incentives. However, the most appropriate structures (e.g. single pan-NI commissioner; devolved GP commissioning etc) needs further investigation

Recommendation 25: Alongside changes in the performance management system, there is a need to explore the development of a more transparent priority setting process at national level, together with an explicit 'NHS Plan for Northern Ireland' which sets out outcome-based targets linked to new spending paths

An approach to these three recommendations was agreed and signed off by the steering group in March 2007. This involved principal targets set in PfA for a range of primary and community care services as well as for planned and unplanned care in hospitals. Robust arrangements for holding Trusts accountable for the

delivery of these targets are in place and were formalised in Accountability Agreements. DFP Supply have been provided with performance reports showing good progress against targets for elective waiting times and A&E.

The following two Appleby recommendations were for DFP to address:

Recommendation 3: Adopt HMT NAS model based Wanless 'fully engaged scenario' projections as set out in Table 1 for now as best reasonable guide to future spending in NI

Recommendation 6: If the future spending path suggested by this Review is accepted, then there needs to be some way round the implications of the Barnett Formula for health and social care if the general principle (sic) of Barnett are to be maintained and other public services in Northern Ireland are not to suffer

The draft Budget allocation to DHSSPS is significantly less than the increase recommended by Professor Appleby.

In summary then, of the 23 recommendations my Department are responsible for, there is some action to take to bring Appleby recommendations 7, 8, 11, 13 and 16 to a conclusion. The necessary future process for these has been established or will be proposed this month at the Steering Group meeting. Recommendation 5 is complete and final results will be presented to the Steering Group this month. Recommendations 21, 14 and 9 at this stage only require an action plan or similar, which we also hope to present to the steering group this month.

More important is what positive change my Department and others have effected in terms of ensuring cost efficiency without compromising quality and ensuring that waiting lists for treatment and waiting times in A&E are driven down.

Innovation in the Health Service

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the action he is taking to encourage innovation across the health service. (AQW 2236/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Innovation is a central element of the reform and modernisation programme being taken forward by my Department in conjunction with Boards and Trusts.

In addition to top-down regional initiatives to improve performance, Trusts and Boards are encouraged to develop and implement local solutions to improve the safety, quality and accessibility of services. Trusts are supported in this work by the Department's Service

Delivery Unit which comprises staff for both Northern Ireland and GB with specialist healthcare expertise.

My Department has also developed linkages with the NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement to further support Trusts and Boards in the development and implementation of best practice in healthcare.

Review of NHS Funding

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his assessment of the report 'Our Future Health Secured? A review of NHS funding and performance' by Sir Derek Wanless. (AQW 2237/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The original Wanless Report in 2002 included NI and I fully support its conclusion that our Health & Social Care system can only be sustained if we continue to invest at levels significantly above inflation, provide services much more efficiently and ensure that everyone in NI actively seeks to improve their own health status.

The latest review did not include NI and while I think many of the conclusions here would be similar, there are some important differences.

Expenditure in England has been broadly in line with the Wanless recommendations but expenditure here has been much lower. This funding gap will increase further if the draft Budget is approved. This review recommends real CSR increases of 4.4%. England has been given 3.7% while we have only 1.1%.

On the other hand, essential pay reform here has also taken up a significant part of available resources and, as in England, the full benefits have yet to be realised.

Despite lower levels of recurrent and capital expenditure, there have also been significant improvements here in a range of services. The funding gap, however, means that the level of services provided in many key areas has fallen behind England.

With regard to efficiency and productivity, significant savings have also been achieved and more are planned. For example, the number of day cases has risen significantly and the length of stay has been reduced. Much more needs to be achieved and this requires service redesign, more effective use of ICT and new models of delivery here as recommended by Wanless for England. Similarly, the Wanless analysis of policy direction is equally applicable to NI.

Finally, Public Health interventions and other interventions that assist people to engage knowledgeably in regard to their own health and to manage their own conditions are crucially important if a free health service is to be sustainable. The Department's CSR

bids places a focus on these interventions for that reason. Successfully improving the health of the public requires action on the part of all relevant Departments, through Investing for Health and other processes, such as Neighbourhood Renewal

Efficiency Measures

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (i) a timetable for the implementation of efficiency measures over the next three years; and (ii) the expected savings each year that will result. (AQW 2243/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department plans to achieve its efficiencies on the basis and timetable assigned by DFP which is as follows:

Year	Amount (expressed cumulatively)
2008/09	£118m
2009/10	£233m
2010/11	£344m

In addition to the £146m achieved in the last three years, this represents savings of almost half a billion pounds over a six year period.

Sale of Assets

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration he is giving to the sale of assets to augment his department's resources; and to detail these assets. (AQW 2250/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has identified potential sales of assets of properties that are surplus to requirement, or are expected to become surplus, to the value of £265m over the period 2008-2018. Under the current ISNI proposals, published for consultation along with the draft budget and Programme for Government, the income from these sales would form part of the Department's overall capital budget. Asset sales that would generate £95m in capital receipts in respect of surplus properties in the Health and Social Care service are proposed in the next budget period 2008-2011.

The specific assets to be included in this programme of disposals are currently not finalised and have yet to be confirmed with Health and Social Care Trusts.

Review of Public Administration

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the responsibilities he is proposing to transfer to local government under the Review of Public Administration. (AQW 2251/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No final decision has been made about the transfer of DHSSPS responsibilities to local government. I am currently exploring the possibilities for enhancing the role of local government in the delivery of health and social care in Northern Ireland. In particular, I am keen to look at how more collaborative working with district councils can help address health inequalities and help realise the shared goal of a better and healthier future for all our people.

For example, a Partnership Group has been established to take stock of relevant existing partnership working and collaborative initiatives and to examine the scope for greater co-ordination and relevant integration across and between existing partnerships in the Belfast area.

The Families Matter: Supporting Families Consultation

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (i) detail the progress made in relation to 'the Families Matter: Supporting Families consultation' which closed in March 2007; and (ii) give a timescale within which the outcome of this consultation will be brought to the Assembly Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. (AQW 2259/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: (i) A summary of the responses received on the consultation on 'Families Matter: Supporting Families in Northern Ireland', will be placed on the Departmental website by the end of December and individuals and organisations who sent in responses will be notified accordingly; and (ii) it is envisaged that the final strategy document will be brought to the Assembly Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety for discussion early next year.

Children's Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not he will implement all the commitments by his department included in the ten year Children's Strategy. (AQW 2260/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department are making progress in the implementation of many of the commitments attributed

wholly or partly to the DHSSPS and its agencies. As the Strategy has another eight years to run, I think it would be premature to state categorically that all commitments will be implemented by 2016, however every effort will be made to advance the aims of the Strategy and Action Plan within the resources available.

Services for Children and Young People

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) all amounts being spent by his department on children and young people; and (ii) the services on which these monies are being spent. (AQW 2270/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Generally cost information is not collected by the age group of care recipients but all expenditure which can be identified has been listed in the following table.

2005/06 IDENTIFIED EXPENDITURE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Programme of Care	Service	£m
Acute	Inpatients and Daycases*	75.2
	Outpatients	10.6
	Critical Care Units**	19.0
Maternity and Child Health	Inpatients and Daycases*	2.6
	Speech and language therapy	7.6
	Community Medical and Dental	7.8
	Health Visiting	10.7
	Other Community Services	6.8
Family and Child Care	Social Work	50.0
	Residential Homes	29.4
	Payments to foster carers	19.9
	Grant aid	12.7
	Payments under legislation	8.7
	Assessment centres	2.7
	Daycare for Children	4.8
	Surestart programme	5.0
	Other Personal Social Services	4.7
	Community Services	4.0
Mental Health	Inpatients and Outpatients	2.2
Learning Disability	Residential Homes	4.7
	Inpatients	2.2
Physical and Sensory Disability	Technology Dependent Children	1.9

Programme of Care	Service	£m
Health Promotion and Disease Prevention	Health Visiting	9.6
Total		302.8

* Estimated by costing care for patients aged under 18

** Neonatal Care Services and Paediatric Intensive Care

Accountability in the Provision of Health Services

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment he has made of the need for accountability at local level for the provision of health services. (AQW 2275/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am firmly convinced of the need for a strong local voice in the planning and delivery of health and social care in Northern Ireland. To that end, I am examining the scope for increasing democratisation within the various structures and for enhancing the role of local government in service delivery, particularly in terms of collaborative working with district councils to help address health inequalities.

Improved Performance

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the incentives in place to encourage improved performance within the health service. (AQW 2280/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Robust arrangements are in place within the health service to incentivise improved performance and to deal with poor performance.

My Department monitors progress towards my key targets on a weekly basis. Where Trust performance falls behind that required such that there is a serious risk to the achievement of the targets, my Department takes appropriate steps to intervene including placing the Trust on “special measures” until performance improves to the necessary level. Special measures may include some or all of transferring patients to another provider (with the original Trust meeting the costs), providing specialist recovery support to the Trust, and meetings between the Department and the Trust Chief Executive.

Conversely, where a Trust is performing well against my standards and targets, there is a degree of “earned autonomy” with my Department adopting a more hands-off approach to the performance management of the organisation.

There is a direct link between the annual pay increase made to senior executives in Trusts and their performance and the performance of their organisation.

In addition arrangements are in place in primary care to incentivise improved performance with rewards available for practitioners that improve the accessibility and quality of services, consistent with regional standards.

Review of Public Administration

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment he has made of the potential to improve health productivity arising from the reforms proposed by the Review of Public Administration. (AQW 2281/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Departmental officials have looked closely at all elements of the Department in an effort to drive up HPSS productivity, including RPA. I am committed to ensuring that productivity is further increased across the CSR period and delivering on RPA reform is central to productivity improvement. Three key strands of RPA will transform HPSS productivity:

Reducing costs through efficiency savings - over the period 2008-09 to 2010-11 the Department will realise total annual efficiencies of £53 million from RPA restructuring: a reduction of almost 1,700 managerial and administrative staff.

Consideration of new finance regime – the current finance regime is being reviewed in partnership with DFP, aiming 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 and, consideration of a tariff style regime which will enable commissioning to focus on outcomes rather than on agreeing costs.

Performance Management – Building on the excellent progress that has been made to date, I expect the new structures under RPA to give a strong focus to both local commissioning and performance management. Doing so, will drive up activity, control costs and so improve HPSS productivity.

Air Ambulance/Helicopter Service

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment he has made of (i) the feasibility of an air ambulance/helicopter service; (ii) the projected cost of providing such a service, in terms of (a) purchase costs; (b) maintenance costs; and (c) staffing costs; and (iii) the

benefits of such a service in meeting critical care needs. (AQW 2284/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A Feasibility Study on a Helicopter Emergency Medical Service (HEMS) for the island of Ireland was published by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Republic of Ireland's Department of Health and Children in April 2004. The Report identified three possible response roles for a HEMS:

- **“Primary”** – travelling directly to the scene of an incident to take the patient to hospital;
- **“Secondary”** – meeting a ground ambulance to speed up the patient's journey to hospital; and
- **“Tertiary”** – the planned, rapid transfer between hospitals of patients requiring specialist care, escorted by skilled professionals.

The Report concluded that the tertiary role may be the most appropriate in an all-island context and estimated that this service level would require capital investment in the region of £8 million with annual operating costs of £2.4 million.

A copy of the report can be viewed on the DHSSPS website at <http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/hems.pdf>.

Bamford Review

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the reasons why a service user representative was not appointed to the Bamford Review's Expert Implementation Body. (AQW 2302/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Board for Mental Health and Learning Disability consists of a small number of people, 6 in all, who have key expertise to bring to the work of championing the issues of Mental Health and Learning Disabilities, following the Bamford Review. One of its members is a representative of users of services. The Board is, of course, free to engage with other individuals and groups as it sees fit in carrying out its remit. Consideration is also being given to ways of involving wider groups of users of services and carers in the work.

Treatment for Personality Disorders

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the treatment that is available to patients with personality disorders in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust; and to provide details of the number that (i) are being currently treated; (ii) have been referred to specialist centres

outside Northern Ireland; and (iii) are currently on a waiting list. (AQW 2316/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust currently have no specialist services for people with a diagnosis of personality disorder; but within the Belfast Trust there is a general adult psychiatrist with a particular interest in developing such services for people with this diagnosis.

It is generally accepted that between 20 – 40% of patients admitted to acute mental health inpatient care will have a single or co-morbid diagnosis of personality disorder. Also, 10% of the outpatient list of general adult psychiatrists will include patients with a single or co-morbid diagnosis of personality disorder. Community mental health teams will provide support to clients with personality disorder where they have significant functional needs and are willing to engage with services.

It would be extremely difficult to provide exact details in relation to the number of patients currently being treated because it would require individual patient's files to be reviewed.

Currently there are 6 patients referred to specialist centres outside of Northern Ireland. There is one client with severe personality disorder presently on the waiting list awaiting assessment for placement in a specialist centre outside of Northern Ireland.

Foreign Nationals

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what responsibility his department has in relation to monitoring the number of foreign nationals residing in Northern Ireland. (AQW 2317/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety does not have any formal responsibility for monitoring the number of foreign nationals residing in Northern Ireland.

Health and social Care statistics contain information only on foreign nationals who have registered for treatment and for a Health and Social Care number.

Respite for Autistic Children

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration he will give to changing the current provision of funding for respite for autistic children, in order that the parent or carer is no longer required to pay for this service. (AQW 2332/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Bamford Review made a series of recommendations on the improvements required in terms of health and social care provision for those with autism, including improvements to respite provision. As a result, additional funds for respite have been bid for under the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR). However whilst the Department bid for £17m, £29m and £48m across the CSR period, to support the reform of mental health and learning disability services in line with Bamford recommendations, a disappointing allocation of £4m, £7m and £18m is currently allocated in the draft budget. Consultation on the CSR will not be finalised until January 2008. Until it is clear what funding will be available to improve respite provision it is not possible to anticipate what respite provision will be available. As resources are finite, provision will continue to be prioritised based on need.

Respite for Autistic Children

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration he will give to increasing the provision of respite care for children with autism and their parents. (AQW 2333/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is clear that an increase in respite provision for children with autism is necessary. The Bamford Review made a series of recommendations on the improvements required in terms of health and social care provision for those with autism, including improvements to respite provision. As a result, my Department made a bid for additional funds for respite under the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR). However, whilst my Department bid for £17m, £29m and £48m across the CSR period to support the Bamford recommendations for mental health and learning disability, a disappointing allocation of £4m, £7m and £18m is currently allocated in the draft budget. Consultation on the Comprehensive Spending Review will not be finalised until January 2008.

Autism

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to reduce waiting lists for diagnosis of autism. (AQW 2334/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have already announced a number of targets to assist in the reduction of waiting lists/times. By March 2008 no patient should wait any longer than 13 weeks for a consultant-led first outpatient appointment. I have also set a target for six key services provided by Allied Health Professionals that will

ensure that no-one is waiting more than 26 weeks for treatment by March 2008, and no more than 13 weeks by March 2009. I am currently awaiting the outcome of the Independent Review of Autism which is due to report to me by the end of December 2007. I will examine its recommendations as to how services may be improved with a view to reducing waiting lists/times for the diagnosis of autism further.

Autism

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to provide a service within his department that deals specifically with issues relating to autism. (AQW 2335/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Service provision issues relating to autism are dealt with locally by individual Health and Social Care Trusts. I have set up an Independent Review of Autism Services to identify gaps, share best practice and promote innovation. The Independent Review Group will report to me by the end of December 2007

Inquiry into Hyponatraemia-Related Deaths

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of the progress of the Inquiry into Hyponatraemia-related Deaths. (AQW 2353/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Progress on the Inquiry has been slower than I would have wished, but both the Chairman and I recognise that the work of the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Public Prosecution Service in respect of these cases must be completed before the Inquiry can fully examine all relevant matters. I remain committed to ensuring that the Inquiry will finish its work, so that whatever learning might come from it can be applied.

Inquiry into Hyponatraemia-Related Deaths

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what reviews or discussions have taken place within his department into the progress of the Inquiry into Hyponatraemia-related Deaths; and to detail the stages at which these took place. (AQW 2354/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I met with John O'Hara on 31 May 2007 to discuss how the Inquiry into hyponatraemia-related deaths might be progressed. I have also reviewed responses received in July 2007 from both the Police

Service of Northern Ireland and the Public Prosecutions Service regarding the progress of their ongoing investigations into hyponatraemia-related deaths.

In addition, the progress of the Inquiry is regularly monitored and discussed within the Senior Management Team of the Department's Safety, Quality and Standards Directorate.

Inquiry into Hyponatraemia-Related Deaths

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm when the last sitting of the Inquiry into Hyponatraemia-related Deaths took place. (AQW 2355/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The last sitting of the Inquiry into hyponatraemia-related deaths took place on Friday 7 October 2005.

Inquiry into Hyponatraemia-Related Deaths

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any discussions between his department, the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Public Prosecution Service in relation to the progress of the Inquiry into Hyponatraemia-related Deaths. (AQW 2356/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I wrote to both the Chief Constable and the Director of the Public Prosecutions Service in June of this year to enquire about the progress of the investigation into hyponatraemia-related deaths. Replies were received in July and subsequently copied to Mr O'Hara for his information.

Community Commissioning Associations

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of the introduction of Community Commissioning Associations. (AQW 2357/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am currently considering the future shape of our health and social care systems in Northern Ireland. This also includes an assessment of the most appropriate way to commission health and social care services in Northern Ireland.

I am of the view that commissioning, together with robust financial management and performance management, have to be three key functions of any new structure. I want to be sure that the changes we make will deliver the best outcome for the people of Northern Ireland. Health and social care structures

must meet local needs and must be sustainable in the long-term.

I want to see resources used in a way which maximises the benefits to patients by driving up quality and standards without compromise. I want to ensure that the new commissioning arrangements contribute to the delivery of this agenda.

Care Workers

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of home helps and home care workers currently employed by Homefirst in the South Antrim constituency. (AQW 2366/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Homefirst Trust was subsumed within the Northern Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust on 1st April 2007. There are 308 (126.32 whole-time equivalent) home helps and home care workers in the Northern HSC Trust who were formerly employed by the Homefirst legacy Trust and who provide services within the South Antrim constituency area.

Community Care Packages

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment he has made of the impact upon the care of the elderly and vulnerable, that the lack of staff and resources available for community care packages, is having in the South Antrim constituency. (AQW 2367/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is important that older and vulnerable people have their care needs met promptly. Tough targets have been set for Trusts to reduce delayed discharge from hospital and to meet the need for community care packages in the community. By March 2008, people with complex needs should be discharged from hospital within 72 hours with appropriate support and people with assessed care needs in the community should have the main components of those needs met within 12 weeks. My Department has invested an additional £4m in services for older people in 2007/08. I am satisfied that those resources been allocated equitably across Northern Ireland and good progress is being made against the targets in South Antrim and elsewhere. However, as I made clear in my submission to the Comprehensive Spending Review, further investment will be required if we are to maintain and improve upon the progress that has been made to date.

Human Papilloma Virus Vaccine

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given the health benefits to women and girls afforded by the human papilloma virus vaccine, whether or not he will (i) introduce a vaccination and immunisation programme; and (ii) investigate the benefits of running a parallel 'catch up' programme, similar to that committed to by the Scottish Executive. (AQW 2374/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am strongly in favour of introducing a routine vaccination programme against human papilloma virus in 2008/09. Regarding the benefits of a catch-up programme, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) has investigated this rigorously and concluded that such a campaign would be cost-effective. I am also strongly in favour of carrying out such a campaign in 2009-2011. These proposals are subject to adequate resources being made available in the budget settlement.

The Department of Health in London, the Scottish Executive and Welsh Assembly have all announced details of their plans for HPV vaccination over the coming three years and beyond. Northern Ireland must 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.

Treatment for Haemo-Chromatosis

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people who receive vene section treatment for haemo-chromatosis in (i) home visits; (ii) clinic visits; and (iii) hospital day units, in the past year. (AQW 2383/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of people who receive vene section treatment for haemo-chromatosis during a home visit or during a clinic visit in Northern Ireland is not currently available. However, information is available on the number of people receiving vene section treatment for haemo-chromatosis during a day case admission to hospital.

The total number of day case admissions to hospital where the patient has a primary diagnosis of haemo-chromatosis and received vene section treatment during 2005/06 is 1,238. It is estimated that this equates to 260 individuals based on the patients' casenotes.

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.

Bamford Review

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to reprioritise the implementation of the Bamford Review of Mental Health within his department's work programme. (AQW 2400/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have no plans to reprioritise the implementation of Bamford. It is already a top priority for my Department. While a wide range of service improvements are already underway in line with the Bamford recommendations, the draft budget for 2008/09 to 2010/2011 will only allow for the highest priority elements of the Review to proceed.

Ministerial Statement

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail when, and how, he was first notified of the Ministerial Statement, 'Outlining a Vision for our Education system'; and to confirm whether or not he had discussions with the Minister of Education on the subject matter of the statement before it was issued. (AQW 2478/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The intention of the Minister of Education to make a statement to the Assembly on her vision for the education system was notified to my Private Office by e mail on 4 December – approximately 30 minutes before the statement was made to the Assembly.

I can confirm that I had no discussions with the Minister of Education on the subject matter of the statement before it was issued.

Missed Outpatient Appointments

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of outpatient appointments missed over the last four years. (AQW 2495/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of outpatient appointments missed in Health Service hospitals in Northern Ireland, over the last four years, is detailed below.

Year	Number of New Referrals ¹ that Did Not Attend (DNA)	Number of Consultant Initiated Appointments ² that Did Not Attend (DNA)	Total number of appointments that Did Not Attend (DNA)
2003-2004	48,135	156,674	204,809
2004-2005	47,304	150,434	197,738

Year	Number of New Referrals ¹ that Did Not Attend (DNA)	Number of Consultant Initiated Appointments ² that Did Not Attend (DNA)	Total number of appointments that Did Not Attend (DNA)
2005-2006	48,673	152,296	200,969
2006-2007	47,816	149,116	196,932

¹ – A New Referral is the first of a series, or the only attendance, at an out-patient clinic of a consultant in a hospital.

² – A Consultant Initiated appointment is any attendance other than a referral attendance i.e. a review or follow up attendance.

Note: The number of 'Did Not Attend' appointments is used to represent missed appointments. This refers to the number of patients with an appointment who did not attend and failed to give advance warning to the hospital. This does not include those who could not attend and who did warn the hospital in advance.

Director of Mental Health and Learning Disability

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm when the post of director of mental health and learning disability will be filled. (AQW 2520/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The post of Director of Mental Health Services is not being filled. The proposed remit and duties of the Director post is being carried out by the Mental Health and Learning Disability Board of Experts, which I have established to act as an independent champion for taking forward the Bamford Review's vision.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Broughderg - Carnaransy - Sixtowns Road Upgrade

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to upgrade the Broughderg - Carnaransy - Sixtowns Road from Greencastle to Draperstown, as part of the strategic transport corridor between Counties Tyrone and Derry/Londonderry. (AQW 2112/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): The Regional Transportation Strategy identifies Key Transportation Corridors, Link Corridors and Trunk Roads vital for sustained economic growth and future prosperity. The C554 road between Greencastle and Draperstown does not form part of the Regional Strategic Transportation Network and

while some recent improvements have been carried on this road, there are no plans to upgrade its classification.

20mph Speed Limit Zones

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the locations of (i) existing 20mph speed limit zones; and (ii) 20mph speed limit zones under construction. (AQW 2181/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: By way of information, I should explain that 20mph Zones are a form of traffic calming and are generally implemented in residential areas where an extensive network of streets is involved and self-enforcing measures can be provided to reduce vehicle speeds to approximately 20mph. Whenever speeds have been reduced to this, it is then possible to introduce a mandatory 20mph limit. If the level of traffic calming measures are insufficient to reduce speeds to around 20mph, then it is not possible to introduce a 20-mph mandatory limit.

In relation to the first part of your question, my Department's Roads Service advises that 20mph speed limit zones have been introduced at the locations detailed in the table below.

LOCATION OF 20MPH ZONES

Lisanally Lane / Alexander Road, Armagh	Glennelly Heights/Villas, Draperstown
Brownstown West, Portadown	Lisnahull, Dungannon
Carlisle Park, Ballynahinch	Altmore, Dungannon
The Holylands, Belfast	Windmill, Dungannon
Mersey Street, Belfast	Cornagrade, Enniskillen
Riverdale, Belfast	Windmill, Enniskillen
Donegall Road Village Area, Belfast	Meetinghouse Ave, Maghera
Taughmonagh, Belfast	Crawfordsburn, Maghera
Ardoyne, Belfast	Sunnyside, Maghera
Ballymurphy, Belfast	Strathroy, Omagh
Ballynafeigh, Belfast	Keeragh, Pomeroy
Bloomfield, Belfast	Parkview, Pomeroy
Andersonstown, Belfast	Shanroy, Pomeroy
Turf Lodge, Belfast	Ballycolman, Strabane
Tonagh Estate, Lisburn	Greenvale, Cookstown

With regards the second part of your question, I am advised that there are no 20mph zones currently under construction. However, the table below details the location of proposed schemes.

LOCATION OF PROPOSED 20MPH ZONES

Lakeview, Ardboe	Gleannan, Omagh
Abbeyvale, Ardboe	Pinefield, Omagh
Derrycharra, Enniskillen	Cluney, Clady
Ashfield, Fintona	Scrabo Estate, Newtownards

For your additional information, I can also advise that Roads Service has implemented non-mandatory "advisory" 20mph zones with the primary aim of testing the effectiveness of signing alone without the accompanying self enforcing engineering measures. These measures are at the locations detailed in the table below.

LOCATION OF NON-MANDATORY "ADVISORY" 20MPH ZONES

Alexander Park, Katesbridge	Earhart Park, Londonderry
Greenpark Manor, Armagh	Colinbridge, Belfast
St. Anthony's School, Craigavon	

Adopted Roads

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of roads that are adopted by the Roads Service, but are as yet unadopted by Northern Ireland Water. (AQW 2197/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service officials have advised that there is one instance of an adopted road where Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has yet to adopt their services.

Increase in Traffic Volume

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the increase in the volume of traffic on A-class roads, B-class roads, trunk roads, dual carriageways and motorways; and (ii) the spending on each of these classes of road, over the last five years. (AQW 2199/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In response to part (i) of your question, I should firstly explain that my Department's Roads Service has some 270 traffic census sites strategically located throughout the North on both the major and minor road networks. Traffic flow is monitored at each of these sites for at least one week in every quarter of the year and an annual average is calculated. Roads Service also conducts a vehicle kilometres of travel (VKT) survey each year, to estimate the total distance travelled on the road network in the North. This provides a measure of the usage of the various roads and traffic growth rates for most of the road categories you

requested. Although most of the dual carriageways in the North are 'A' Class roads, they are not exclusively included within one class. As such, I am unable to provide a traffic growth rate for this type of road.

Estimated traffic growth rates for the other types of road are provided in the table below:

Road Class	Traffic Growth				
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Motorways	2.66%	3.52%	3.07%	2.96%	-2.54% ²
'A' Class	0.82%	1.02%	1.76%	1.74%	-0.19%
'B' Class	-	-1.17%	0.81%	1.13%	-2.06%
Trunk Roads	-0.07%	1.57%	2.09%	2.59%	-1.26%

In response to part (ii) of your question, my Department's Roads Service officials have advised that they do not maintain details of expenditure broken down by road class.

Bonfires

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 30/08, to confirm that Roads Service will undertake to monitor expenditure related to bonfires in 2008.
(AQW 2220/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In response to AQW 2220/08, my Department's Roads Service has advised that the overall number of bonfire sites, on Roads Service property and the resulting spend on clear up or repair expenditure, is relatively low, when viewed in the context of the overall Roads Service budget. It is considered that the introduction of a system to monitor these specific costs would serve no useful purpose and would impose an undue additional burden on front line staff.

In relation to AQW 2227/08, I am advised that the experience of my Department's Roads Service is that there are very few incidents of bonfires in publicly owned car parks. Consequently, Roads Service would propose to continue to manage these on the basis of current practice and with the co-operation of the other agencies involved in bonfire management.

You may also be interested to note that Roads Service has signed up to a "Bonfires" report, produced by an inter-agency group. This group was chaired by the Department of the Environment and included representatives from the Police Service for Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the Northern Ireland Office, District Councils and Roads Service. This report provided useful guidelines on bonfire

management. Roads Service would be content to participate in any future review of this document.

Bonfires

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 484/08, to detail what action he will take to review the Roads Service policy in relation to the removal of bonfire materials from car parks belonging to his department.
(AQW 2227/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In response to AQW 2220/08, my Department's Roads Service has advised that the overall number of bonfire sites, on Roads Service property and the resulting spend on clear up or repair expenditure, is relatively low, when viewed in the context of the overall Roads Service budget. It is considered that the introduction of a system to monitor these specific costs would serve no useful purpose and would impose an undue additional burden on front line staff.

In relation to AQW 2227/08, I am advised that the experience of my Department's Roads Service is that there are very few incidents of bonfires in publicly owned car parks. Consequently, Roads Service would propose to continue to manage these on the basis of current practice and with the co-operation of the other agencies involved in bonfire management.

You may also be interested to note that Roads Service has signed up to a "Bonfires" report, produced by an inter-agency group. This group was chaired by the Department of the Environment and included representatives from the Police Service for Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the Northern Ireland Office, District Councils and Roads Service. This report provided useful guidelines on bonfire management. Roads Service would be content to participate in any future review of this document.

20mph Zones Outside Schools

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of schools that have 20mph zones outside them, listed by district council area; and (ii) the percentage of schools in Northern Ireland that have such zones outside them.
(AQW 2230/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: With regards the first part of your question my Departments Roads Service have advised that there are currently 12 schools located within 20mph zones and the council areas where these are located are detailed in the following table.

Council Area	Number Of Schools Within 20mph Zones
Armagh City and District Council	3
Craigavon Borough Council	1
Belfast City Council	7
Fermanagh District Council	1

In relation to the second part of your question, colleagues from the Department of Education have advised that there are 1288 schools in the North. The 12 schools would therefore equate to 0.93% of schools in the North located within a 20mph zone.

Traffic Signals at Sandyknowes Roundabout

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the changes that have been made to the timings on traffic signals at Sandyknowes roundabout. (AQW 2315/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service officials have confirmed that the traffic signals at Sandyknowes Roundabout have been operating full time since 22 October 2007. This was one of the measures introduced to cope with increased traffic flows generated by the recent closure of Hightown Bridge. Some minor adjustments to the signal timings were necessary as part of this exercise.

In addition, as part of my Department's transportation strategy to encourage a change of travel mode from private car to public transport, the hard shoulder busway on the M2 (Citybound) was opened on 18 November 2007. As a result, buses can make use of a 1.5km length of hardshoulder prior to the Sandyknowes junction and are brought down the off-slip at Sandyknowes, where they now receive priority at the traffic signals on the roundabout before travelling up the on-slip to rejoin the main carriageway. This is a joint Roads Service/Translink project and initial evaluation has shown journey time savings of between 7-15 minutes for the buses.

Finally, I am sure you will appreciate that Sandyknowes is a complex interchange, with seven approaches to the roundabout, and is saturated during the morning and evening peak periods. Roads Service's Traffic Information and Control Centre continuously monitors the traffic flows and, as necessary, makes adjustments to the traffic signal timings to cope with the prevailing traffic flows.

Free Parking Places

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to increase the number

of free parking places in Lurgan and Portadown. (AQW 2337/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: As this issue is a matter for the Department for Regional Development, your question has been passed to me, as Minister responsible, to answer.

I am advised by my Department's Roads Service that there are no plans to increase the level of free parking in either Portadown or Lurgan.

In line with the recently adopted Sub Regional Transport Plan, parking strategies have been developed for all the 29 major towns and cities referred to in the Plan. The overriding parking strategy is to encourage the availability and turn-over of convenient short-stay spaces in the town centres, which is to be achieved through on-street enforcement and appropriate charging of off-street parking.

The ultimate aims of the strategy are to encourage a shift to more sustainable transport modes, reduce congestion, improve accessibility and promote economic vitality in town centres to the benefit of all in the area.

It is envisaged that any additional parking facilities will be provided through future development in regional towns.

Street Lighting

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration his department has given to energy efficiency in relation to street lighting, in particular (i) the feasibility of turning off all, or some, street lights between, for example 3.00am and 6.00am; and (ii) solar powered street lighting. (AQW 2372/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The energy efficiency of street lighting is a major consideration for my Department's Roads Service and I have been assured that, where possible, the highest wattage street lights have already been replaced with more efficient lanterns that use less power. Further energy conservation measures are currently being implemented and assessed, including appropriate lighting levels for new schemes, reduced burning hours, use of white light lamps and dimming systems.

In relation to turning street lights off for part of the night, Roads Service officials advise that this was considered but rejected on road safety grounds. However, officials will continue to monitor developments and will reconsider this option when next reviewing energy conservation plans.

In relation to solar powered lighting, while this is not considered viable for street lighting purposes at this time, rapid developments in the efficiency of

photo-voltaic cells and lamp technologies will likely make solar power a realistic solution for street lighting purposes in the near future.

Airport Security

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to discuss with the relevant authorities ending the practice of photographing airline passengers travelling between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. (AQW 2373/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The practice of photographing airline passengers is carried out by police forces to meet the requirements of anti-terrorism legislation, which is the responsibility of the British Home Office. It is one of a number of security measures used. The policy affects all domestic passengers who use a common departure lounge, travelling within the common travel area and is not aimed solely at those passengers who travel to and from the North of Ireland. The British Home Office has been consulted and it has no plans to recommend change to the current policy.

Planning Policy Statement 12

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the arrangements, including timescales, for the transfer of Planning Policy Statement 12: Local Development Frameworks to the Department of the Environment. (AQW 2381/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I wrote to Arlene Foster, MLA, Minister of the Environment, on Tuesday 4 December to seek her agreement that responsibility for PPS 12 'Housing in Settlements' be transferred to the Department of the Environment. However, no timescales for this transfer have been set.

NCP Services Ltd

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to carry out a review of the operation of NCP Services Ltd. (AQW 2387/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service became responsible for on-street parking from 30 October 2006. Following a robust procurement process, NCP Services Ltd was appointed to provide enforcement services and car-park management within Roads Service car-parks from that date.

NCP's performance within the contract is measured through Key Performance Indicators and these are monitored at regular monthly review meetings.

Additionally, under the terms of the contract, there will be a meeting of senior personnel from both parties to review the operation of the contract in early 2008.

Bus Passes

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the reasons why senior citizens who currently hold a bus pass have been required to re-apply for their bus pass. (AQW 2399/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: SmartPasses are used to ensure that only those people eligible for concessionary travel can avail of it and that transport operators can be properly reimbursed for concessionary journeys taken.

The first SmartPasses which were issued in 2002 had an estimated lifespan of five years. Therefore, from the April 2007 these SmartPasses have begun to expire.

As Senior SmartPasses represent a significant benefit my Department has established robust procedures to ensure that those customers who wish to continue to obtain concessionary travel can renew their SmartPass before their existing pass expires.

These procedures involve the Department writing to all customers three months prior to the expiry of their SmartPass informing them of what they need to do to renew their SmartPass. The Department also has carried out an extensive advertising campaign to promote and explain the reissue process. In addition, officials have written to each MP, MLA and local council informing them of the process needed to obtain a replacement pass.

Ministerial Statement on Outlining a Vision for our Education System

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail when, and how, he was first notified of the Ministerial Statement, 'Outlining a Vision for our Education system'; and to confirm whether or not he had discussions with the Minister of Education on the subject matter of the statement before it was issued. (AQW 2420/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I was notified of the intention of the Minister of Education to make a statement to the Assembly on her vision for the education system at official level on morning of Tuesday 4 December.

While the Education Minister and I had discussed a vision of the education system in a party political context, I did not discuss this statement with the Minister of Education before it was issued.

Hightown Bridge

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the service works being carried out on the Hightown bridge, from 12 December until 22 December, that will reduce the traffic flow to a single lane system between the hours of 8pm and 6am. (AQW 2434/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the Hightown Bridge will be reduced to a single lane of traffic from 8:00 pm in the evening until 6:00 am in the morning from Wednesday 12 December until Friday 21 December 2007. This lane closure is required to allow BT to draw cables through the new chamber and ducts recently constructed on the Hightown Road, which will enable BT to divert and maintain essential services in advance of the Hightown Bridge being demolished at the end of January 2008.

This cable laying operation will be undertaken at night to reduce the impact on road users in the Glengormley area. During the works one lane will be maintained over the Hightown Bridge and shuttle working will be in operation with temporary traffic lights. The Hightown Bridge will be returned to its normal 2 lane arrangement each day.

Roads Management

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the overhead costs that were incurred by the Roads Service, in the management of the roads in Northern Ireland, in (i) the 2006/2007 financial year; and (ii) the current financial year to the end of October 2007. (AQW 2437/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that it does not analyse its expenditure between overheads and other costs. The analysis performed classifies expenditure in terms of Administration and Programme costs. Administration expenditure reflects the costs of running the Agency and Programme costs reflect non-administrative costs.

Administration expenditure (apart from staff costs) includes premises costs including rent and leases, general administration costs, travel and subsistence costs, staff training and notional costs from DRD, other departments and NIAO.

Programme costs include payments to contractors for maintenance and capital work and payments for materials and fuel, energy costs including street lighting energy and the cost of public liability claims. It also includes the purchase of land for schemes.

The table below details these costs for the 2006/2007 financial year

2006/2007 FINANCIAL YEAR

	Administration £000	Programme £000
Staff Costs	59,509	
Other Costs	23,292	238,622
Total	82,801	238,622

Unfortunately, as this analysis is conducted on an annual basis, no figures are available for the current financial year to the end of October 2007.

Hilyard Report

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will provide an update on the Hilyard Report. (AQW 2442/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Independent Water Review Panel was appointed on 14 June 2007. Its terms of reference indicated that its work would be carried out in two strands. The first strand focused on the fundamental issues of financing water and sewerage services. The Panel's Strand 1 report was published on 12 October 2007 and the Executive made a number of decisions which I announced to the Assembly on 22 October.

The Panel is currently undertaking the second strand of its work which will concentrate on the wider aspects of the management and governance arrangements for water and sewerage services. In addition to the issues set out in its terms of reference, the Panel indicated in its first report that it would also consider the issue of affordability under Strand 2 of its review.

I expect to receive the Panel's final report early in the New Year. I understand that the Panel will publish this report during January.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Public Housing

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of units of public housing that will be provided in the following areas in the next two years: (i) Warrenpoint; (ii) Rostrevor; (iii) Kilkeel; (iv) Rathfriland; (v) Mayobridge; (vi) Hilltown; and (vii) Annaclone. (AQW 2078/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

The current five year Social Housing Development Programme, which is in the process of being rolled forward, makes provision for the following schemes for 2007/08 and 2008/09:

Year	Housing Association	Scheme	Units
2007/08	Rural	Lisbane Park, Mayobridge	8
	Ulidia	Ganna Way, Warrenpoint	1
	Rural	Monteith Road, Annaclone	6
2008/09	Ulidia	Clonallon Road, Warrenpoint	30

Public Housing

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of units of public housing that have been built in the following areas in the past three years: (i) Warrenpoint; (ii) Rostrevor; (iii) Kilkeel; (iv) Rathfriland; (v) Mayobridge; (vi) Hilltown; and (vii) Annaclone. (AQW 2079/08)

The Minister for Social Development: During 2006/07, 30 units of social housing were completed at Ganna Way/Mews, Bridal Loanan, Warrenpoint. No other schemes were completed in the other areas listed for the period concerned.

Waiting List for Houses

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people on the waiting list for houses in the following areas: (i) Warrenpoint; (ii) Rostrevor; (iii) Kilkeel; (iv) Rathfriland; (v) Mayobridge; (vi) Hilltown; and (vii) Annaclone. (AQW 2080/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The total number of people on the waiting list at 30th September 2007 for each of these areas was as follows:

Warrenpoint	220
Rostrevor	83
Kilkeel	106
Rathfriland	51
Mayobridge	18
Hilltown	28
Annaclone	7

Social Housing Budget

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to source more affordable designs, to the traditional block-built homes, in order to ensure the better use of the department's social housing budget. (AQW 2094/08)

The Minister for Social Development: From 1 April 2008 my Department intends to introduce a three star level in the Code for Sustainable Homes as the mandatory standard for new social housing. The Code has been developed to enable a step change in sustainable home building practice with a view to achieving a six star rating - zero carbon home - by 2016. In order to achieve this it will be necessary to move away from traditional building practices to modern methods of construction.

My Department is also about to launch a new Procurement Strategy for the Social Housing Development Programme. The key objectives of the strategy are to procure the programme on a value for money basis in accordance with best practice and to reduce the transaction costs of construction procurement.

Efficiency Measures

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the amount of money her department expects to save as a direct result of efficiency measures in each of the next three years. (AQW 2147/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My department has a target to deliver cash releasing efficiencies of £19.3 million, £38.1 million and £56.3 million respectively, over the period 2008-09 to 2010-11. In addition, my department will have to absorb pay and price inflation of £4.8 million, £9.5 million and £14.1 million over this period.

Anti-Social Behaviour Orders

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of times the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has exercised its powers, including the use of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders, to deal with tenants who have caused problems to neighbours and other residents in each of the following District Office areas: (i) Newtownabbey I; (ii) Newtownabbey II; (iii) Carrickfergus; and (iv) Larne. (AQW 2152/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information is as follows:

District Office	No of cases recorded for period 2006/07	No of cases recorded for period 01/04/07-30/09/07
Newtownabbey 1	79	79
Newtownabbey 2	40	16
Carrickfergus	60	25
Larne	64	34

All reported cases of anti social behaviour received in these areas during the periods requested were of a nature that did not require legal intervention. All cases were resolved through a range of early interventions including the use of Acceptable Behaviour Contracts and referrals to Housing Executive Mediation Services.

Pension Credit

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of new applicants for pension credit in each of the last 12 months. (AQW 2167/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The number of new applications for Pension Credit for the 12 month period November 2006 to October 2007 is set out in the table below.

November	878
December	635
January	584
February	511
March	677
April	635
May	715
June	588
July	601
August	615
September	740
October	786
Total	7,965

Attendance Allowance

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of new applicants for attendance allowance in each of the last 12 months. (AQW 2168/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The number of new applications for Attendance Allowance for the 12 month period November 2006 to October 2007 is set out in the table below.

November	808
December	486
January	513
February	688
March	667
April	558
May	617
June	607
July	578
August	589
September	631
October	726
Total	7468

Big Wheel Attraction at Belfast City Hall

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development to clarify whether or not any public funds were used to pay for the big wheel attraction at Belfast city hall. (AQW 2169/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department has incurred expenditure of £5,000 on this project in providing drawings for the planning application, planning application fee and advertising costs for the tender. Following an invitation to tender, World Tourist Attraction Company Ltd (WTA) was appointed to provide the Observation Wheel meeting the full costs of installation, operation and reinstatement.

Housing Benefit

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people in North Antrim who were in receipt of housing benefit in each of the last five years. (AQW 2224/08)

The Minister for Social Development: North Antrim has been taken to mean the Ballymena, Ballymoney and Ballycastle/Moyle areas. The tables below detail the numbers of people who were receiving Housing Benefit in those areas at year end for each of the last five years up to March 2007.

BALLYMENA

Year end	Social Rented	Private Rented	Total
March 2007	1996	1752	3748
March 2006	2071	1672	3743
March 2005	2137	1545	3682
March 2004	2304	1432	3736
March 2003	2400	1327	3727

BALLYMONEY

Year end	Social Rented	Private Rented	Total
March 2007	1152	788	1940
March 2006	1179	724	1903
March 2005	1184	682	1866
March 2004	951	577	1528
March 2003	1324	572	1896

BALLYCASTLE (MOYLE)

Year end	Social Rented	Private Rented	Total
March 2007	664	663	1327
March 2006	693	621	1314
March 2005	686	587	1273
March 2004	778	542	1320
March 2003	815	519	1334

Desmond & Sons Limited 1975 Pension and Life Assurance Scheme

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Social Development to detail what steps she is taking to assist deferred members of the Desmond & Sons Limited 1975 Pension and Life Assurance Scheme.

(AQW 2229/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Both the Pension Protection Fund and the Financial Assistance Scheme, which provide help to members of defined benefit occupational pension schemes where the scheme winds up and is unable to meet its liability to its members, operate on a United Kingdom-wide basis. The Minister of State for Pensions Reform has met with representatives of members of the Desmond & Sons Limited 1975 Pension and Life Assurance Scheme to discuss the particular issues relating to the scheme. Officials have been working with member representatives and the trustees of the Desmond's scheme to try and find a way forward. Scheme members have also made representations to the Young Review which is looking at how to make best use of scheme assets and to see if they could be used to

increase the help available to members of underfunded schemes, and it is expected to report shortly. My officials will continue to work closely with colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions in seeking a resolution to this matter.

New Claimants for Pension Credit

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of new claimants for pension credit in (i) Bangor Social Security Office; (ii) Newtownards Social Security Office; and (iii) Hollywood Road Social Security Office, over the last 12 months.

(AQW 2240/08)

The Minister for Social Development: It is not possible to provide the information in the format requested for all new claimants as we do not hold geographical data on unsuccessful claims. The table below provides a breakdown of customers whose postcodes fall within each of the 3 Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office boundaries in respect of successful new claims only for the 12 month period November 2006 to October 2007. *

Month	Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office		
	Bangor SSO	Newtownards SSO	Hollywood Road Jobs & Benefits office
November	25	21	44
December	14	16	15
January	14	15	36
February	24	19	35
March	17	25	34
April	49	43	62
May	26	19	41
June	10	4	18
July	22	19	12
August	24	16	22
September	33	31	40
October	23	13	30
Total	281	241	389

* In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to geographical areas on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated to a geographical area using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.

New Claimants for Attendance Allowance

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of new claimants for

attendance allowance in (i) Bangor Social Security Office; (ii) Newtownards Social Security Office; and (iii) Holywood Road Social Security Office, in each of the last 12 months. (AQW 2241/08)

The Minister for Social Development: It is not possible to provide the information in the format requested for all new claimants as we do not hold geographical data on unsuccessful claims. The table below provides a breakdown of customers whose postcodes fall within each of the 3 Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office boundaries in respect of successful new claims only for the 12 month period November 2006 to October 2007. *

Month	Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office		
	Bangor SSO	Newtownards SSO	Holywood Road Jobs & Benefits office
November	45	25	37
December	53	32	59
January	30	14	29
February	44	21	45
March	61	34	51
April	47	40	61
May	20	19	25
June	21	11	36
July	34	30	37
August	21	16	30
September	33	25	37
October	24	5	24
Total	433	272	471

* In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to geographical areas on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated to a geographical area using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.

Housing Benefit

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people in Upper Bann constituency who were in receipt of housing benefit in each of the last five years. (AQW 2245/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Upper Bann constituency has been taken to mean the combined Banbridge, Lurgan and Portadown areas. The tables below detail the numbers of people who were receiving Housing Benefit in those areas at year end for each of the last five years up to March 2007.

BANBRIDGE

Year end	Social Rented	Private Rented	Total
March 2007	1322	1094	2416
March 2006	1367	955	2322
March 2005	1351	859	2210
March 2004	1243	764	2007
March 2003	1380	783	2163

LURGAN

Year end	Social Rented	Private Rented	Total
March 2007	1999	2053	4052
March 2006	2104	1944	4048
March 2005	2136	1762	3898
March 2004	2377	1601	3978
March 2003	2258	1605	3863

PORTADOWN

Year end	Social Rented	Private Rented	Total
March 2007	1154	1451	2605
March 2006	1191	1416	2607
March 2005	1198	1322	2520
March 2004	1724	1207	2931
March 2003	1236	1184	2420

Budget Allocations

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Social Development to detail any analysis she has undertaken on budget allocations to other departments in relation to identifying monies that could be re-allocated to her department. (AQW 2246/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department has not engaged in any analysis of this nature. Recommendations on budget allocations to departments and programmes are put forward by the Minister of Finance and Personnel and agreed by the Executive.

Bereavement Benefit

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people in receipt of bereavement benefit (i) in total; (ii) by constituency; and (iii) by council area, in each of the last five years. (AQW 2247/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The total number of people in receipt of Bereavement Benefit in each of the last five years is set out in the following table.

TABLE 1: BEREAVEMENT BENEFIT RECIPIENTS IN TOTAL IN EACH OF THE LAST FIVE YEARS

	Oct-03	Sep-04*	Oct-05	Oct-06	Oct-07
Total number of Bereavement Benefit Recipients	1,430	1,503	1,614	1,749	1,881

* Figures have been derived from Bereavement Computer Scan at September 2004.

TABLE 2: BEREAVEMENT BENEFIT RECIPIENTS BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY IN EACH OF THE LAST FIVE YEARS

Parliamentary Constituency	Oct-03	Sep-04*	Oct-05	Oct-06	Oct-07
Belfast East	57	66	70	69	74
Belfast North	80	87	79	92	92
Belfast South	54	46	47	54	62
Belfast West	97	100	99	115	125
East Antrim	70	79	86	94	100
East Londonderry	71	84	74	89	88
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	85	79	97	100	103
Foyle	92	102	117	117	120
Lagan Valley	84	81	81	101	106
Mid Ulster	74	72	89	100	90
Newry and Armagh	85	91	103	113	120
North Antrim	91	94	98	105	120
North Down	66	71	72	76	92
South Antrim	79	77	96	112	109
South Down	90	103	128	121	145
Strangford	88	93	95	91	113
Upper Bann	87	96	91	103	118
West Tyrone	72	73	77	87	91
Unallocated Postcode**	8	9	15	10	13
Total	1,430	1,503	1,614	1,749	1,881

* Figures have been derived from Bereavement Computer Scan at September 2004.

** In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to Electoral Wards, Parliamentary Constituency and District Council Areas on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated to a ward using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all

TABLE 3: BEREAVEMENT BENEFIT RECIPIENTS BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA IN LAST FIVE YEARS

District Council	Oct-03	Sep-04*	Oct-05	Oct-06	Oct-07
Antrim	39	44	52	47	52
Ards	60	69	79	69	80
Armagh	52	62	56	65	70
Ballymena	51	53	55	62	64
Ballymoney	28	26	27	30	38
Banbridge	43	38	41	42	46
Belfast	212	225	222	257	270
Carrickfergus	31	42	47	47	53
Castlereagh	62	59	57	55	68
Coleraine	49	54	48	60	64
Cookstown	30	30	34	42	37
Craigavon	64	78	68	81	91
Derry	92	102	117	117	120
Down	64	66	76	70	95
Dungannon	43	44	50	48	48
Fermanagh	57	51	63	69	69
Larne	26	26	31	33	31
Limavady	22	30	26	29	24
Lisburn	98	100	103	118	129
Magherafelt	29	26	39	41	39
Moyle	12	15	16	13	18
Newry & Mourne	61	67	91	96	99
Newtownabbey	64	52	61	93	91
North Down	61	62	63	68	81
Omagh	36	34	44	44	52
Strabane	36	39	33	43	39
Unallocated Postcode**	8	9	15	10	13
Total	1,430	1,503	1,614	1,749	1,881

* Figures have been derived from Bereavement Computer Scan at September 2004.

** In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to Electoral Wards, Parliamentary Constituency and District Council Areas on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated to a ward using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.

Children and Young People

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) all amounts being spent by her department on children and young people; and (ii)

the services on which these monies are being spent.
(AQW 2262/08)

The Minister for Social Development: With regard to the Children and Young People Fund my department has committed £871k in 2007-2008 supporting 13 women's centres in disadvantaged areas deliver a range of childcare services for 0-4 years and school-aged children. This funding secures more than 2,000 childcare places each week and provides employment to more than 50 childcare staff. The services provided include:

- full day/week care including pre and after-school care and holiday schemes linked to women's development (education, training and capacity building) and family support (advice and advocacy services, young mothers groups, respite and parenting programmes)
- part-time services, crèches or afternoon out-of-school hours clubs to facilitate mothers taking up courses and programmes
- temporary childcare over a set number of weeks
- services for families/children referred by Social Services (who are generally on the Child Protection Register)
- mobile crèches for 'one-off' events.

Eviction Notices

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of eviction notices that have been unsuccessful, broken down by district council area, for each of the last 3 years.
(AQW 2267/08)

The Minister for Social Development: All eviction notices lodged in the Courts by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive have successfully led to a decree being awarded for possession of the property.

Evictions

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of evictions that have taken place, broken down by district council area, in each of the last three years. (AQW 2268/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is as follows:

EVICCTIONS DUE TO RENT ARREARS

Housing Executive District	Evictions 2004/05	Evictions 2005/06	Evictions 2006/07
Belfast (West)	0	1	0
Belfast (East)	2	0	4

Housing Executive District	Evictions 2004/05	Evictions 2005/06	Evictions 2006/07
Belfast (South)	0	0	1
Belfast(North)	0	4	6
Belfast(Shankill)	0	6	3
(Area Totals)	2	11	14
Bangor	3	4	0
Newtownards	2	1	0
Castlereagh	0	4	1
Lisburn (Poleglass)	5	5	6
Lisburn (Antrim Street)	1	0	0
Down	5	3	4
(Area Totals)	16	17	11
Banbridge	0	0	0
Newry	0	0	0
Armagh	0	0	0
Lurgan/Brown	2	5	0
Portadown	2	4	1
Dungannon	2	0	0
Fermanagh	0	0	0
(Area Totals)	6	9	1
Ballymena	0	0	0
Antrim	1	0	0
Newtownabbey 1	4	0	0
Newtownabbey 2	1	0	0
Carrick	0	1	6
Larne	0	0	2
Ballycastle	0	0	0
Ballymoney	0	0	0
Coleraine	0	0	0
(Area Totals)	6	1	8
Waterloo	0	0	0
Waterside	0	1	0
Collon	0	0	0
Limavady	0	0	0
Magherafelt	0	0	0
Strabane	0	0	0
Omagh	0	0	0

Housing Executive District	Evictions 2004/05	Evictions 2005/06	Evictions 2006/07
Cookstown	0	0	0
(Area Totals)	0	1	0
Totals	30	39	34

EVICTIIONS DUE TO ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

Housing Executive District	Evictions 2004/05	Evictions 2005/06	Evictions 2006/07
Belfast (West)	0	0	0
Belfast (East)	1	0	0
Belfast (South)	0	0	1
Belfast (North)	2	0	1
Belfast (Shankill)	0	0	0
(Area Totals)	3	0	2
Bangor	0	0	0
Newtownards	1	1	1
Castlereagh	0	0	0
Lisburn (Poleglass)	2	0	0
Lisburn (Antrim Street)	1	4	2
Down	1	0	0
(Area Totals)	5	5	3
Banbridge	0	0	0
Newry	1	0	0
Armagh	1	2	0
Lurgan/Brown	0	1	2
Portadown	1	1	1
Dungannon	1	2	1
Fermanagh	2	2	0
(Area Totals)	6	8	4
Ballymena	0	0	0
Antrim	0	0	0
Newtownabbey 1	0	0	0
Newtownabbey 2	0	0	0
Carrick	0	0	0
Larne	1	0	0
Ballycastle	0	0	0
Ballymoney	1	0	0
Coleraine	1	0	0

Housing Executive District	Evictions 2004/05	Evictions 2005/06	Evictions 2006/07
(Area Totals)	3	0	0
Waterloo	1	0	0
Waterside	1	2	0
Collon	0	1	0
Limavady	0	2	0
Magherafelt	0	2	0
Strabane	0	0	0
Omagh	0	0	0
Cookstown	1	0	0
(Area Totals)	3	7	0
Totals	20	20	9

Proposed Scheme for the Ardcarne Park Area of Newry

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm whether or not the proposed scheme for the Ardcarne Park area of Newry, approved by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive Board in October 2007, will go ahead as planned in 2009.

(AQW 2269/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I would refer to the reply I gave to the honourable member for Newry & Armagh in AQW 1881/08 on 4 December 2007.

Children's Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm whether or not she will implement all the commitments by her department included in the ten year Children's Strategy.

(AQW 2272/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I can report that my Department is on course to deliver all of the actions detailed in the 2007 – 2008 Action Plan for the 'Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge' 10 year Strategy. However, I am unable to confirm whether or not I will be able to implement all my Department's commitments in the strategy, particularly those relating to housing, before the finalisation of the budget allocation.

Housing Executive District Office at Dairy Farm, Stewartstown Road

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development whether or not it is planned to close the Northern Ireland Housing Executive district office at Dairy Farm, Stewartstown Road, Belfast.

(AQW 2330/08)

The Minister for Social Development: There are no plans to close the Dairy Farm office. It will remain in its current location and continue to provide a comprehensive range of housing services. I understand that while the processing of Housing Benefit claims has moved to Lisburn and the Rent Accounting function will also relocate next year, only a small number of staff is involved. The relocation of back office processing functions will not reduce the range or quality of services provided from the Dairy Farm office.

Houses of Multiple Occupation

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to outline (i) what action she is taking to address the effects of an excess of Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs) in South Belfast; (ii) whether or not the Northern Ireland Housing Executive will review the HMO strategy and increase the rate of registration; and (iii) what plans she has to hold discussions with the Minister of the Environment in relation to the high number of HMOs in South Belfast.

(AQW 2364/08)

The Minister for Social Development: In order to safeguard the residents of HMOs and the areas in which they are situated my Department has given the Housing Executive a range of statutory powers which enable it to deal with issues relating to both the physical condition of HMOs and the standards to which they should be managed. I have agreed to meet with representatives of the Belfast Holyland Regeneration Association to ensure that I am aware of all the issues and will address any which fall within my remit.

- (ii) The Northern Ireland Housing Executive is currently reviewing the HMO strategy with the intention of increasing the rate of registration. A detailed plan will be provided in the New Year.
- (iii) I have no plans at this stage to meet with the Minister of the Environment, however, my officials and Housing Executive officials are involved in the consultation process on the draft HMO Plan.

Social Development of the Crumlin Area

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Social Development to outline what plans she has to promote the social development of the Crumlin area, in view of the scale of demographic change and housing development that have taken place in the area. (AQW 2365/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Crumlin was classified as a large village in the report on urban/rural definitions produced by NISRA in 2004. DSD does not, therefore, have a role in its regeneration as we focus solely on regeneration of urban areas. My Department is aware of the recent rapid growth of Crumlin and this position is regularly reviewed.

In its role as an agent of the International Fund for Ireland, my Department is at present working with Crumlin Together Limited to bring forward a Community Property Development Scheme on the site of the PSNI station in the village. An application for DSD funding under the Modernisation Fund is currently being assessed.

Social Housing

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development what consideration she gives to the concept 'shared future', in relation to future social housing provision and allocation. (AQW 2370/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I believe that the OFMddM policy document "A Shared Future" has laid down the foundations to build trust between all people in Northern Ireland. It advocates a public policy to promote sharing over separation and the development of shared communities where people of all backgrounds can live, work, learn and socialise together.

In developing Shared Future Housing schemes the following selection criteria are taken into account:

- Housing need
- Religious mix of the local community
- Presence of integrated primary and secondary schools
- A history of good relations
- Proximity of other housing developments
- Potential size of development (10-20 units)
- Local political issues/views
- Availability of developable land in a neutral area.

I am in favour of increasing the uptake of the shared future housing in the social housing sector. However, housing provision and allocation will continue to be based on housing need.

Relocation of Tenants

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1708/08, to detail the number of complaints there have been to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, in relation to religious intimidation in social housing developments in the Lisburn area, in the last five years.

(AQW 2386/08)

The Minister for Social Development: While the reasons for applicants presenting as homeless due to intimidation is available from 2000/01, the type of intimidation, for example sectarian, was only recorded from 2005/06. Data, by type of intimidation, is therefore not readily available before 2005/06.

The table below details the total number of homeless applicants for the Lisburn area presenting as homeless because of sectarian intimidation during 2005/06 and 2006/07. There is not necessarily a correlation between those who presented as homeless or were awarded Full Duty Applicant (FDA) status. For example, an applicant may have presented in one financial year and been awarded FDA in another year.

	2005/06	2006/07
Homeless Presenters*	76	62
Homeless Presenters (Sectarian)**	4	2
Awarded FDA status*	38	30
Awarded FDA status (Sectarian)**	1	2

* Cases presenting as homeless with the reason given as intimidation

** Cases presenting as homeless with the reason given as sectarian intimidation.

Housing Executive Improvement Schemes

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Social Development what is her assessment of the impact of the shortfall in her department's budget in relation to (i) current; and (ii) proposed, Northern Ireland Housing Executive improvement schemes, in each Belfast district office area.

(AQW 2388/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The final programme of schemes for 2007/08 will be confirmed when the December monitoring round outcome is known. The proposed programme of work for 2008/09 may be at risk. There is a significant shortfall in the capital budget for housing which needs to be redressed. The forward budget is still in draft form and I am exploring every means possible to both get the budget increased and raise the necessary capital in alternative ways. My aim is to minimise the effect on our most vulnerable citizens.

Housing Executive Improvement Schemes

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Social Development what is her assessment of the impact of the shortfall in her department's budget in relation to (i) current; and (ii) proposed, Northern Ireland Housing Executive improvement schemes in the Dunmurry Cross/Lagan Valley area.

(AQW 2389/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The schemes programmed to start in 2007/08 will be unaffected. However, the proposed programme of work for 2008/09 may be at risk. There is a significant shortfall in the capital budget for housing which needs to be redressed. The forward budget is still in draft form and I am exploring every means possible to both get the budget increased and raise the necessary capital in alternative ways. My aim is to minimise the effect on our most vulnerable citizens.

Antisocial Behaviour

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of complaints made to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive about antisocial behaviour involving mini motorbikes or other off-road vehicles, in the last three years, broken down by district office area.

(AQW 2397/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive cannot disaggregate its figures on anti-social behaviour to include only those involving off-road vehicles.

Incapacity Benefit and Disability Living Allowance

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Incapacity Benefit and Disability Living Allowance life-time awards that were reviewed, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2398/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is not available as there are no "life-time awards" for Incapacity Benefit and Disability Living Allowance.

Table 1 below details the number of Incapacity Benefit claims reviewed under the Personal Capability Assessment process in each of the last three years and shows the current year to date position.

The Welfare Reform and Pensions Act 1999 removed the term "for life" in respect of awards of Disability Living Allowance and amended it to state "indefinite" awards. Table 2 below details the number of indefinite awards of Disability Living Allowance reviewed under

my Department's Programme Protection Strategy in each of the last three years and shows the current year to date position.

TABLE 1 INCAPACITY BENEFIT

Year	Number reviewed
2004/05	32,194
2005/06	39,845
2006/07	40,293
Year to date	31,073

TABLE 2 DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE

Year	Number reviewed
2004/05	2079
2005/06	3395
2006/07	3811
Year to date	2319

Foreign Nationals

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail what responsibility her department has in relation to monitoring the number of foreign nationals residing in Northern Ireland. (AQW 2430/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department has no formal responsibility for monitoring the number of foreign nationals residing in Northern Ireland.

My Department collects and maintains data on the number of applications made by foreign nationals for a National Insurance number (NINo) and allocates NINOs on behalf of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC). A database of national insurance number allocations and registrations to foreign nationals is supplied to the Department by HMRC for the purposes of statistical analysis, research and fraud investigation. Using this data the Department produces an annual National Statistic entitled "NINo Allocations to Overseas Nationals entering Northern Ireland". Quarterly summary tables relating to trends on the allocation of NINOs to foreign nationals are also produced.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development to outline what steps she is taking to ensure that there is a consistent approach, taken by panels hearing Disability Living Allowance cases, in reaching their decisions. (AQW 2479/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department does not have a role in such matters as appeal tribunals are independent judicial bodies composed of members taken from a panel appointed by the Lord Chancellor. In the circumstances, the Honourable Member may wish to write direct to the President of Appeal Tribunals at 6th floor, Cleaver House, 3 Donegall Square North, Belfast, BT1 5GA for a response.

Housing Waiting Lists

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of (i) applicants for housing on waiting lists; (ii) applicants perceived to be at risk; and (iii) the number of homes planned for construction in the next calendar year, broken down by district council area. (AQW 2480/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The following table indicates the total number of applicants on the waiting list, those awarded Full Duty Applicant status (FDA*) at 30th September 2007 and the number of units currently programmed to start in 2008/09**

District Council Area	Applicants on waiting list	Applicants with FDA status *	Units planned 08/09
Derry	1565	377	284
Limavady	532	72	12
Coleraine	1342	158	13
Ballymoney	511	65	11
Moyle	377	45	10
Larne	541	70	11
Ballymena	1561	204	29
Magherafelt	496	73	0
Cookstown	398	41	0
Strabane	555	43	3
Omagh	720	37	6
Fermanagh	1024	122	54
Dungannon	828	119	55
Craigavon	1936	186	27
Armagh	870	99	22
Newry & Mourne	1774	200	63
Banbridge	704	83	16
Down	1196	131	81
Lisburn	2555	397	333
Antrim	1000	99	10

District Council Area	Applicants on waiting list	Applicants with FDA status *	Units planned 08/09
Newtownabbey	1660	258	17
Carrickfergus	1015	79	15
North Down	1835	194	12
Newtownards	1626	181	48
Castlereagh	1312	155	4
Belfast	9473	1201	1251
Totals	37406	4689	2387

* Full Duty Applicant is a person to whom the Housing Executive owes a duty under the homelessness legislation to provide accommodation.

** This includes an element of overprogramming to allow for slippage. The programme will be dependent on the availability of funding

Improvements in the Markets Area, Belfast

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an update on her department's commitment in relation to public realm improvements in the Markets area, Belfast; and to provide a timeframe for work on these improvements to be completed.

(AQW 2485/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I am committed to delivering the planned public realm improvements in the Markets area. They are being taken forward in three phases, details of progress to date are as follows:

- Phase 1 - Cromac Street completed.
- Phase 2 – (a) East Bridge Street (along frontage of Forsythe House) commenced on 10th September 2007. Scheme suspended over the Christmas period. Estimated completion date is 31st January 2008.
- Phase 2 – (b) East Bridge Street to Friendly Street. Estimated completion date is 31st January 2008.

Ministerial Statement

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development to detail when, and how, she was first notified of the Ministerial Statement, 'Outlining a Vision for our Education system'; and to confirm whether or not she had discussions with the Minister of Education on the subject matter of the statement before it was issued.

(AQW 2527/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I was first notified of the Ministerial Statement by email on the morning of 4 December. I did not discuss the subject matter of the Statement with the Minister of Education before it was made.

Maternity Pay

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her department's policy in relation to providing maternity pay to project workers who are funded by government departments, but who work in the voluntary and community sector.

(AQW 2582/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department for Social Development fully complies with legal requirements in relation to Maternity rights in relation to its own employees. However, individuals who are employed by others will have the full protection of Employment Law and compliance with the requirements of that Law is the responsibility of those employers.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Assembly Doorkeepers

Ms Anderson asked the Assembly Commission to detail the number and percentage of doorkeepers from a Roman Catholic background who were employed by the Assembly on 3 September 2007, broken down by (i) direct recruits; (ii) secondees; and (iii) Brook Street agency staff.

(AQW 2175/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): At 3 September 2007 there were 28 doorkeepers working at the Assembly. Of these there were 27 direct recruits and 1 secondee. Five (18.5%) direct recruits were from a Roman Catholic background. We will not release details of the religious background of the single secondee as to do so would be a breach of our obligations under the Data Protection Act 1998.

At 3 September 2007, 19 Agency (Brook Street) doorkeepers were working at the Assembly. The Assembly Commission does not hold information on the community background of Agency staff.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 11 January 2008

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Promotion of Tolerance

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to identify one key goal, under the priority ‘Promote Tolerance, Inclusion and Health and Well-Being’ in the Draft Programme for Government 2008-11, that is aimed specifically at the promotion of tolerance aspect of the priority.

(AQW 1580/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley and Mr M McGuinness): The draft Programme for Government contains high level commitments: it does not contain detailed specific goals.

As the deputy First Minister stated during Question Time on Monday 22 October, “we will bring forward detailed proposals for a programme of cohesion and integration – designed to build on some of the excellent work being done, particularly by district councils – to address the challenges that local communities face”. The Department intends 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 New Year.

The proposed budget for this programme is almost £26m over the three years from 2008-2011. This will be additional to EU PEACE III funding. A key element of the proposals will include a significant increase in investment over the period to promote inclusion and integration at local level.

Key objectives, actions and targets will be developed in the context of these proposals.

Programme to Improve Societal Relations

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline five key objectives, five key actions and five key targets which make up the programme to improve societal relations mentioned in PSA 7, Objective 5 in Annex 1 to the Draft Programme for Government 2008-11. (AQW 1581/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The draft Programme for Government contains high level commitments: it does not contain detailed specific goals.

As the deputy First Minister stated during Question Time on Monday 22 October, “we will bring forward detailed proposals for a programme of cohesion and integration – designed to build on some of the excellent work being done, particularly by district councils – to address the challenges that local communities face”. The Department intends 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 New Year.

The proposed budget for this programme is almost £26m over the three years from 2008-2011. This will be additional to EU PEACE III funding. A key element of the proposals will include a significant increase in investment over the period to promote inclusion and integration at local level.

Key objectives, actions and targets will be developed in the context of these proposals.

European Union Gender Goods and Services Directive

Mr Storey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to the answers to AQW 624/08, AQW 626/08 and AQW 631/08, to indicate whether or not it will make use of any available degree of flexibility to (i) member states; and (ii) devolved assemblies, to consider ways to protect religious conscience when implementing the European Union Gender Goods and Services Directive.

(AQW 1827/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The consultation document on the implementation of the EU Gender Goods and Services Directive included proposals for retaining or amending the exceptions already in the Sex Discrimination (NI) Order 1976. One of these exceptions relates to ‘organised religion’ and the consultation proposed that that exception should remain unchanged. In addition, there was also within the draft Regulations implementing the Directive an exclusion for the provision of goods and services at a place occupied or used by an organised

religion. Both issues are being considered as a result of the consultation as policy decisions are being finalised.

Planning Appeals

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to give a timescale within which the Planning Appeals Commission Commissioners will be in a position to deal with the appeal backlog. (AQW 1910/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Planning Appeals Commission is a tribunal Non Departmental Public Body. Given its independent tribunal status it is appropriate for the Chief Commissioner to provide a response directly to you, and we understand she has written to you in the following terms:

“The Commission deals with the backlog of appeals on an ongoing basis. At 31 October 2007 the backlog was 3173 and our projected output for the current financial year is 1046. Future clearance rates will depend on Commissioner complement and the level of referred work from Planning Service, particularly in relation to Area Plans. The above figures do not make allowances for the future intake of appeals, which is approximately 150 per month.

The Commission made a bid for additional resources in December 2006 and is awaiting the outcome of that bid. Final confirmation of additional funding arising out of the Comprehensive Spending Review is expected soon. Once confirmed the Commission aims to be in a position to secure additional Commissioner resources to further address the backlog.

I would be happy to provide any further information you require arising out of this response or to meet with you to discuss the matter if that would be more suitable.”

OFMDFM is fully committed to providing the Commission with the resources required to address the appeals backlog. The additional funding allocations for PAC in the Draft Budget 2008-2011 will provide the Chief Commissioner with the funding certainty to enable her to recruit additional commissioners. This additional funding has the potential to fund a significant number of additional commissioners, although the actual number to be appointed will be for the Chief Commissioner to determine, taking account of the Commission's capacity to manage a greatly increased complement and also subject to the availability of suitable people from within a limited and specialised market. Arrangements are already in progress to deliver a competition early in the New Year.

An independent review of the resource needs of the PAC was recently carried out. The review supports the case for the additional resources allocated to PAC in the draft budget.

Funding for Organisations Offering Advice on Sexual Orientation

Mr Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail any proposed funding to organisations offering advice on sexual orientation, in each of the next three years. (AQW 2136/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The current funding package of £230k was agreed for years 2007-08 and 2008-09 by Direct Rule Ministers. There are currently no new proposals to fund any organisations offering advice on sexual orientation, nor are there any proposals to fund any lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender groups beyond that period.

All funding proposals are given full consideration as they arise in the context of departmental priorities at the time.

Funding for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Groups

Mr Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail any proposed funding to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender groups, in each of the next three years. (AQW 2138/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The current funding package of £230k was agreed for years 2007-08 and 2008-09 by Direct Rule Ministers. There are currently no new proposals to fund any organisations offering advice on sexual orientation, nor are there any proposals to fund any lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender groups beyond that period.

All funding proposals are given full consideration as they arise in the context of departmental priorities at the time.

Planning Appeals

Lord Morrow asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the average length of time taken to issue a decision on a planning appeal, from the date an appeal is submitted to the Planning Appeals Commission, under each of the following procedures: (i) written representations; (ii) written representations with accompanied site visit; (iii)

informal hearing; and (iv) formal hearing.
(AQW 2205/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The Planning Appeals Commission is a tribunal Non Departmental Public Body. Given its independent tribunal status, it is appropriate for the Chief Commissioner to provide a response directly to you, and we understand she has written to you in the following terms:

"I have provided, in the table below, figures for the average time taken to decide an appeal for all of the procedures available. These figures indicate the time taken to determine appeals already heard within the current financial year and illustrate the position as at 30 October 2007.

Procedure	Median Time (Weeks)
Formal Hearing	89
Informal Hearing	74
Written Representation (accompanied Site Visit)	68
Written Representations (unaccompanied Site Visit)	73

The Commission publishes updates of these figures on a monthly basis via its website.

I would be happy to provide any further information you require arising out of this response or to meet with you to discuss the matter if that would be more suitable."

An independent review of the resource needs of PAC was recently carried out. The review supports the case for the additional resources allocated to PAC in the draft budget.

Barriers to Economic Development

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide its assessment of the importance of creating a shared future in addressing the barriers to economic development in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2306/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The draft Programme for Government's overarching aim is to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society where there is respect for the rule of law and where everyone can enjoy a better quality of life. The draft Programme also identifies the need to pursue an innovative and productive economy and a fair society that promotes social inclusion, sustainable communities and personal health and well-being.

We must become an even more attractive location for the flow of internationally mobile skills and labour, high value-added industries and secure high

scale job investment. In so doing we must ensure that we have political and social stability and an absence of conflict all of which are key factors in decisions relating to new investment both nationally and internationally.

Continuing divisions mar our reputation, blight our economic prospects and have a corrosive effect on our society. For these reasons it is imperative that we all embrace the opportunity to create a better future, based on tolerance and respect for cultural diversity. We are currently working on detailed proposals for a programme of cohesion and integration to promote the interests of the whole community towards the goal of a shared and better future.

'The Cost of Division - A Shared Future Strategy'

Mr Lunn asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps it has taken to discuss 'The Cost of Division - A Shared Future Strategy' with key stakeholders, as outlined in 'A Shared Future: First Triennial Action Plan'.

(AQW 2438/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

As stated previously, the Cost of Division research was commissioned, conducted and finalised under direct rule. It is an independent piece of research. Whilst the report may be a material consideration and departments may wish to have regard to it, and, in particular, the statistics and factual analysis which it contains, the report of itself does not form an agreed basis for future policy development.

We are fully committed to promoting the interests of the whole community towards the goal of a shared and better future and a prosperous, peaceful and settled society. Having considered progress made, we are currently working on detailed proposals for a programme of cohesion and integration. Key objectives, actions and targets will be developed in the context of these proposals.

Fair Employment Monitoring Regulations

Mr Lunn asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what commitment it will make to review the Fair Employment Monitoring Regulations.

(AQW 2440/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

Review of the Fair Employment Monitoring Regulations is an ongoing commitment.

Sustainable Development Strategy

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the assistance or support given to the community and voluntary sector to ensure the implementation and delivery of the Sustainable Development Strategy. (AQW 2501/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Target 33 of the Sustainable Development Implementation Plan is to “modernise the voluntary and community sector to strengthen the service delivery role of the organisations”. This supports the achievement of the strategic objective “to promote the development of community engagement, civic leadership and responsible citizenship”.

The Modernisation Fund Programme through which this target is being pursued is the responsibility of our Executive colleague, the Minister for Social Development.

The first call for Modernisation Fund Revenue applications closed in January 2006 with 168 applications received. Following detailed assessment and evaluation eighteen projects have been supported to a value of £2m.

DSD are currently assessing the impact of this intervention in order to best determine how the remaining resources of the available £1m within the Modernisation Fund Revenue Programme might best be utilised.

The Modernisation Fund Capital Programme which has a value of £15m, closed to applications on 19 October 2007. Some 475 valid applications have been received and these are currently being assessed. Initial allocation decisions for this programme are planned for early 2008.

Both programmes being resourced by DSD under the Modernisation Fund have established clear objectives aimed at strengthening the service delivery role of organisations within the voluntary and community sector. These include developing partnership and collaboration, improving income generation capability and enhancing capacity to deliver services.

It is planned that both programmes will be subject to robust evaluation in order to determine how successful they have been in achieving these objectives. These programmes have and continue to assist in the achievement of target No.33 in the Sustainable Development Implementation Plan.

Sustainable Development

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail what plans it has to

audit and monitor the fulfilment and delivery of its statutory requirement in relation to sustainable development. (AQW 2502/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Following the introduction of the statutory duty legislation in March 2007, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is developing guidance to assist public authorities, including District Councils, in fulfilling its statutory requirement. It is hoped that we will be in a position to issue the draft guidance for consultation in the near future.

The development of advice on monitoring and reporting on the guidance is still at a relatively early stage but we would expect that all bodies affected by the duty will be encouraged to publish the results of their monitoring. At this stage, we do not propose to introduce formal audit arrangements for the statutory duty.

Sustainable Development

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail what action it is taking to assist district councils to fulfil their new statutory obligations under sustainable development. (AQW 2504/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Following the introduction of the statutory duty legislation in March 2007, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is developing guidance to assist public authorities, including District Councils, in fulfilling its statutory requirement. It is hoped that we will be in a position to issue the draft guidance for consultation in the near future.

The development of advice on monitoring and reporting on the guidance is still at a relatively early stage but we would expect that all bodies affected by the duty will be encouraged to publish the results of their monitoring. At this stage, we do not propose to introduce formal audit arrangements for the statutory duty.

Education System

Mr B McCrea asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether or not the Minister of Education was in breach of the Ministerial Code in presenting her statement, ‘Outlining a Vision for our Education system’; and to confirm that no significant or cross-cutting changes to the education system can be implemented, without first being brought to the Executive and receiving cross-community support from the Assembly. (AQW 2536/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We do not consider that the Minister of Education was in

breach of the Ministerial Code in presenting her statement to the Assembly.

The Minister is of course required by the Ministerial Code to bring to the attention of the Executive any matter which is significant or controversial and outside the scope of the Programme for Government. In answering questions after her statement, the Minister undertook to bring proposals on the matters raised in her statement both to the Executive and to the Committee for Education in due course.

Civic Forum

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the expenditure committed to the Civic Forum, or any new North/South civic body, in the Northern Ireland block grant in each financial year since it was established; and to detail the proposed expenditure as outlined by the draft Budget. (AQW 2554/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Civic Forum's budget allocation and expenditure since it was established is as follows:

Year	2001/ 2002	2002/ 2003	2007/ 2008	2008/ 2011
Opening Budget (£k)	318	518	516	516/year
In-year Budget Adjustment (£k)	+ 132	- 195 ¹	- 250 ²	N/A
Actual Expenditure (£k)	423	328	89 ³	N/A

There were no budget allocations for the Civic Forum during 2003/2007 as the Legislative Provisions under which the Forum is funded ceased to have effect during suspension of the devolved institutions.

No budget allocation has been made for any new North/South civic body.

The budget allocation for 2008/2011 is a preliminary figure. Resource requirements for future years will be one of the issues for consideration in the Review of the Civic Forum.

Expenditure of North/South Bodies

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what assessment it has made of the expenditure of North/South Bodies since the restoration of devolution in May 2007.

(AQW 2558/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Each of the North/South Bodies function under the overall direction of the North/South Ministerial Council, with accountability lines back, not only to

the Council, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Oireachtas, but also to the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Department of Finance and to each of the Sponsor Departments.

In line with their Financial Memoranda, Sponsor Departments monitor and keep under regular review the expenditure of each of the Bodies.

The North/South Bodies are required to produce a set of annual accounts which are subject to full and rigorous audit by Comptroller and Auditors General in each jurisdiction. To comply with its Financial Memorandum, which prescribes detailed financial arrangements, each body is also required to produce a three year corporate plan and an annual business plan which are subject to approval of NSMC, including the Finance Ministers.

Undocumented Irish

Mr P J Bradley asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm whether or not the issue of the 'undocumented' Irish, living in the United States of America, was raised personally with President George W. Bush during the meeting which took place on 7 December 2007.

(AQW 2566/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The deputy First Minister met with the Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform in New York on 4 December 2007 during which they outlined their proposal for a reciprocal visa programme, similar to that which exists between Australia and the United States of America. The deputy First Minister subsequently raised this issue during the meeting with Steve Hadley, Director of the National Security Council and during the meeting with President Bush on 7 December 2007.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Staff Undergoing Disciplinary Procedures

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the reasons for the high number of staff in her Department, compared to other Government Departments, undergoing disciplinary procedures as a result of an unacceptable sickness record.

(AQW 2325/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development applies the NICS sickness

absence policies and inefficiency process in a fair and consistent manner.

I understand that, with the exception of DARD, the figures provided by Peter Robinson MP MLA in AQW 1629/08 related only to the core Northern Ireland Government Departments and excluded executive agencies. To a large extent this explains the disparity in the figures with DARD

Packaging and Processing of Meat Imports

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide a breakdown of the (i) lamb; (ii) beef; (iii) pig; and (iv) chicken meat, imported into Northern Ireland in 2005, 2006, and the first six months of 2007, in relation to (a) the tonnage/percentage that was not subject to further packaging or processing; and (b) the tonnage/percentage that was subject to further packaging or processing.

(AQW 2347/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development does not maintain this information centrally. Information does exist in relation to imports from a Third Country direct to here. However, information does not exist in relation to indirect importations. This is due to the fact that once imports from countries outside the European Union enter through the Border Inspection Post (BIP) in any Member State, they can complete their onward journey on a Common Veterinary Entry Document provided by the BIP of entry. Under EU Trade rules, these products are permitted to move freely within the EU.

Annex A details the imports direct from Third Countries and Annex B provides further details on the number of consignments from each country and by product type.

The Livestock and Meat Commission does monitor and maintain figures of beef imports to here. The composite figures are detailed in Annex C. There is no statutory reason for DARD to calculate the actual tonnages imported direct from each Third Country and this limited information could only be calculated at disproportionate cost.

Owing to reasons of commercial confidentiality information cannot be provided in relation to those organisations or individuals importing meat here.

DARD does not maintain statistics to provide a complete picture of the amount of product imported, that is subject to further packaging or processing, or of the amount that is subsequently re-exported. There is no statutory requirement for DARD to collect this information.

ANNEX A IMPORTED DIRECT FROM THIRD COUNTRIES INTO NORTHERN IRELAND

	2005	2006	2007*
Lamb (in Tonnes)	2391.2	550.1	785.2
Beef (in Tonnes)	0.0	49.6	99.9
Pig (in Tonnes)	23.9	0.0	0.0
Chicken Meat (in Tonnes)	152.8	302.0	1253.9

* 1st 6 months only

ANNEX B

2005

- 27 consignments of lamb from Argentina
- 19 turkey consignments from Brazil
- 3 chicken consignments from Brazil
- 3 chicken consignments from Thailand
- 2 turkey consignments from Chile
- 32 lamb consignments from New Zealand
- 1 pork consignment from Korea (re import)

2006

- 2 consignments of Beef from Brazil
- 13 consignments of chicken from Thailand
- 2 consignments of venison from New Zealand
- 28 consignments of lamb from New Zealand
- 2 consignments of lamb from Uruguay
- 4 consignments of lamb from Australia

2007

- 6 consignments of Beef from Brazil
- 62 consignments of chicken from Brazil
- 13 consignments of chicken from Thailand
- 62 consignments of lamb from New Zealand
- 4 consignments of lamb from Chile
- 14 consignments of lamb from Australia

ANNEX C UK BEEF IMPORTS

(*000 tonnes)	2005	2006	Jan-Jun 2007
Total imports	239.9	232.9	117.7
from EU-25	176.4	177.3	*88.3
from non EU-25	63.5	55.5	*29.4
Main Sources			
ROI	136.5	142.7	67.0

('000 tonnes)	2005	2006	Jan-Jun 2007
Brazil	32.2	28.6	15.8
Other Sources			
Germany	9.2	11.0	8.3
The Netherlands	12.7	12.8	7.8
Uruguay	7.0	7.6	4.9
Australia	4.7	6.2	**
Namibia	5.9	3.5	2.1
Botswana	3.5	2.4	2.4
Argentina	9.1	5.0	1.7
France	3.8	2.7	1.5
Italy	3.9	2.4	0.7

Source: Meat and Livestock Commission

* Figures are for EU-27

** No figures available.

Meat Imports

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide a breakdown of the (i) lamb; (ii) beef; (iii) pig; and (iv) chicken meat, imported into Northern Ireland in 2005, 2006, and the first six months of 2007, in relation to the organisations and/or individuals importing the meat. (AQW 2349/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development does not maintain this information centrally. Information does exist in relation to imports from a Third Country direct to here. However, information does not exist in relation to indirect importations. This is due to the fact that once imports from countries outside the European Union enter through the Border Inspection Post (BIP) in any Member State, they can complete their onward journey on a Common Veterinary Entry Document provided by the BIP of entry. Under EU Trade rules, these products are permitted to move freely within the EU.

Annex A details the imports direct from Third Countries and Annex B provides further details on the number of consignments from each country and by product type.

The Livestock and Meat Commission does monitor and maintain figures of beef imports to here. The composite figures are detailed in Annex C. There is no statutory reason for DARD to calculate the actual tonnages imported direct from each Third Country and this limited information could only be calculated at disproportionate cost.

Owing to reasons of commercial confidentiality information cannot be provided in relation to those organisations or individuals importing meat here.

DARD does not maintain statistics to provide a complete picture of the amount of product imported, that is subject to further packaging or processing, or of the amount that is subsequently re-exported. There is no statutory requirement for DARD to collect this information.

ANNEX A IMPORTED DIRECT FROM THIRD COUNTRIES INTO NORTHERN IRELAND

	2005	2006	2007*
Lamb (in Tonnes)	2391.2	550.1	785.2
Beef (in Tonnes)	0.0	49.6	99.9
Pig (in Tonnes)	23.9	0.0	0.0
Chicken Meat (in Tonnes)	152.8	302.0	1253.9

* 1st 6 months only

ANNEX B

2005

- 27 consignments of lamb from Argentina
- 19 turkey consignments from Brazil
- 3 chicken consignments from Brazil
- 3 chicken consignments from Thailand
- 2 turkey consignments from Chile
- 32 lamb consignments from New Zealand
- 1 pork consignment from Korea (re import)

2006

- 2 consignments of Beef from Brazil
- 13 consignments of chicken from Thailand
- 2 consignments of venison from New Zealand
- 28 consignments of lamb from New Zealand
- 2 consignments of lamb from Uruguay
- 4 consignments of lamb from Australia

2007

- 6 consignments of Beef from Brazil
- 62 consignments of chicken from Brazil
- 13 consignments of chicken from Thailand
- 62 consignments of lamb from New Zealand
- 4 consignments of lamb from Chile
- 14 consignments of lamb from Australia

ANNEX C UK BEEF IMPORTS

('000 tonnes)	2005	2006	Jan-Jun 2007
Total imports	239.9	232.9	117.7
from EU-25	176.4	177.3	*88.3
from non EU-25	63.5	55.5	*29.4
Main Sources			
ROI	136.5	142.7	67.0
Brazil	32.2	28.6	15.8
Other Sources			
Germany	9.2	11.0	8.3
The Netherlands	12.7	12.8	7.8
Uruguay	7.0	7.6	4.9
Australia	4.7	6.2	**
Namibia	5.9	3.5	2.1
Botswana	3.5	2.4	2.4
Argentina	9.1	5.0	1.7
France	3.8	2.7	1.5
Italy	3.9	2.4	0.7

Source: Meat and Livestock Commission

* Figures are for EU-27

** No figures available.

Meat Imports

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the tonnage of (i) lamb; (ii) beef; (iii) pig; and (iv) chicken meat imported into Northern Ireland in 2005, 2006, and the first six months of 2007. (AQW 2350/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development does not maintain this information centrally. Information does exist in relation to imports from a Third Country direct to here. However, information does not exist in relation to indirect importations. This is due to the fact that once imports from countries outside the European Union enter through the Border Inspection Post (BIP) in any Member State, they can complete their onward journey on a Common Veterinary Entry Document provided by the BIP of entry. Under EU Trade rules, these products are permitted to move freely within the EU.

Annex A details the imports direct from Third Countries and Annex B provides further details on the number of consignments from each country and by product type.

The Livestock and Meat Commission does monitor and maintain figures of beef imports to here. The composite figures are detailed in Annex C. There is no statutory reason for DARD to calculate the actual tonnages imported direct from each Third Country and this limited information could only be calculated at disproportionate cost.

Owing to reasons of commercial confidentiality information cannot be provided in relation to those organisations or individuals importing meat here.

DARD does not maintain statistics to provide a complete picture of the amount of product imported, that is subject to further packaging or processing, or of the amount that is subsequently re-exported. There is no statutory requirement for DARD to collect this information.

ANNEX A IMPORTED DIRECT FROM THIRD COUNTRIES INTO NORTHERN IRELAND

	2005	2006	2007*
Lamb (in Tonnes)	2391.2	550.1	785.2
Beef (in Tonnes)	0.0	49.6	99.9
Pig (in Tonnes)	23.9	0.0	0.0
Chicken Meat (in Tonnes)	152.8	302.0	1253.9

* 1st 6 months only

ANNEX B

2005

- 27 consignments of lamb from Argentina
- 19 turkey consignments from Brazil
- 3 chicken consignments from Brazil
- 3 chicken consignments from Thailand
- 2 turkey consignments from Chile
- 32 lamb consignments from New Zealand
- 1 pork consignment from Korea (re import)

2006

- 2 consignments of Beef from Brazil
- 13 consignments of chicken from Thailand
- 2 consignments of venison from New Zealand
- 28 consignments of lamb from New Zealand
- 2 consignments of lamb from Uruguay
- 4 consignments of lamb from Australia

2007

- 6 consignments of Beef from Brazil
- 62 consignments of chicken from Brazil

- 13 consignments of chicken from Thailand
- 62 consignments of lamb from New Zealand
- 4 consignments of lamb from Chile
- 14 consignments of lamb from Australia

ANNEX C UK BEEF IMPORTS

(*000 tonnes)	2005	2006	Jan-Jun 2007
Total imports	239.9	232.9	117.7
from EU-25	176.4	177.3	*88.3
from non EU-25	63.5	55.5	*29.4
Main Sources			
ROI	136.5	142.7	67.0
Brazil	32.2	28.6	15.8
Other Sources			
Germany	9.2	11.0	8.3
The Netherlands	12.7	12.8	7.8
Uruguay	7.0	7.6	4.9
Australia	4.7	6.2	**
Namibia	5.9	3.5	2.1
Botswana	3.5	2.4	2.4
Argentina	9.1	5.0	1.7
France	3.8	2.7	1.5
Italy	3.9	2.4	0.7

Source: Meat and Livestock Commission

* Figures are for EU-27

** No figures available.

Meat Imports

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the percentage of (i) lamb; (ii) beef; (iii) pig; and (iv) chicken meat imported into Northern Ireland in 2005, 2006, and the first six months of 2007, that was subsequently re-exported from Northern Ireland. (AQW 2351/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development does not maintain this information centrally. Information does exist in relation to imports from a Third Country direct to here. However, information does not exist in relation to indirect importations. This is due to the fact that once imports from countries outside the European Union enter through the Border Inspection Post (BIP) in any Member State, they can complete their onward journey on a Common Veterinary Entry Document provided by the BIP of

entry. Under EU Trade rules, these products are permitted to move freely within the EU.

Annex A details the imports direct from Third Countries and Annex B provides further details on the number of consignments from each country and by product type.

The Livestock and Meat Commission does monitor and maintain figures of beef imports to here. The composite figures are detailed in Annex C. There is no statutory reason for DARD to calculate the actual tonnages imported direct from each Third Country and this limited information could only be calculated at disproportionate cost.

Owing to reasons of commercial confidentiality information cannot be provided in relation to those organisations or individuals importing meat here.

DARD does not maintain statistics to provide a complete picture of the amount of product imported, that is subject to further packaging or processing, or of the amount that is subsequently re-exported. There is no statutory requirement for DARD to collect this information.

ANNEX A IMPORTED DIRECT FROM THIRD COUNTRIES INTO NORTHERN IRELAND

	2005	2006	2007*
Lamb (in Tonnes)	2391.2	550.1	785.2
Beef (in Tonnes)	0.0	49.6	99.9
Pig (in Tonnes)	23.9	0.0	0.0
Chicken Meat (in Tonnes)	152.8	302.0	1253.9

* 1st 6 months only

ANNEX B

2005

- 27 consignments of lamb from Argentina
- 19 turkey consignments from Brazil
- 3 chicken consignments from Brazil
- 3 chicken consignments from Thailand
- 2 turkey consignments from Chile
- 32 lamb consignments from New Zealand
- 1 pork consignment from Korea (re import)

2006

- 2 consignments of Beef from Brazil
- 13 consignments of chicken from Thailand
- 2 consignments of venison from New Zealand
- 28 consignments of lamb from New Zealand
- 2 consignments of lamb from Uruguay
- 4 consignments of lamb from Australia

2007

- 6 consignments of Beef from Brazil
- 62 consignments of chicken from Brazil
- 13 consignments of chicken from Thailand
- 62 consignments of lamb from New Zealand
- 4 consignments of lamb from Chile
- 14 consignments of lamb from Australia

ANNEX C**UK BEEF IMPORTS**

('000 tonnes)	2005	2006	Jan-Jun 2007
Total imports	239.9	232.9	117.7
from EU-25	176.4	177.3	*88.3
from non EU-25	63.5	55.5	*29.4
Main Sources			
ROI	136.5	142.7	67.0
Brazil	32.2	28.6	15.8
Other Sources			
Germany	9.2	11.0	8.3
The Netherlands	12.7	12.8	7.8
Uruguay	7.0	7.6	4.9
Australia	4.7	6.2	**
Namibia	5.9	3.5	2.1
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Argentina	9.1	5.0	1.7
France	3.8	2.7	1.5
Italy	3.9	2.4	0.7

Source: Meat and Livestock Commission

* Figures are for EU-27

** No figures available.

Meat Imports

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide a breakdown of the (i) lamb; (ii) beef; (iii) pig; and (iv) chicken meat, imported into Northern Ireland in 2005, 2006, and the first six months of 2007, in relation to the country of origin.

(AQW 2352/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development does not maintain this information centrally. Information does exist in relation to imports from a Third Country direct to here. However, information does not exist in relation to indirect importations. This is due to the fact that once imports

from countries outside the European Union enter through the Border Inspection Post (BIP) in any Member State, they can complete their onward journey on a Common Veterinary Entry Document provided by the BIP of entry. Under EU Trade rules, these products are permitted to move freely within the EU.

Annex A details the imports direct from Third Countries and Annex B provides further details on the number of consignments from each country and by product type.

The Livestock and Meat Commission does monitor and maintain figures of beef imports to here. The composite figures are detailed in Annex C. There is no statutory reason for DARD to calculate the actual tonnages imported direct from each Third Country and this limited information could only be calculated at disproportionate cost.

Owing to reasons of commercial confidentiality information cannot be provided in relation to those organisations or individuals importing meat here.

DARD does not maintain statistics to provide a complete picture of the amount of product imported, that is subject to further packaging or processing, or of the amount that is subsequently re-exported. There is no statutory requirement for DARD to collect this information.

ANNEX A**IMPORTED DIRECT FROM THIRD COUNTRIES INTO NORTHERN IRELAND**

	2005	2006	2007*
Lamb (in Tonnes)	2391.2	550.1	785.2
Beef (in Tonnes)	0.0	49.6	99.9
Pig (in Tonnes)	23.9	0.0	0.0
Chicken Meat (in Tonnes)	152.8	302.0	1253.9

* 1st 6 months only

ANNEX B**2005**

- 27 consignments of lamb from Argentina
- 19 turkey consignments from Brazil
- 3 chicken consignments from Brazil
- 3 chicken consignments from Thailand
- 2 turkey consignments from Chile
- 32 lamb consignments from New Zealand
- 1 pork consignment from Korea (re import)

2006

- 2 consignments of Beef from Brazil
- 13 consignments of chicken from Thailand
- 2 consignments of venison from New Zealand

- 28 consignments of lamb from New Zealand
- 2 consignments of lamb from Uruguay
- 4 consignments of lamb from Australia

2007

- 6 consignments of Beef from Brazil
- 62 consignments of chicken from Brazil
- 13 consignments of chicken from Thailand
- 62 consignments of lamb from New Zealand
- 4 consignments of lamb from Chile
- 14 consignments of lamb from Australia

ANNEX C UK BEEF IMPORTS

('000 tonnes)	2005	2006	Jan-Jun 2007
Total imports	239.9	232.9	117.7
from EU-25	176.4	177.3	*88.3
from non EU-25	63.5	55.5	*29.4
Main Sources			
ROI	136.5	142.7	67.0
Brazil	32.2	28.6	15.8
Other Sources			
Germany	9.2	11.0	8.3
The Netherlands	12.7	12.8	7.8
Uruguay	7.0	7.6	4.9
Australia	4.7	6.2	**
Namibia	5.9	3.5	2.1
Botswana	3.5	2.4	2.4
Argentina	9.1	5.0	1.7
France	3.8	2.7	1.5
Italy	3.9	2.4	0.7

Source: Meat and Livestock Commission

* Figures are for EU-27

** No figures available.

Seaweed Aqua Culture

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline what research has been carried out in relation to identifying seaweed species, in order to create new business opportunities in seaweed aqua culture. (AQW 2394/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department has not carried out any research into identifying seaweed species for use in aquaculture. However the Department is aware that

research has been undertaken by Queen's University at the Centre for Marine Resources and Mariculture (CMAR) in Portaferry and that the results of this research is freely available to industry. I should also add that the Department does not currently have powers under the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966 to regulate and licence the culture of seaweed.

European Fisheries Fund

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail how the European Fisheries Fund can be used by members of the fishing sector. (AQW 2395/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The conditions governing the use of the EFF are set out in Council Regulation (EC) No 1198/2006. The EFF provides four primary priorities for the funds - 1) Measures to adjust the Community's fishing fleet; 2) Aquaculture, processing and marketing; 3) Common interest/collective action; 4) Sustainable development of coastal fishing areas. My Department is currently working on a draft operational programme that will guide the implementation of the EFF. That will be subject to a 12-week public consultation beginning in February 2008.

Genetically Modified Varieties of Maize

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is her assessment of the European Union decision to allow the import of genetically modified varieties of maize from the United States of America into Europe. (AQW 2396/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Food Standards Agency Northern Ireland has the policy lead for GM food and feed issues, whilst the Department of the Environment leads on all aspects concerning the 'deliberate release' and cultivation of GMOs in the North.

Before GMO's for food/feed use can be placed on the market in Europe, they must first be authorised in accordance with the GM food and feed Regulation 1829/2003. The requirements for authorisation are based on scientific assessment of any risks for human and animal health and, if authorisation is sought for importation and/or cultivation, for the environment as well. The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) undertakes a safety assessment on each application and their final opinion is published for public comment before any authorisation decision is taken. A final decision is taken by a vote of Member States at the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health (SCoFCAH).

In addition to the GM varieties already authorised, three other types of GM maize including Herculex were recently authorised for importation and processing in the EU.

Newtownards Canal

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the Rivers Agency's policy on maintaining the banks of the canal behind homes at Greenwell Place, Newtownards.

(AQW 2402/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The section of the Newtownards Canal behind Greenwell Place, is designated under the terms of the Drainage (NI) Order 1973 and as such is maintained by Rivers Agency to ensure free flow. The upkeep of the banks of the canal is the responsibility of adjacent landowners however it is Rivers Agency policy to remove overhanging trees and vegetation from the banks if these are causing, or likely to cause, obstruction to flows in the channel.

Oil Procurement

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what consideration she will give to investigating the possibility of the procurement of oil from Venezuela, at a 20% reduction, to help alleviate the difficulties faced by the fishing sector in relation to high fuel prices.

(AQW 2426/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am conscious of the impact that fuel prices are having on the fishing industry but rising fuel prices have been the trend over the last 3-4 years. The way to combat this for the longer term is for the fleet to become more fuel efficient. Fuel efficiency initiatives will be a key component of the new European Fisheries Fund which will be introduced next year. I have no plans at present to investigate the procurement of oil from Venezuela but would be content to raise this issue with Ministerial colleagues in the future.

Ministerial Statement, 'Outlining a Vision for our Education System'

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail when, and how, she was first notified of the Ministerial Statement, 'Outlining a Vision for our Education system'; and to confirm whether or not she had discussions with the Minister of Education on the subject matter of the statement before it was issued.

(AQW 2474/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I was first notified of the Ministerial Statement 'Outlining a Vision for our Education System' when it was issued by email through the Department of Education's Private Office on the 4 December 2007.

I can confirm that I did not have discussions with the Minister of Education on the subject matter of the statement before it was issued.

Flooding in the Glens of Antrim

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the amount of financial assistance provided to residents in the Glens of Antrim, in relation to flooding in that area last summer; and what assistance will be offered to compensate farmers under the Emergency Distress Fund.

(AQW 2488/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Under the Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance to District Councils, which was established by the Department of the Environment following the severe flooding, 17 householders in Moyle District Council area and 9 householders in Larne Borough Council area received financial assistance totalling £26,000. Names and addresses of those who received financial assistance are available but it would be difficult to determine precisely those who reside within the Glens of Antrim. The Scheme did not extend to farm or other businesses but farmers whose homes were flooded would have been eligible for compensation.

Support for Farming Families

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what support she is providing for farming families, particularly in relation to health and well-being, as part of any rural development plans.

(AQW 2490/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: It is estimated that over 75% of the Rural Development Programme's total budget of approximately £540 million will go directly to farmers and farm families, and they are also free to benefit from the other measures open to the rural community as a whole.

The RDP's "competitiveness" priority contains two measures likely to improve well-being. A family farms options scheme will help beneficiaries analyse their current business position and consider the future, while a farm modernisation scheme will assist farmers to improve their competitiveness, for example, through investing in new technology or energy efficiency. Together, the measures have the potential to trim outgoings, increase incomes, lighten workloads and improve the immediate environment of farming

families, all outcomes likely to have a positive impact on health and well-being.

The RDP's "quality of life" priority includes three measures designed to strengthen the social infrastructure of the entire rural community: basic services for the economy and rural population; village renewal and development; and the conservation and upgrading of rural heritage. It is estimated that £20 million will be available for projects that could promote the health and well-being of farming families and the wider rural community.

In addition, you will be aware that I have bid for £10 million to tackle poverty and social exclusion in rural areas. Contained in the "Lifetime Opportunities" strategy and specifically listed among those targets is the need to bring positive benefits to the lives of farm families, as well as seeking to improve their overall quality of life.

Use of Local Produce

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail each of her department's premises where all canteen meat, fish and vegetables are exclusively sourced or procured locally.
(AQW 2498/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department has no information on purchases at these premises as public service catering is contracted to the private sector.

Under current arrangements the Department of Finance and Personnel's Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) is responsible for managing these catering contracts. Whilst the procurement of food cannot be restricted to specific locations or suppliers, I am advised that its contracts do state that the use of local produce should be considered where possible.

It is my desire that CPD explores all opportunities to use local produce as much as possible whilst adhering to EU law. My officials are therefore working with CPD to assist in the development of a range of guidance to support and encourage the participation of local enterprises in competitions for Government business. They are also looking at how to integrate sustainable development considerations into public sector contracts. I trust that these activities will bring significant benefit to the local economy, particularly producers and processors.

Sales of Foie Gras

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to ban the sale of foie gras.
(AQW 2508/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: While the production of foie gras is banned here, the free movement of goods is a key principle in European Community law and is enshrined in Part III, Title I of the treaty establishing the European Community (TEC). A unilateral ban on the import or sale of foie gras would contravene the provisions of the TEC and would result in proceedings being brought against us before the European Court of Justice.

As a result, I have no plans to ban the sale of foie gras here.

Council Boundaries

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the measures she is taking to ensure that local action group boundaries will be co-terminous with new council boundaries; and to outline what transitional funding measures will be made available to ensure the continued success of rural development projects.
(AQW 2514/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I understand that the proposed new council boundaries will not be announced until January or February at the earliest, and that will no doubt be followed by a period of reflection and debate.

I have said many times that I cannot afford to await the results of the review of public administration, since the funding must get out to rural people as soon as possible. Councils already work in various different clusters on such issues as economic development, waste management and building control.

I do not believe that this issue is any different. Five clusters have already been agreed, and I am hopeful that local action groups (LAGs) and strategies will be in place shortly. Regarding the call for transitional funding, the LEADER and the BSP programmes still have funds to spend until next year, as does the INTERREG programme, meaning that they should dovetail with an expected call for applications by the new LAGs in late spring.

Funding for Fishing Boats

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the funding that is available for the purchase of new boats for the fishing industry.
(AQW 2531/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There is no funding available for the purchase of new boats, however the new European Fisheries Fund, which will be consulted upon in the New Year, will contain measures to permit vessel modernisation related to fuel efficiency, working conditions and

safety. The European Union ended grant aid for the construction of new vessels at the end of 2004 following a review of the European Common Fisheries Policy in 2002. This move recognised that, at a time when there was over capacity in fleets for the fishing opportunities available, it made no sense to have grant aid to enable an increase in fishing effort. The Council Regulation governing the EFF specifically states that no EU aid can be granted for the construction of fishing vessels.

Policing Fishing Fleets

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the cost of policing the fishing fleet by (i) helicopter; (ii) nimrod; and (iii) satellite surveillance, in the last financial year.

(AQW 2561/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department of Agriculture does not finance aerial surveillance of the North's fishing fleet.

A satellite Vessel Monitoring System has been established in Britain through collaboration between the Marine Fisheries Agency (DEFRA) the Scottish Fisheries Protection Agency, and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in the North of Ireland, with DARD contributing 20% of costs.

In the past financial year, costs to DARD have been:

Overheads £36,201.13, Communications: £2550.60, and staff at £46,624.90, making a total cost of £85,376.63

Training Organisations for the Fishing Industry

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm that funding will no longer be available for the training organisation responsible for the fishing industry. (AQW 2562/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Group Training Association (GTA) based in Portavogie is part of a network of GTAs funded by the Sea Fish Industry Authority (Seafish), to carry out training for the seafood industry on its behalf. Following a review of its training provision the Seafish board recently announced that it would phase out funding for individual GTAs by April 2010. Instead, individual fishermen could apply directly to Seafish for funding to undertake Seafish approved training courses. Seafish propose to underwrite the fixed costs of mandatory safety training courses.

Marine Tourism of the River Foyle

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the marine tourism potential for the River Foyle at Culmore, resulting from the North-South Ministerial Council Meeting on 21 November 2007 and the launch of the Marine Tourism Strategy 2008-2013. (AQW 2580/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: On the 21 November the North/South Ministerial Council approved the Loughs Agency's Marine Tourism Development Strategy. A public consultation on the Strategy was commenced in December 2006 and the Agency is still accepting comments on its proposals. The North/South Ministerial Council approved the strategic plan, subject to funding availability.

The Strategy adopts a holistic approach to marine tourism development in the Foyle and Carlingford systems and it proposes the key themes for the consideration of development projects. These themes include:

1. Access Infrastructure which encompasses;
 - a. Boat Berthing and Launching,
 - b. Beach based activities,
 - c. The Natural Environment,
 - d. Access, awareness and information gateways ,
 - e. Tourist accommodation, and
 - f. Angling.
2. Development / Skills Training
3. Marketing and Communications
4. General awareness / branding and PR
5. Events programmes
6. Cluster packages

The site at Culmore on the Fiver Foyle has been identified as being appropriate for development for a boat berthing and launching project under the access infrastructure theme. A preliminary proposal and budget for this project have therefore been included in the bid for funding under the Cross Border Territorial Co-operation Programme.

It is anticipated that this project will realise wider benefits, in relation to the other themes. The Agency still awaits confirmation from the Special EU Programmes Body of its funding allocation and therefore the Department is unable to provide a more detailed comment on the potential for marine tourism under the Loughs Agency's Marine Tourism Development Strategy for the River Foyle at Culmore.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE**Sport Northern Ireland**

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the total amount of funding awarded by Sport NI to projects in each (i) constituency; and (ii) district council area, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1627/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): I am aware that this Question was due for Answer on 26 November 2007 and I apologise to the Member for the delay.

The tables below detail the total amount of funding awarded by Sport Northern Ireland to projects in each constituency and each district council area in each of the last 5 years.

FUNDING BY CONSTITUENCY

	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Belfast East	43,117.00	117,993.00	7,135.00	92,775.00	11,706.00
Belfast North	87,064.00	135,132.00	564,625.00	887,021.00	6,157.00
Belfast South	168,847.00	440,056.00	434,034.16	306,851.00	77,555.00
Belfast West	180,967.10	128,651.00	96,994.00	83,580.00	12,596.00
East Antrim	126,197.00	103,252.00	212,606.95	8,375.00	-
East Londonderry	148,819.00	194,158.00	235,560.00	-	3,163.00
Fermanagh & S Tyrone	200,810.00	305,122.00	110,538.00	-	451,071.66
Foyle	220,817.50	293,732.00	427,883.00	376,365.53	-
Lagan Valley	40,685.00	64,076.00	611,736.00	40,186.00	139,531.00
Mid Ulster	290,840.07	253,334.00	201,847.00	40,495.00	-
Newry & Armagh	339,276.00	374,877.00	301,784.00	23,170.00	9,051.00
North Antrim	117,985.00	354,926.78	813,620.00	216,443.00	168,326.00
North Down	37,248.00	95,755.00	4,680.00	8,000.00	-
South Antrim	489,859.35	388,881.00	171,840.00	4,000.00	-
Strangford	96,659.31	79,060.00	76,800.00	10,000.00	458.00
Upper Bann	230,673.00	171,576.73	370,298.00	63,171.00	4,995.00
West Tyrone	418,587.00	271,713.00	415,149.00	9,142.00	618,900.00
South Down	129,703.00	332,975.00	485,019.05	151,801.00	804,571.00

FUNDING BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA

	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Antrim	568,652.35	73,160.00	15,420.00	55,238.00	-
Ards	35,938.00	1,900.00	76,800.00	-	458.00
Armagh	286,219.00	145,983.00	36,114.00	23,170.00	11,867.00
Ballymena	104,842.00	275,772.78	688,833.00	-	168,326.00
Ballymoney	-	-	113,092.00	6,435.00	-
Banbridge	85,000.00	227,803.00	24,192.00	2,077.00	-
Belfast	384,000.10	837,844.00	1,457,258.16	1,524,987.00	108,014.00
Carrickfergus	2,775.00	3,517.00	21,150.00	-	-
Castlereagh	30,345.00	70,000.00	106,030.00	-	-
Coleraine	75,194.00	14,773.00	221,380.00	-	-

	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Cookstown	201,191.07	36,394.00	20,297.00	23,695.00	-
Craigavon	74,630.00	132,168.73	342,136.00	61,094.00	-
Derry	305,817.50	357,480.00	437,087.00	380,365.53	-
Down	204,824.31	88,373.00	250,261.00	111,711.00	804,571.00
Dungannon	91,559.00	107,160.00	107,220.00	-	2,402.00
Fermanagh	198,900.00	217,962.00	108,318.00	-	449,793.66
Larne	43,422.00	1,940.00	191,456.95	8,375.00	-
Limavady	-	94,385.00	14,180.00	-	-
Lisburn	26,285.00	64,076.00	141,736.00	80,276.00	-
Magherafelt	-	91,800.00	76,550.00	16,800.00	3,163.00
Moyle	-	99,294.00	3,683.00	-	-
Newry & Mourne	124,100.00	292,258.00	422,410.00	-	2,179.00
Newtownabbey	80,000.00	418,756.00	156,716.00	-	-
North Down	37,248.00	95,755	4,680.00	18,000.00	-
Omagh	253,592.00	159,120.00	300,789.00	9,142.00	613,770.00
Strabane	149,995.00	112,593.00	114,360.00	-	5,130.00

Freedom of Information Requests

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the cost to his department of dealing with Freedom of Information requests, in each of the last five years. (AQW 1667/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I apologise to the member for the delay in answering his question.

The Freedom of information Act 2000 came into effect on 1 January 2005 and it makes provision for the disclosure of information held by public authorities. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in common with all Northern Ireland Departments, does not calculate the cost of individual requests and this information is not held. However, I have commissioned some analysis that may better inform the costings associated with the Freedom of Information process. I will, of course, share this with you in due course.

Sport Northern Ireland

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline those projects in Upper Bann that have been funded by Sport NI in each of the last five years. (AQW 1823/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am aware that this Question was due for Answer on 3

December 2007 and I apologise to the Member for the delay.

The table below details the projects in Upper Bann that have been funded by Sport Northern Ireland in each of the last 5 years.

FUNDING TO PROJECTS IN UPPER BANN

Year	Applicant Organisation	Project title	Grant Amount (£)
2002/03	Glenavon FC Mourneview Park Mourneview Avenue Lurgan BT66 8EW	Major Works Year 3	70,000.00
2002/03	Glenavon FC Mourneview Park Mourneview Avenue Lurgan BT66 8EW	Safety Management	4,630.00
2002/03	Portadown FC Shamrock Park Brownstown Road Portadown BT62 3PZ	Major Works Year 3	65,000
2002/03	Portadown FC Shamrock Park Brownstown Road Portadown BT62 3PZ	Safety Management	6,043.00

Year	Applicant Organisation	Project title	Grant Amount (£)
2002/03	Clann na Banna GFC Scarva Road Banbridge BT32 3QL	Construction of changing pavilion	85,000.00
2003/04	Glenavon FC Mourneview Park Mourneview Avenue Lurgan BT66 8EW	Safety Management	3,360.00
2003/04	Portadown FC Shamrock Park Brownstown Road Portadown BT62 3PZ	Safety Management	3,606.00
2003/04	Banbridge District Council Civic Buildings Downshire Road Banbridge BT32 3JY	Sports Development Grant	8,179.00
2003/04	Banbridge District Sports Association Leisure Services Department Council Offices Downshire Road Banbridge BT32 3JY	Various Education courses	7,610.00
2003/04	Banbridge District Sports Association Leisure Services Department Council Offices Downshire Road Banbridge BT32 3JY	Generic Education courses	11,013.00
2003/04	Brownlow Campus Sport Trust Craigavon Leisure Centre Brownlow Road Craigavon BT65 6DL	Girls Soccer Development Officer	10,311.00
2003/04	Brownlow Campus Sport Trust Craigavon Leisure Centre Brownlow Road Craigavon BT65 6DL	Girls Soccer Development Officer	12,120.00
2003/04	Brownlow Campus Sport Trust Craigavon Leisure Centre Brownlow Road Craigavon BT65 6DL	Strategic development research, social inclusion and club development and coach education	11,015.00

Year	Applicant Organisation	Project title	Grant Amount (£)
2003/04	Craigavon Aztecs Volleyball club 65 Ballynagrick Road Portadown BT63 5NS	Club Development Officer	2,500.00
2003/04	Craigavon Borough Council Craigavon Civic Centre Lakeview Road Craigavon BT64 1AL	Gaelic Football CDO	7,666.73
2003/04	Craigavon Borough Council Craigavon Civic Centre Lakeview Road Craigavon BT64 1AL	Gaelic Football CDO	7,667.00
2003/04	Craigavon Borough Council Craigavon Civic Centre Lakeview Road Craigavon BT64 1AL	Aztecs Volleyball Club	2,500.00
2003/04	Craigavon Borough Council Craigavon Civic Centre Lakeview Road Craigavon BT64 1AL	Strategic Development Research	10,610.00
2003/04	Craigavon Borough Council Craigavon Civic Centre Lakeview Road Craigavon BT64 1AL	Club development and Gaelic football coaching	8,080.00
2003/04	Craigavon Borough Council Craigavon Civic Centre Lakeview Road Craigavon BT64 1AL	Skills 4 Sport	5,000.00
2003/04	Craigavon Sports Advisory Council Craigavon Borough Council Lakeview Road Craigavon BT64 1AL	Assistant sports development officer	17,748.00

Year	Applicant Organisation	Project title	Grant Amount (£)
2003/04	Craigavon Sports Advisory Council Craigavon Borough Council Lakeview Road Craigavon BT64 1AL	Assistant sports development officer	10,274.00
2003/04	Craigavon Sports Advisory Council Craigavon Borough Council Lakeview Road Craigavon BT64 1AL	Strategic Development research, health & physical activity, sports education	13,318.00
2003/04	Craigavon Sports Advisory Council Craigavon Borough Council Lakeview Road Craigavon BT64 1AL	Various sports courses	14,999.00
2003/04	NI Carriage Driving Association 26a Monyannon Road Donaghcloney BT66 7NB	Edwin Bryson	4,000.00
2004/05	Portadown FC Shamrock Park Brownstown Road Portadown BT62 3PZ	Safety Management	3,970.00
2004/05	Banbridge District Council Civic Buildings Downshire Road Banbridge BT32 3JY	Sports Development Grant	8,179.00
2004/05	Banbridge District Sports Association Leisure Services Department Council Offices Downshire Road Banbridge BT32 3JY	Generic Education courses	11,013.00
2004/05	Brownlow Campus Sport Trust Craigavon Leisure Centre Brownlow Road Craigavon BT65 6DL	Community Sports Programme	129,000.00
2004/05	Brownlow Campus Sport Trust Craigavon Leisure Centre Brownlow Road Craigavon BT65 6DL	Girls soccer development officer	10,311.00

Year	Applicant Organisation	Project title	Grant Amount (£)
2004/05	Brownlow Campus Sport Trust Craigavon Leisure Centre Brownlow Road Craigavon BT65 6DL	Strategic development research, social inclusion and club development and coach education	11,015.00
2004/05	Craigavon Borough Council Craigavon Civic Centre Lakeview Road Craigavon BT64 1AL	Skills 4 Sport	5,000.00
2004/05	Craigavon Borough Council Craigavon Civic Centre Lakeview Road Craigavon BT64 1AL	Development of 4km of new cycle track	35,590.00
2004/05	Craigavon Borough Council Craigavon Civic Centre Lakeview Road Craigavon BT64 1AL	Community Sport Programme	106,877.00
2004/05	Craigavon Borough Council Craigavon Civic Centre Lakeview Road Craigavon BT64 1AL	Gaelic Football CDO	7,667.00
2004/05	Craigavon Borough Council Craigavon Civic Centre Lakeview Road Craigavon BT64 1AL	Strategic Development Research	10,610.00
2004/05	Craigavon Sports Advisory Council Craigavon Borough Council Lakeview Road Craigavon BT64 1AL	Assistant sports development officer	17,748.00
2004/05	Craigavon Sports Advisory Council Craigavon Borough Council Lakeview Road Craigavon BT64 1AL	Strategic Development Research	13,318.00

Year	Applicant Organisation	Project title	Grant Amount (£)
2005/06	Banbridge District Sports Association Leisure Services Department Council Offices Downshire Road Banbridge BT32 3JY	Generic Education courses	2,077.00
2005/06	Brownlow Campus Sport Trust Craigavon Leisure Centre Brownlow Road Craigavon BT65 6DL	Girls soccer development officer	9,022.00
2005/06	Brownlow Campus Sport Trust Craigavon Leisure Centre Brownlow Road Craigavon BT65 6DL	Strategic Development Research	8,198.00
2005/06	Craigavon Borough Council Craigavon Civic Centre Lakeview Road Craigavon BT64 1AL	Gaelic Football CDO	7,833.00
2005/06	Craigavon Borough Council Craigavon Civic Centre Lakeview Road Craigavon BT64 1AL	Strategic Development Research	7,790.00
2005/06	Craigavon Sports Advisory Council Craigavon Borough Council Lakeview Road Craigavon BT64 1AL	Assistant sports development officer	17,748.00
2005/06	Craigavon Sports Advisory Council Craigavon Borough Council Lakeview Road Craigavon BT64 1AL	Health and Physical Activity Programme and Sports Education Courses.	10,503.00
2006/07	Portadown FC Shamrock Park Brownstown Road Portadown BT62 3PZ	Safety Management	1,914.00
2006/07	Portadown FC Shamrock Park Brownstown Road Portadown BT62 3PZ	Safety Management	3,081.00

Foras na Gaeilge

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide a timescale within which approval will be given to Foras na Gaeilge to proceed with the filling of 12 key posts outlined in a revised staffing submission in autumn 2007. (AQW 2057/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It was agreed at the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) Language Sectoral Meeting on 26 October 2007 that a Working Group would be established with representatives from Foras na Gaeilge and the two Sponsor Departments to reach agreement on the staffing submission from Foras na Gaeilge, to quantify the financial implications in 2008 year and subsequent financial years. It was also agreed that the Working Group should seek to progress agreement on a number of key posts identified in the submission which can be met from existing financial allocations in the shortest possible timeframe. A further submission outlining 12 key posts was received by the Sponsor Departments from Foras na Gaeilge on 31 October 2007. This is currently being considered by the Department of Finance and Personnel, and the Department of Finance in Dublin.

FIFA Eligibility Proposal

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the steps he is taking to assist the Irish Football Association to address the recent eligibility proposal outlined by FIFA. (AQW 2064/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Since FIFA wrote to the Irish Football Association on this matter, I have met with the Association's Chief Executive, Howard Wells, to express my deep dissatisfaction with the proposal of the FIFA Legal Committee. I have also written to FIFA urging them to review their recommendation as a matter of urgency and to stand by their long standing principle that only players born within the territory of an Association, and holding appropriate citizenship, should be able to play for its international team.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) those events which caused the Northern Ireland Events Company to overspend its budget; and (ii) who authorised payment in relation to these events. (AQW 2127/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Detailed investigations into the causes of the Northern Ireland Events Company's budget overspend are continuing. Details of the events on which the Company's

budget was overspent and information on authorisation of payments relating to these events will be available when these investigations have been concluded.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to (i) detail the corporate sponsorship agreements for the Northern Ireland Events Company that were expected, but did not materialise; and (ii) outline who authorised the Northern Ireland Events Company to proceed with payments in the absence of such sponsorship. (AQW 2129/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Northern Ireland Events Company's corporate sponsorship arrangements and authorisation of payments are matters for the Company's Board.

Implementation of Creative Industries Workshop Report (2006)

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what steps have been taken to implement the Creative Industries Workshop Report (2006), particularly in relation to promoting and streamlining the creative industries. (AQW 2187/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: As a result of the Creative Industries Workshop Report, a Creative Industries Working Group was established. This is led by DCAL with representatives from DETI, Invest NI, DEL, NESTA, Belfast City Council, University of Ulster and the Sector Skills Councils. The Group is working on mapping the support available to creative industries from public bodies and identifying strengths, weaknesses and gaps in provision.

DCAL and Belfast City Council commissioned research to profile the creative industry sector in Belfast and across Northern Ireland and a draft report has just been completed. This will inform policy development on the creative industries.

DCAL is also pursuing the possibility of securing funding from the Innovation Fund to establish a Creative Industries Seed Fund. This Fund is proposed to provide a range of help and support to emerging creative businesses.

DETI and Invest NI have been working with the Special EU Programmes Body to develop a creative industries support programme under Interreg IV. The development of this programme will help to ensure a more strategic approach to the development of creative industries.

In relation to promoting the creative industries, the Shifting Brilliances Conference took place in September

2006 to address the issues surrounding TV drama production in Northern Ireland.

DCAL is also planning to engage with various sub-sectors of the creative industries to address issues specific to those business areas.

Children and Young People

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) all amounts being spent by his department on children and young people; and (ii) the services on which these monies are being spent. (AQW 2271/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Details of all amounts being spent by my department on children and young people and the services on which these monies are being spent are as follows:

Function	Services	2007/08
Arts	Arts Council- Youth Arts Creative Youth Partnerships Lottery Project Funding	£433,040
	Northern Ireland Screen - Creative Learning Centres Cinemagic Film Festival Creative Youth Partnerships	£960,000
Museums	Armagh Observatory and Planetarium Skills and Science	£300,000
	W5 Skills and Science Renewing Communities - Sound and Vision	£1,050,000
Library Service	Public Library Service	£10.8m
Language	Ulster Scots Agency Summer Schools After-schools clubs Financial Assistance Scheme Grants Blue Eagles Production Theatre for Schools	£778,375
	Foras na Gaeilge Pre school Altram Summer schools Youth Clubs Family clubs for parents which children in Irish speaking schools Return to Education programmes with DEL	£245,676
Sports	34 governing bodies of sport 36 community/voluntary organisations 10 district councils 3 Education & Library Boards Disability Sport Northern Ireland NSPCC-Child Protection in Sport Unit Countryside Access & Activities Network Tollymore Mountain Centre	£10,390,643

The key actions my Department will take to deliver on the aims of the 10-year strategy are outlined in the Children and Young Peoples Action Plan 2007- 08.

Sport Northern Ireland will have an important role in the delivery of the sports strategy for Northern Ireland. The funding allocation to sport in the draft Budget 2008/2011 will help to ensure that a start can be made on implementing the 10-year sports strategy and consequently on the commitments relating to sport in the Children & Young People Strategy. However, full implementation also depends on the willingness and ability of all stakeholders to contribute to its delivery.

The draft budget has set a challenging target for the Public Library Service and there are therefore some uncertainties about the future services Libraries will be able to offer Children and Young People. Likewise, until the draft budget is finalised there are uncertainties around the future of the Creative Youth Partnership (CYP) initiative.

All other departmental commitments will be implemented.

Children and Young People

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm whether or not he will implement all the commitments by his department included in the ten year Children's Strategy. (AQW 2273/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Details of all amounts being spent by my department on children and young people and the services on which these monies are being spent are as follows:

Function	Services	2007/08
Arts	Arts Council- Youth Arts Creative Youth Partnerships Lottery Project Funding	£433,040
	Northern Ireland Screen - Creative Learning Centres Cinemagic Film Festival Creative Youth Partnerships	£960,000
Museums	Armagh Observatory and Planetarium Skills and Science	£300,000
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Library Service	Public Library Service	£10.8m

Function	Services	2007/08
Language	Ulster Scots Agency Summer Schools After-schools clubs Financial Assistance Scheme Grants Blue Eagles Production Theatre for Schools	£778,375
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The draft budget has set a challenging target for the Public Library Service and there are therefore some uncertainties about the future services Libraries will be able to offer Children and Young People. Likewise, until the draft budget is finalised there are uncertainties around the future of the Creative Youth Partnership (CYP) initiative.

All other departmental commitments will be implemented.

2008 European Union Year of Inter-Cultural Dialogue

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the plans for Northern Ireland to participate in the 2008 European Union Year of Inter-Cultural Dialogue. (AQW 2305/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: At this stage DCAL has no formal plans to participate in the 2008 European Year of Intercultural Dialogue.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the reasons for the visit of auditors to the offices of the Northern Ireland Events Company for a period of three days, and then for a further period of five days, during the 2006/2007 financial year. (AQW 2410/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department did not commission any audit work in relation to the Northern Ireland Events Company during the 2006/2007 financial year.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office visited the Northern Ireland Events Company on a number of occasions as part of its work in producing a report entitled 'Hospitality Association of Northern Ireland: A Case Study in Financial Controls and Public Appointments'. Some of these visits occurred in the 2006/2007 financial year.

The Company's accountants also visited its premises during 2006/2007 to carry out fieldwork on the audit of accounts.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm whether or not (i) the Northern Ireland Events Company contracted into events after 20 September 2007; (ii) these events will now take place; and (iii) there will be any financial penalties in not proceeding with these events. (AQW 2411/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Since 20 September 2007 the Northern Ireland Events Company has contracted into one event. This is the Tennis Legends event to be held over four days in February 2008. It is expected that this event will now take place.

The issue of potential financial penalties if NIEC commitments, including Tennis Legends 2008, are not met is a matter which is currently being considered under the investigation, commissioned by the Department, to verify creditors and potential liabilities. I will report back to the House at the earliest opportunity once this investigation has been completed.

Cantonese and Mandarin Translations

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the guidance given by his department on translations by Government departments into Cantonese and Mandarin; and what is his assessment of the need for separate translations into each of these languages. (AQW 2441/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department is responsible for providing a quality assured Irish Language Translation service for all Government Departments in Northern Ireland. Guidance on this service issued in 2004.

As a matter of courtesy my Department also facilitates translations in other languages, including Cantonese and Mandarin. However this is not a formal arrangement and there are currently no proposals to extend this service. It is not compulsory that Departments use this service, nor is it quality assured. Each Government Department is free to source and assess its own translations into languages other than Irish.

Health and Safety at Football Stadia

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to his answer to AQW 1875/08, to confirm whether or not funding is available to improve health and safety at football stadia. (AQW 2443/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport including the distribution of funding. Over the past three years, SNI has been running a stadia safety programme, the purpose of which is to assist owners of major sports grounds, including football stadia, to improve health and safety at their venues. Up to the end of March 2007, Sport NI has made offers of awards under this programme, worth a total of £3,071,636.00 to football clubs to help them improve health and safety at their stadia.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline (i) the date on which he was made aware of discrepancies in Pay As You Earn, National Insurance, and Value Added Tax payments at the Northern Ireland Events Company; and (ii) what action was undertaken by officials to address the matter. (AQW 2449/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: On 20 September 2007, the Acting Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Events Company advised the Department that the Company had incurred a significant financial deficit. I have commissioned an independent comprehensive review of all the circumstances surrounding the deficit accumulated by the Northern Ireland Events Company. This will include an examination of the circumstances surrounding any financial discrepancies within the Company. I will report back to the House at the earliest opportunity on the findings of this review.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the extent of the overspend by the Northern Ireland Events Company at the end of the 2005/2006 financial year; and to outline what action was taken by officials as a result of that overspend.

(AQW 2452/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In my statement to the Assembly on 26 November 2007, I said that I was commissioning an independent review of all the circumstances surrounding the deficit accumulated by the Northern Ireland Events Company and that I would report back to the House at the earliest opportunity on the findings of this review.

I am sure the member will agree that it would be inappropriate for me to comment further until this review is complete.

Ministerial Statement, ‘Outlining a Vision for our Education System’

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail when, and how, he was first notified of the Ministerial Statement, ‘Outlining a Vision for our Education system’; and to confirm whether or not he had discussions with the Minister of Education on the subject matter of the statement before it was issued.

(AQW 2476/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I first became aware of the Ministerial Statement by the Education Minister when I saw it on the Indicative Timings for Assembly Business on the morning of 4th December 2007. My Private Office received the text of the statement by email at 10:51am on Tuesday 4th December 2007. As I was already in the Assembly chamber from 10:30am to 11:30am making a statement on the Community Festivals Fund, I did not receive this until 11:30am when the Education Minister had begun her statement. I had no discussions with the Minister for Education on the subject matter of her statement before it was issued.

Building Projects at Ravenhill Rugby Ground

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the amount of public money paid to the Ulster Branch of the Irish Rugby Football Union for building projects at Ravenhill; (ii) the date each project was undertaken; (iii) the companies involved, and the amount of money each received; and (iv) any conditions that were attached to these projects.

(AQW 2483/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding. The table below details the exchequer funding provided to the Ulster Branch of the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) over the past 5 financial years, and the main contractors in each case:

Year	Amount	Date of SNI Offer	Main Contractor
02 / 03	£72,622.59	11 / 06 / 02	Design & Construct
03 / 04	£17,377.41	11 / 06 / 02	Design & Construct
04 / 05	£17,377.41	11 / 06 / 02	Design & Construct
05 / 06	Nil		
06 / 07	£284,068.67	04 / 10 / 05	William Dowling Ltd

All of these projects were required to satisfy accountability and value for money requirements of public funding.

Library Provision in Newtownards

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide an update on progress in relation to the provision of a new library in Newtownards.

(AQW 2547/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The South Eastern Education and Library Board submitted a draft Economic Appraisal to the Department in June 2007. The Department has considered the submission and recently responded with comments on the Appraisal together with an offer to meet Board officials to discuss the content of the Appraisal.

Waterways Ireland

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the expenditure committed to Waterways Ireland in the Northern Ireland block grant in each financial year since it was established; and to detail the proposed expenditure as outlined by the draft Budget.

(AQW 2550/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The expenditure committed to Waterways Ireland in the Northern Ireland block grant in each financial year since it was established is as follows:

2000/1 £'000	2001/2 £'000	2002/3 £'000	2003/4 £'000	2004/5 £'000	2005/6 £'000	2006/7 £'000	2007/08 £'000
1,300	1,931	2,330	3,154	4,557	3,503	5,783	*8,300

* Grant of £8.3m committed to WI in the block grant for the period April 2007 to March 2008, subject to final outturn.

Increased expenditure in 2006/7 and 2007/8 reflects increases in capital costs and works on the new WI Headquarters in Enniskillen. The building is scheduled for completion in Autumn 2008.

In the Building a Better Future Draft Budget 2008-11 published on 25 October 2007, Waterways Ireland's draft indicative budget for 2008/09 is £7.298m.

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
North/ South Language Body	£2.303m	£3.5m	£3.71m	£4.005m	£4.561m	£4.599m	£5.095m	£5.439m
Ulster-Scots Agency	£0.5m	£0.97m	£1.07m	£1.155m	£1.337m	£1.357m	£1.61m	£1.931m
Foras na Gaeilge	£1.803m	£2.53m	£2.64m	£2.85m	£3.224m	£3.242m	£4.934m	£3.508m

North/South Language Bodies

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the expenditure committed to North/South Language Bodies in the Northern Ireland block grant in each financial year since they were established; and to detail the proposed expenditure as outlined by the draft Budget. (AQW 2552/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The amount of expenditure committed to the North/South Language Bodies in the Northern Ireland block grant in each financial year since they were established is shown on the table above:

The proposed expenditure for the North/South Language bodies in the Northern Ireland block grant for 2008/2009 as outlined in the draft budget is £6.277m.; approximately £2.65m for the Ulster-Scots Agency and £3.6m for Foras na Gaeilge. The draft budget is currently out for consultation. The consultation period ends on 4th January 2008.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm whether or not any future event already planned by the Northern Ireland Events Company will still go ahead. (AQW 2599/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department's aim is to ensure that contractual commitments are honoured to ensure that Northern Ireland's reputation for hosting events is preserved.

Currently the number and nature of NIEC's commitments to events is being investigated. Once this information is available, we will be examining carefully the commitments made by the Company to host events in future years, to ensure they represent Northern Ireland's best interests and value for money.

Motorcycle Road Racing

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to his answers to AQW 447/08

and 448/08, to detail the reasons for the fall in financial support for motorcycle road racing in the last two years. (AQW 2600/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport including the distribution of financial assistance to sports organisations. Over the past number of years, SNI has been providing funding to assist motorcycle road race organisers implement the recommendations of a Taskforce, established by the Motor Cycle Union of Ireland, to examine safety issues within the sport. Funding has been reducing as these recommendations have been implemented.

Irish Football Association

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions he has had with the Irish Football Association in relation (a) to reviewing its decision not to reduce the size of its governing committee to ten; and (b) to securing the proposed funding of £5 million. (AQW 2619/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) is currently in discussion with both Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), which is responsible for the development of sport including the distribution of funding, and the Irish Football Association (IFA) about the implications of the Association's recent decision not to move to a more competence based and stream-lined governing committee. As part of that process, DCAL and SNI have asked the IFA to re-visit this decision in order to ensure that funding under the Soccer Strategy can continue to be released.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what employer obligations his department has in relation to staff employed by the Northern Ireland Events Company. (AQW 2628/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My department has no employer obligations in relation to staff employed by the Northern Ireland Events Company.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm whether or not staff employed by the Northern Ireland Events Company will be given the option of transferring to other government agencies and bodies. (AQW 2629/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am giving urgent consideration to the most appropriate arrangements for the effective delivery of the events function and this will include consideration of the staff currently employed by the Northern Ireland Events Company. Several options are being pursued, but I cannot comment further at this stage.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of staff employed by the Northern Ireland Events Company, broken down by grade. (AQW 2630/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am informed by the Northern Ireland Events Company that it currently employs seven staff. These staff are not civil servants, and are employed on contract by the Northern Ireland Events Company.

However, their equivalent levels to Civil Service Grades are:

- One Grade 6
- One Deputy Principal
- One Executive Officer Grade 1
- Four Executive Officers Grade 2

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm whether or not the Northern Ireland Events Company entered into a contract, after 20 September 2007, to host the FIM Motocross of Nations in September 2008; and to detail (a) the amount of money involved in the contract; (b) whether the contract will be honoured; and (c) the financial penalties that will be incurred if the contract is not honoured. (AQW 2651/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I have been informed by the Northern Ireland Events Company that they entered into a contract, on 12

September 2007, with Youthstream (the event rights holder) to host the FIM Motocross of Nations in September 2008. The value of this contract is €550,000.

FIM in association with Youthstream, announced on 13 December 2007, following an inspection of the proposed venue, that the 2008 Motocross of Nations would not take place in Northern Ireland.

I also understand from the Company that, in the light of the withdrawal of FIM and Youthstream, the issue of financial penalties is currently being considered and is with the Company's legal advisers.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when the forensic audit of the Northern Ireland Events Company finances will be completed; and what plans he has to report to the Assembly on this matter. (AQW 2652/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It is currently expected that the comprehensive independent review of all the circumstances surrounding the Northern Ireland Events Company's finances will be completed by the end of February 2008. I will report to the Assembly on the findings of this review as soon as is practicable after it is completed.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether or not the Northern Ireland Events Company owns any (i) buildings; (ii) land; or (iii) high value capital assets. (AQW 2654/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Northern Ireland Events Company does not own any buildings or land. It does not own any capital assets beyond those required for a normal administration function.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the total deficit for (i) 2005-06; and (ii) 2006-07, of the Northern Ireland Events Company. (AQW 2682/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In my statement to the Assembly on 26 November 2007, I said that I was commissioning an independent review of all the circumstances surrounding the deficit accumulated by the Northern Ireland Events Company and that I would report back to the House at the earliest opportunity on the findings of this review.

I am sure the member will agree that it would be inappropriate for me to comment further until this review is complete.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2129/08, whether or not he will seek the requested information from the Company's Board; and to (i) outline a timeframe for this action; or (ii) provide reasons why he will not seek this information. (AQW 2683/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In my statement to the Assembly on 26 November 2007, I said that I was commissioning an independent review of all the circumstances surrounding the deficit accumulated by the Northern Ireland Events Company and that I would report back to the House at the earliest opportunity on the findings of this review.

Current expectations are that the review will be completed by the end of February 2008. I am sure the member will agree that it would be inappropriate for me to comment further until this review is complete.

Foras na Gaeilge

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2067/08, to detail progress made regarding (i) 12 Foras na Gaeilge posts outlined in the Foras submission to his department on 31 October 2007; and (ii) the staffing submission from Foras na Gaeilge of February 2007. (AQW 2702/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Further to my answer to your previous question AQW 2057/08 the submission from Foras na Gaeilge relating to the 12 key posts in the organization has been received by the sponsor Departments and is still under consideration as additional information is being sought on two posts to be based in the Belfast office. Once the information is received approval of the posts will also have to be given by the respective Finance Ministers North and South.

Creative Learning Centres

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what funding will be made available for the continuation of creative learning centres, such as the Nerve Centre, Derry/Londonderry. (AQW 2706/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Based on the Draft Budget published on 25 October

2007, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will allocate a total of £400,000 per annum over the next three years to the three creative learning centres, the Nerve Centre, Derry/Londonderry, Studio ON, Crossnacreevy and the AmmA Centre, Armagh.

EDUCATION

Nursery Schools in Ballymena

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Education to list the nursery schools in Ballymena that are failing to fill all available places on first preferences. (AQW 689/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Ballymena Nursery School was undersubscribed at first preference applications. Dunclug Nursery School was undersubscribed at first preference in respect of part-time places applications.

The nursery unit at Harryville Primary School was also undersubscribed at first preference applications.

Funding for Catholic Schools

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Education what assurances she will give that no alterations will be made to the funding for Catholic schools, following the Minister of Finance and Personnel's comments on the Cost of Division report, in his statement on the Draft Budget 2008-2011. (AQW 1326/08)

The Minister of Education: All grant-aided schools are funded under a single Common Funding Scheme on the basis of identified needs. There are no plans to fund schools from one sector any differently than another.

Telecommunications Mast at Ashgrove Road, Newry

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Education to make a statement on concerns expressed by parents, teachers and staff of St. Ronan's Primary School, Newry High School, the Sacred Heart Grammar School and the Abbey Grammar School, currently under construction, in relation to additional equipment being added to the existing telecommunications mast at Ashgrove Road, Newry. (AQW 1395/08)

The Minister of Education: I appreciate that the siting of mobile phone / telecommunication masts and equipment on or near school premises can be a cause for concern for parents and schools and I also have concerns that this particular mast is located near schools.

I understand that the planning application went before Newry and Mourne District Council on 8 November with an opinion to approve. I am informed that the Council disagreed with this opinion and have referred the application to the Planning Service Management Board who will now assess the application before making a final decision. Ultimately, however, the provision of additional equipment to the mast at Ashgrove Road, Newry is a matter for the Planning Service and not one in which I can intervene.

Creationism

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail whether or not her department and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment consider (i) the absence of new additional genetic information in an organism that was not present in the parent population; and (ii) the absence of any evolutionary mechanism which causes genetic information to arise naturally from matter, to be (a) evidence based; or (b) belief. (AQW 1631/08)

The Minister of Education: I refer you to my previous answers to you to AQWs 1471/08, 1507/08, 1509/08, 1514/08 and also my answers to AQWs 1472/08, 1477/08 and 1479/08 to David Simpson, the Member for Upper Bann, 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.

Autistic Spectrum Disorder

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children living in West Belfast who have been diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder; and what special educational needs provisions are available within schools in West Belfast for children with this condition. (AQW 1638/08)

The Minister of Education: The diagnosis of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is the responsibility of the Department of Health and Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). I have been

informed by the Minister for DHSSPS that the total number of children living in west Belfast who have been diagnosed with ASD is not held. However DHSSPS has advised that since January 2007, 31 children living in west Belfast have been diagnosed with ASD.

Children with ASD are educated in a range of settings both mainstream and special school across the education sector, their placement being determined by reference to the pupil's identified special educational needs and the exercise of parental choice.

- Provision available within schools in west Belfast for children with ASD can include:
- The annual Transition support programme for parents, teachers and children at transfer from nursery to year 1 and from year 7 to year 8 provided by the Belfast Education and Library (BELB);
- Assessment by an educational psychologist in liaison with Health and Social Care professionals;
- Schools visits/assessments by the BELB ASD Service and provision of written recommendations which are then incorporated into the child's education plan and implemented by the class teacher/school staff;
- Reviews of these recommendations by the BELB ASD Service on request by school;
- In more complex cases the BELB ASD Service can provide an ASD trained adult assistant for the child;
- In the most complex cases a statutory assessment may ultimately lead to a statement of special educational needs.

Procurement Service Offered by Education and Library Boards

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to outline the means through which Education and Library Boards provide a procurement service to other public sector bodies; and to list the bodies to which it offers this service. (AQW 1683/08)

The Minister of Education: Procurement policy requires Departments and other public bodies to carry out their procurement activities by means of a relevant Centre of Procurement Expertise. Education and Library Boards are designated a Centre of Procurement Expertise and as such may perform procurements on behalf of other public sector bodies.

	Type of Service	Public Body	Method/Mean
SELB	Goods and Services: Invitation to Tender, Evaluation, Contract Award, Advice & Support as required plus Standing Contract schedules	Southern Regional College Armagh Planetarium Armagh Observatory	Service Level Agreement “ “

	Type of Service	Public Body	Method/Mean
	Goods and Services: Invitation to Tender, Evaluation, Contract Award, Contract Management (34 contracts) As above for Copier Paper	Belfast ELB North Eastern ELB South Eastern ELB Western ELB As above plus CSA/RSS, PSNI, OFMDFM, DSD, DETI, DE, DEL, DARD, DoE, DRD, DFP, DHSS, DCAL, NI Assembly Commission, NI Assembly, NIO, Court Service, Housing Executive, Water Service, plus all agencies & NDPBs of the above	Joint Board Arrangements “ “ “ CPD collaborative arrangements
	Goods and Services: Standing Contract Schedules and advice	11 Voluntary Grammar Schools in SELB area	Service Level Agreement
	Buildings Maintenance service and advice	Southern Regional College	Management Fee
BELB	Procurement services	CCEA	Service Level Agreement
SEELB	Procurement services	NILGOSC	Service Level Agreement
WELB	General procurement services	South West Regional College	Management fee
NEELB	Standing Contract Schedules	Voluntary Grammar Schools and GMI schools within area	No income accrues to the NEELB from the provision of these services

North Eastern Education and Library Board

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to detail all procurement policies to which the North Eastern Education and Library Board is required to adhere. (AQW 1684/08)

The Minister of Education: The NEELB's procurement policies reflect the public procurement policy adopted by the Executive in the north of Ireland in May 2002 and the Procurement Policy Guidelines as issued by the Procurement Board. The NEELB should also comply with any relevant EU or other international procurement rules.

North Eastern Education and Library Board Procurement Exercises

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education, in relation to procurement exercises carried out by the North Eastern Education and Library Board, to detail whether or not Education and Library Boards can be added to the contract after it is drawn up. (AQW 1713/08)

The Minister of Education: It has been assumed that this question relates to capital procurement exercises. The North Eastern Education and Library Board have commented that their building contracts relate to specific projects within the areas of maintenance, minor works and major works. Other Boards could not be added to such contracts since they

have been awarded on tenders priced on specifications relating to particular projects.

North Eastern Education and Library Board Procurement

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to detail the major procurements within the North Eastern Education and Library Board area in 2004; 2005; 2006 and 2007 that did not involve tendering. (AQW 1720/08)

The Minister of Education: It has been assumed that major procurement refers to building projects over £300K. There were no major procurements within the North Eastern Education and Library Board area that did not involve tendering in the years 2004 to 2007.

School Funding

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail the funding per pupil, as outlined in the draft Budget, in (i) the controlled primary sector; (ii) the controlled secondary sector; (iii) the maintained primary sector; (iv) the maintained secondary sector; (v) the integrated primary sector; and (vi) the integrated secondary sector, for the current financial year; and for 2008/09. (AQW 1725/08)

The Minister of Education: The figures shown in the table below set out the average funding per pupil

allocations made available to schools in the current financial year under the Local Management of Schools Common Funding Formula and the Children and Young People Funding Package, specifically for school budgets. Figures exclude capital funding, other initiative funding made available outside of delegated funding arrangements, and services and support provided by Education & Library Boards on behalf of all schools in their area, which are not allocated at individual school level.

Sector	Per Capita (4)
Controlled Primary Schools (1)	£2,502
Controlled Secondary Schools (2) (3)	£3,806
Maintained Primary Schools	£2,576
Maintained Secondary Schools	£3,977
Grant-Maintained Integrated Primary Schools	£2,701
Grant-Maintained Integrated Secondary Schools	£4,180

Notes:

1. Includes Controlled Integrated Primary Schools
2. Includes Controlled Integrated Secondary & Controlled Grammar Schools
3. Includes Preparatory Pupils in Controlled Grammar Schools
4. Funding distributed in 2007/08 includes the funding allocated directly to schools from the Children & Young People Funding Package.

The higher per pupil funding received by grant-maintained integrated (GMI) schools reflects the additional spending responsibilities carried by these schools in respect of the payment of VAT costs, landlord maintenance expenditure and the administration costs associated with the running of their schools. The Education and Library Boards meet these additional spending responsibilities centrally for their controlled and maintained schools.

Specific factors have been introduced within the common funding formula to assist individual GMI schools meet these costs.

I am currently considering the detailed implications for Education services of the draft Budget 2008/09 proposals for Education. However, it will not be possible to finalise or confirm allocations for specific services until final Budget allocations for departments are determined.

Magherafelt Nursery School

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail the start date of the new build for Magherafelt Nursery School. (AQW 1868/08)

The Minister of Education: Planning for the new school building for Magherafelt Nursery School is being taken forward in conjunction with the new

replacement school for Magherafelt Primary School and the project is currently at pre-tender stage. Both schools are to be sited on the former RIR site at Castledawson Road, Magherafelt. Subject to the NEELB's acquisition of this site and planning approval being granted, it is expected that work on the construction of the new nursery school should start in Spring 2008.

South Eastern Education and Library Board

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education to give a timeframe within which she intends to remove control from the Commissioners appointed in July 2006 and restore powers to the South Eastern Education and Library Board. (AQW 1883/08)

The Minister of Education: In the interests of local accountability it would be appropriate that the members of the SEELB Board should resume their former responsibilities. However, it is essential to ensure that there would be no return to the difficulties which the Commissioners inherited when they were appointed in July 2006 and that the stability which has since been achieved is sustained. A necessary first step must therefore be to confirm the readiness of Board members to take up their former responsibilities and to deliver those effectively.

School Admissions in Border Areas

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to recover costs from the Department of Education and Science in the Republic of Ireland in relation to children from that jurisdiction who are being educated in schools in Northern Ireland. (AQW 1975/08)

The Minister of Education: I believe that children in border areas should be able to attend their nearest school. The current obligation on schools to give priority in their admissions criteria to children resident in the North before those not so resident may be incompatible with EU law and it is my intention to change it. In progressing this change I wish to work in co-operation with the Department of Education and Science in the South. Such work will include the consideration of the most appropriate arrangements to facilitate education for children in border areas.

School Resource Audit

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education what action she has taken to establish an audit of resources across all Northern Ireland schools, for the purpose of sharing these resources. (AQW 1977/08)

The Minister of Education: No action has been planned to date to undertake such an audit. It is important that education authorities do explore possibility for sharing of resources which can lead to improved educational experiences for children, and improved use of educational resources. A new Education and Skills Authority, undertaking an area-based planning approach, would consider how the educational needs of an area should best be addressed, including the possibilities for sharing of resources.

Schools Careers Service

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail what qualitative improvements she has planned for the schools careers service across Northern Ireland. (AQW 1979/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department for Employment and Learning has direct responsibility for the Careers Service, and the support it provides to schools. It has been working closely with my Department to formulate a coherent all age strategy for careers and, together, the two Departments launched a draft Careers Education, Information, Advice & Guidance (CEIAG) strategy for consultation on the 22nd October 2007.

I want to see high quality provision of careers education in schools supported by the provision of impartial careers advice and guidance. The strategy therefore proposes the introduction of a guide that will address the current gaps in careers education and providing an effective, evidence-based framework for the provision of careers education, information, advice and guidance in schools. It also proposes the introduction of new quality assurance indicators which will include a specific focus on careers education in schools. Further work to introduce these and other improvements will be informed by the responses to the consultation currently underway and will be confirmed in a revised version of the strategy which will be brought to the Assembly in due course.

Teaching English as a Foreign Language

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to ensure that equal standards apply to the provision of Teaching English as a Foreign Language across Northern Ireland. (AQW 1980/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department plans in early 2008 to launch the English as an additional language (EAL) policy in all schools. To prepare the way for the policy to be applied consistently, the five Education and Library Boards set up a single regional

Inclusion and Diversity Service in April 2007. This new service brought together services across the five education and library boards in relation to the education of all children and young people whose first language is not English.

Since being established, the Inclusion and Diversity Service has set up a number of new services: interpreting, translating and a multi-lingual website for teachers and parents. These are available to all schools in the North of Ireland that require support with the teaching of English as an additional language.

In addition, a North/South toolkit for primary school teachers was launched on 10 December 2007 by myself and Conor Lenihan.

Schools receive direct funding to support EAL children and young people (£943 per EAL pupil). Schools will further benefit from additional support in January 2008, when the Inclusion and Diversity Service begins a new initiative to place diversity coordinators in clusters of schools. This initiative will facilitate capacity building by working with all schools on whole school and classroom issues, which will include language support.

Creationism

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1471/08, what professional advice she has received from the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessments in relation to the criteria available to teachers to assess whether or not data; phenomena; experimental observations; laws of physics; biological organs, behaviours, functions or attributes, are to be regarded as either 'evidence based' or 'faith based'. (AQW 1991/08)

The Minister of Education: I refer you to my previous answers to you to AQWs 1471/08, 1507/08, 1509/08, 1514/08 and also my answers to AQWs 1472/08, 1477/08 and 1479/08 to David Simpson, the Member for Upper Bann, 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 Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answers to AQW 1509/08 and AQW 1514/08, to detail whether or not teachers who do not wish to mention faith in God in science classes, but who wish to allow pupils access to scientific data that points to (i) an alternative scientific explanation of the

origin and development of life on earth; and (ii) a relatively young age for the earth, may do so without any need to introduce elements of faith into science classes. (AQW 1992/08)

The Minister of Education: I refer you to my previous answers to you to AQWs 1471/08, 1507/08, 1509/08, 1514/08 and also my answers to AQWs 1472/08, 1477/08 and 1479/08 to David Simpson, the Member for Upper Bann, 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 Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answers to AQW 1471/08, AQW 1507/08, AQW 1509/08 and AQW 1514/08, to detail the reasons why she introduced a 'belief' based approach to the teaching of scientific explanations of the origin and development of life on earth into responses to Assembly questions that explicitly referred to scientific data. (AQW 1993/08)

The Minister of Education: I refer you to my previous answers to you to AQWs 1471/08, 1507/08, 1509/08, 1514/08 and also my answers to AQWs 1472/08, 1477/08 and 1479/08 to David Simpson, the Member for Upper Bann, 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.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of meetings she has held with the Education Minister for (a) Scotland; (b) Wales; (c) the United Kingdom Government; (d) the Republic of Ireland; and (e) Education Ministers from outside the British Isles. (AQW 2003/08)

The Minister of Education: To date, I have not held meetings with Education Ministers in Wales and Britain. I have attended a number of events with Mary Hanafin and met with her under the auspices of NSMC. I also met with the Education Minister for Scotland on 12 December.

Creationism

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1507/08, to detail whether or not teachers who wish to use the flexibility of the revised curriculum to exercise their professional judgement about which scientific explanations of the origin and development of life on earth to teach in science class, must first approach the Board of Governors of the school, or if they can adopt such teaching practices without recourse to the Board of Governors. (AQW 2012/08)

The Minister of Education: I refer you to my previous answers to you to AQWs 1471/08, 1507/08, 1509/08, 1514/08 and also my answers to AQWs 1472/08, 1477/08 and 1479/08 to David Simpson, the Member for Upper Bann, 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.

School Transfer Process

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail how she intends to manage the school transfer process between primary and post-primary schools in 2008. (AQW 2017/08)

The Minister of Education: The current arrangements will apply for transfer between primary and post-primary education in 2008. Children will sit the Transfer Test for the final time in 2008 for transfer in 2009, with new arrangements in place to facilitate transfer from September 2010 onwards.

A-Level Provision

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail what communication she has had with her counterparts in England over the development of new diplomas to replace the existing A-level provision. (AQW 2018/08)

The Minister of Education: My officials have been keeping in touch with their counterparts in the Department for Children, Schools and Families in relation to the introduction of new Diplomas in England. While currently I have no plans to introduce new qualifications for post-16 pupils here, it is my view that A levels can be seen to encourage pupils to specialise too early. I would, therefore, be keen to consider other options and look at emerging models not just in England but also, for example, the Leaving

Certificate model in the South and the developments in Wales.

The Leaving Certificate, the new multi component (overarching) Diplomas in England and the Welsh Baccalaureate all are designed to broaden provision for 16-19 year-old pupils, something that I think carries much merit.

New Teachers

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) what steps she has taken to evaluate the number and specialism of new teachers required by schools, over the next five years; and (ii) what communication she has had with her colleague, the Minister for Employment and Learning, on this matter. (AQW 2020/08)

The Minister of Education: My Department evaluates regularly the number and specialism of new teachers needed in schools and determines the number of students to be admitted each year to initial teacher education (ITE) courses through the Teacher Demand Model. This uses information on projected pupil enrolments; teacher wastage rates; pupil teacher ratios, and wastage rates from the ITE courses to provide a projection of teacher vacancies arising in future years and the consequent requirements for intakes into ITE courses. The number of students admitted to ITE courses has been systematically reduced over the last three years and this trend is likely to continue for the foreseeable future in light of the demographic downturn.

Additionally, we now require schools to submit an annual return indicating their teaching vacancies by subject. This will provide additional information on the employment practices adopted by employers to address vacancies and subject shortages.

My Department is in regular contact with the Department for Employment and Learning on this matter, including in the context of a wider review of teacher education that is being taken forward, and I expect to have a further discussion with the Minister for Employment and Learning soon.

School Management

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to give her assessment of the separation of how the administrative and educational functions in school management might allow a greater emphasis to be placed on academic leadership and educational professionalism by school heads. (AQW 2021/08)

The Minister of Education: In my statement to the Assembly on 24 September, I referred to the need for a

review of the planning and management of the education workforce in our schools. Such a review should examine the roles and responsibilities of all the main staffing groups in our schools and seek to maximise the contribution of each, so that pupils in our schools get the benefit of the skills and expertise which they each bring. I am conscious of the administrative burden on schools with the result that teachers and head teachers, may have to devote more time to this, and to budget management issues, than is desirable. The proposed review presents an opportunity to determine how best school heads may be assisted in discharging their roles in relation to the administrative functions within schools thus allowing an increased focus to be placed on academic leadership and greater professionalism.

Reponse to MLA Queries

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education to detail the timescale for responding, in full, to a query to her department from a Member of the Legislative Assembly. (AQW 2025/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education endeavours to respond to postal or e-mailed queries from members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) within 10 working days of the receipt of the correspondence. This is in accordance with civil service-wide practice.

Telephone or other verbal queries from MLAs are dealt with as quickly as is practicable.

Creationism

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1471/08, to indicate her reasons for failing to say whether or not 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) CCEA as 'evidence based' or 'faith'; and if she will now do so. (AQW 2027/08)

The Minister of Education: I refer you to my previous answers to you to AQWs 1471/08, 1507/08, 1509/08, 1514/08 and also my answers to AQWs 1472/08, 1477/08 and 1479/08 to David Simpson, the Member for Upper Bann, 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.

Transfer Test

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of years for which the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment has prepared, in advance, transfer tests for pupils in Northern Ireland. (AQW 2029/08)

The Minister of Education: CCEA have had responsibility for preparing the Transfer Tests in their current form since 1995. Prior to 1995 the Department of Education had direct responsibility for the preparation of the tests.

Employment and Equality Regulations

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to outline the current employment and equality regulations for (i) teaching staff; and (ii) non-teaching staff, in schools in each sector in Northern Ireland. (AQW 2030/08)

The Minister of Education: I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards that the current employment and equality regulations for (i) teaching staff; and (ii) non-teaching staff in schools in each sector in the north of Ireland places statutory duties and obligations on the employer in terms of adhering to the legislation.

Fair Employment and Treatment Order (NI) Order 1998, as amended*

Sex Discrimination (NI) Order, as amended

Equal Pay Act (NI) 1970, as amended

Work and Families (NI) Order 2006

Race Relations (NI) Order 1997, as amended

Disability Discrimination Act 1995, as amended

Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (NI) 2003

Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2006

Employment Equality (Age) Regulations (NI) 2006

Human Rights Act 1998

Disability Discrimination Order 2006, in October 2007 further provisions of the order came into force.

European directives, wider community legislation and international obligations also effect equality and/or employment regulations.

In addition specific obligations are imposed on public authorities, including the Education and Library Boards, in respect of the need to promote equality of opportunity and the desirability of promoting good relations under section 75 of the NI Act 1998. Schools are not currently designated under this legislation.

*Teachers Exemption

Since 1976 Teachers in Schools in the maintained primary sector have been exempted from monitoring on religious grounds but the exemption was narrowed to recruitment in 2003 when the European Directive on discrimination was enacted.

Senior Managerial Posts

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of (i) women; and (ii) men, who hold senior managerial posts in each division within her department. (AQW 2055/08)

The Minister of Education: There are currently 8 women and 10 men holding senior managerial posts in the Department of Education.

A breakdown by division is shown on the table below:

Division	Male	Female
Permanent Secretary of Department	1	
Deputy Secretary	2	
Development and Infrastructure	1	
Strategy, Performance and Accountability	1	
Finance		1
Corporate Services		1
Review of Public Administration	1	
Policy, Research and Youth		1
Raising Standards		1
Equality, Inclusion and Pupil Support		1
Education and Training Inspectorate	2	3
ESA Implementation	2	
Total	10	8

Youth Service Provision

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail, broken down by education and library board, for each of the last five years (i) the total amount spent on youth service provision; and (ii) the percentage of the total budget of each board these amounts represented. (AQW 2061/08)

The Minister of Education: The table below details the resource allocations made to each education and library board for each of the last five years. These figures do not include capital allocations, funding to projects through the Children & Young People Funding Package, and other short term funding initiatives such as Renewing Communities.

(I) TOTAL AMOUNT SPENT BY BOARDS ON YOUTH SERVICE PROVISION

	2002/2003 (£000's)	2003/2004 (£000's)	2004/2005 (£000's)	2005/2006 (£000's)	2006/2007 (£000's)
BELB	4,087	4,305	4,622	4,238	4,475
NEELB	3,410	3,887	3,969	4,162	4,417
SEELB	3,324	3,714	4,153	4,080	3,989
SELB	3,211	4,136	4,248	4,652	4,985
WELB	3,320	3,604	3,580	3,700	3,770
Totals	17,352	19,646	20,572	20,832	21,636
Youth & Schools Total Budget	£1,114,516	£1,185,483	£1,211,723	£1,295,581	£1,336,417

(II) PERCENTAGE OF YOUTH SERVICE PROVISION ON TOTAL BUDGET

	2002/2003	2003/2004	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007
BELB	0.4%(0.3667)	0.4%(0.3631)	0.4%(0.3814)	0.3%(0.3271)	0.3%(0.3349)
NEELB	0.3%(0.3059)	0.3%(0.3279)	0.3%(0.3276)	0.3%(0.3212)	0.3%(0.3305)
SEELB	0.3%(0.2983)	0.3%(0.3133)	0.3%(0.3427)	0.3%(0.3149)	0.3%(0.2985)
SELB	0.3%(0.2881)	0.3%(0.3489)	0.4%(0.3506)	0.4%(0.3591)	0.4%(0.3730)
WELB	0.3%(0.2979)	0.3%(0.3040)	0.3%(0.2954)	0.3%(0.2859)	0.3%(0.2821)
	1.6%(1.5569)	1.6%(1.6571)	1.7%(1.6977)	1.6%(1.6082)	1.6%(1.6190)

Youth Projects

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Education to detail the youth projects funded by the Western Education and Library Board in the last five years.
(AQW 2063/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education allocated the Western Education and Library Boards funding to deliver the following youth projects in the last five years:

- Controlled and Voluntary youth club activities
- Outreach Centre Based Activities
- Summer Schemes/Camps
- Training and Development Courses
- Summer Intervention Projects
- Social Intervention Projects
- Social Inclusion Projects
- Youth Service Website Provision
- Community Relations Projects

Total funding for these projects in the last five years is as follows:

2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
£3,320m	£3,604m	£3,580m	£3,700m	£3,770m

Integrated Children's Services Beyond 2008

Ms Purvis asked the Minister of Education to (i) outline the bid made by her department, as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review process, for the continuation of Integrated Children's Services beyond 2008; and (ii) confirm that monies for these services will be contained within the department's baseline budget when the department's final budget outcome for 2008-2011 is made known.[R] (AQW 2088/08)

The Minister of Education: In Budget 2007 a bid was submitted to continue funding for Integrated Children's Services. Draft Budget proposals were published on 25 October, and I am currently considering the implications of these for Education budgets. Final decisions on the budgets for services, including Education, will not be taken until after the public consultation period, which ends on 4 January.

Answers to Assembly Questions

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education to provide details of her department's performance in adhering to deadlines for responding, in full, to Assembly written, and Priority written, questions.
(AQW 2089/08)

The Minister of Education: The information shown in the table below details my Department's performance in responding to Priority written and

Assembly written questions that were due for answer between 08 May and 27 November 2007.

	Number of Questions	Answered on Time	Answered Late	% Answered on Time
Priority AQWs	51	3	48	6
AQWs	557	263	294	47
Total	608	266	342	44

Comprehensive Schooling System

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education what is her assessment of the benefits and drawbacks of the comprehensive schooling system in England.

(AQW 2102/08)

The Minister of Education: I consider the education system in England to be one which is relatively complex in terms of its structure, and like every other system of education, some schools are better than others.

There are 154 Local Education Authorities in England with schools of varying types. Of those comparable to our own system – some will outperform it, others will not. Comparisons with England do not permit one single, simple assessment – including the often quoted point that our system is “world class” when set alongside England’s.

While looking at what is available elsewhere can be informative my aim is to develop local arrangements that match provision to the educational interests of children here, provide our young people with important life skills and support the needs of the economy.

Autism

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Education to detail the measures in place to ensure that the social welfare needs of autistic children are fully addressed in schools.

(AQW 2113/08)

The Minister of Education: There are a range of measures in place to help meet the social welfare needs of children with autism in schools. These measures include Education and Library Board level, school level and individual level support services, as well as training for teachers, classroom assistants and parents. I will outline these measures below:

Board level support services

The Education and Library Boards provide support services for meeting the needs of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD). These support services typically involve providing support to pupils

with ASDs and their schools; through training, giving advice to teachers and offering individual help for pupils.

Board level support services also work collaboratively with their respective Health and Social Care Trusts and voluntary organisations such as Autism NI. Through this collaborative working it has been possible to provide training to help address the social skills needs of individual children.

School level

Autism-specific classes have been established and are provided within some mainstream schools and most special schools. These provide an additional level of structure and intervention to assist the social skills development needs of children with ASD and co-occurring significant learning difficulties. Various social skills programmes are also available for pupils in these schools, for example, social skills groups and advice on setting up social support groups during lunchtimes in post primary schools.

Individual level

The assessment of pupils’ special educational needs through Stages 1-5 of the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs also enables their difficulties with social functioning to be identified and addressed by schools. A pupil’s statement of special educational need can also include provision for socially relevant competencies which can be used to direct the school’s educational planning for that pupil which may include provision of a classroom assistant.

Direct individual support is also provided in some areas to children at home as well as at school.

Training

Training is provided to schools to assist teachers and classroom assistants recognise the characteristics of ASD and the implications for teaching and learning, taking into account that the welfare needs, and specifically the social skills needs, of children and young people with ASD will vary widely. By increasing their understanding and promoting these skills, teachers and classroom assistants become much better at helping the children manage their social environments. Specifically, social skills training is provided for classroom assistants to enable them to assist children, in particular those transferring to post primary schools.

Training is also available for parents to help them identify and address the key life skills and welfare needs of their children. This training takes the form of ongoing programmes and one off workshops.

Statementing Process

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Education what steps she is taking to simplify and shorten the statementing process. (AQW 2114/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department commenced a review of special educational needs (SEN) and inclusion in April 2006 to address a range of issues associated with the current SEN framework, a key feature of which is the statementing process. I am presently giving consideration to draft policy proposals which have emerged from this review. Subject to my approval the draft policy proposals will be made available for public consultation in the usual manner.

Autism

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Education what steps she is taking to develop training within schools in relation to autism. (AQW 2115/08)

The Minister of Education: Since the publication of the Task Group Report on Autism, DE has secured additional resources totalling some £7.5m to support positive measures in ASD. These include:

- ASD-related training within the pre-school sector, to teachers, classroom assistants, playgroup leaders and assistants, qualified early years specialists and relevant ELB staff;
- funding to ELBs to enable key staff to undertake accredited training in Applied Behavioural Analysis (£110k in 2005/06 and subsequently added to the block grant);
- the formation, in 2003/04, of an Interboard ASD Group, which is helping to develop cross-Board training for ELB staff and schools in a range of ASD strategies and interventions.
- the production of a range of school/parent resources to support positive interventions for children with ASD, issued to all schools, ELBs and ASD voluntary groups, as aids to teachers and classroom assistants and to provide information to parents. These include: complementary parent and teacher videos/ DVDs/CD-ROMs and guidance material on ASD, produced by DE on a North/South basis; "ASD a Guide to Classroom Practice"; "Evaluating Provision for Autism"; and "Opening the Spectrum", a resource pack produced on a cross-border basis.

The Department of Education and the Department of Education and Science in Dublin are also jointly taking forward the establishment of an all island Centre of Excellence for Children with ASD in Middletown, Co. Armagh which will provide a training and advisory service.

The Training and Advisory Service will provide training and advice for parents, professionals and support staff, throughout the island, North and South.

Parents of Children with Autism

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to involve parents of children with autism in committee roles and planning education services. (AQW 2116/08)

The Minister of Education: In August and September 2007 two stakeholder consultations were held at the Middletown Centre for Autism to canvas opinion about the building and refurbishment project. Most of the representatives at these meetings were parents of autistic children and were able to contribute from direct experience.

The Middletown Centre for Autism is planning another extensive consultation exercise beginning in December 2007. This will include parents and those involved with children and young people with autism within the public, private and voluntary sectors. The purpose of this consultation is both to inform and invite comments regarding how the proposed services should be delivered by the Centre. The outcome of the consultation exercise will be to inform future developments at the Centre.

When the Centre begins to deliver services to children, it is the intention that a parent representative will be appointed to the board of Middletown Centre for Autism Limited.

The Cross Border School and Parent Community Partnership Programme, funded by the Peace II Extension and co-funded by the Departments of Education and the Department of Education and Science, commenced in September 2006 and will run to August 2008. This programme is focused on helping schools to educate parents in relation to autism, dyslexia and marginalised youth. An integral part of the programme is parental involvement and parents are asked for their evaluation of the programme as each stage is piloted.

Sure Start Projects

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail the per capita spend on each Sure Start project, since its inception. (AQW 2120/08)

The Minister of Education: Sure Start project funding is not allocated per capita, but is allocated according to the available budget, the areas requiring Sure Start coverage and the services that can be provided.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of requests for meetings she has received from (a) individual members of the public; and (b) organisations, since assuming office; (ii) how many of these requests were granted; and (iii) how many requests were refused, and the reason(s) for this. (AQW 2139/08)

The Minister of Education: Since assuming office, I have received 7 requests for meetings from individual members of the public and 203 requests from organisations. 118 of these requests were granted and 92 refused; 41 were refused due to prior diary commitments, 6 were refused as negotiations regarding issues stated in the request were still ongoing, 35 refused were referred to other organisations such as the ELB's, CCEA, CCMS as the issues stated fell under their remit rather than Department of Education, 9 were refused as the issues stated were already well advanced or already resolved and 1 was refused as it was to discuss a decision that had already been agreed by Maria Eagle, and I would not have been in a position to overturn that decision.

Hospitality Expenditure

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1480/08, to detail how her department maintains a record of (i) the amount of money spent on hospitality; and (ii) the number of functions for which hospitality expenditure is incurred. (AQW 2142/08)

The Minister of Education: Hospitality payments are recorded on the department's Oracle accounting system. The original invoices are held on general payment files in order of payment date.

The actual number of functions for which hospitality is incurred is not recorded.

Hospitality Expenditure

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1480/08, to detail (i) whether or not expenditure on hospitality is included in any financial return; and (ii) the criteria to be met before hospitality expenditure is agreed. (AQW 2143/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department does not collate a specific financial return in respect of hospitality. Expenditure on hospitality is recorded in the Department's financial system as part of Departmental Running Costs (DRCs).

Guidance on the provision of hospitality is detailed in Office Circular 7 of 2006, Gifts and Hospitality, which follows the principles and guidelines set out by the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Departmental Expenditure on Alcohol

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1478/08, what plans she has to maintain a record of the amount of money spent by her department on alcohol. (AQW 2144/08)

The Minister of Education: There are no plans to maintain a record of the amount of money spent on alcohol.

New Transfer System

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what consideration her department has given to the safeguarding of academic selection in legislation when preparing a new transfer system for Northern Ireland. (AQW 2149/08)

The Minister of Education: The proposals that will be brought forward for future transfer arrangements will not simply replace one form of academic selection with another. They will instead offer all children equal access to a quality post-primary education in which the importance of informed decisions about educational and career pathways is recognised.

GCSE Grades

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of pupils in Northern Ireland who failed to gain a single GCSE at grade A* to C in each of the last five years. (AQW 2150/08)

The Minister of Education: The requested information is detailed in the table below:

Academic year	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06
Percentage of year 12 pupils not achieving any GCSEs at grades A*-C	19	19	18	15	14

Accidents on School Buses

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children who have been (i) killed; and (ii) injured, in accidents on buses taking children to and from school, in each of the last five years. (AQW 2151/08)

The Minister of Education: The Education and Library Boards (ELBs) and Translink have provided the following statistics with regard to accidents on dedicated school buses involving injury or fatality to pupils over the last five years:

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Injury	45*	54*	19*	24*	18*
Fatality	0	0	0	0	0

* Figures not available for Privately Operated Services in the Belfast Board area.

Independent Schools' Counselling Service

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education if she will consider extending the current Independent Schools' Counselling Service to include the primary sector. (AQW 2153/08)

The Minister of Education: I recognise and accept the need for counselling by staff who have been appropriately trained and who are professionally supervised in all school sectors. I do not, however, currently have the resources within my Departmental budget to make such a service universal, but it would be my intention to expand provision as resources permit.

Club Bank Scheme for Irish-Medium Education

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to give a timescale within which the club bank scheme for Irish medium education will be (i) established; and (ii) come into operation. (AQW 2183/08)

The Minister of Education: The implementation of the club bank arrangement for the Irish medium education sector is a matter of discussion between the Department of Education and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta. There are issues surrounding the scheme which would need to be resolved before a scheme could be established.

Education Other than at School Service

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 1583/08, to detail (i) the number of staff days spent by all grades in the Southern Education and Library Board; and (ii) the total cost of those days, in relation to the settlement of disputes between teachers from the Education Other than at School Service (EOTAS) and the Board, since September 2003. (AQW 2184/08)

The Minister of Education: The details of the days spent by all members of staff involved full time or part

time, directly or indirectly, in individual cases are not recorded.

As the days spent are not recorded it is not possible to provide the total cost of those days.

Education Other than at School Service

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail, pursuant to AQW 1582/08, to detail the total amount of money spent in the settlement of disputes between teachers from the Education Other than at School Service (EOTAS) and the Southern Education and Library Board since September 2003.

(AQW 2185/08)

The Minister of Education: The total amount of money spent in the settlement of disputes between teachers from the Education Other than at School Service (EOTAS) and the Southern Education and Library Board since September 2003 is £23,000.

St Gerard's Educational Resource Centre, Upper Springfield Road

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether or not St Gerard's Educational Resource Centre, Upper Springfield Road, complies with regulations in relation to fire risk assessments.

(AQW 2219/08)

The Minister of Education: The school has carried out its statutory obligation by commissioning a fire risk assessment in September 2007. The results of the assessment are now with the Department and steps are being taken in conjunction with the school to address deficiencies and reduce identified risks.

Origin and Development of Life on Earth

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether or not science teachers conducting lessons on the origin and development of life on earth, are expected to teach only what the evidence reveals or if they are permitted to teach assumption and speculation that goes beyond such evidence.

(AQW 2223/08)

The Minister of Education: I refer you to my previous answers to AQWs 1471/08, 1507/08, 1509/08, 1514/08 and also my answers to AQWs 1472/08, 1477/08 and 1479/08 to David Simpson, the Member for Upper Bann, published in the Official Record on 23 November 2007, where I clearly set out the position.

Child Protection Policy

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to outline her department's child protection policy in relation to granting people with criminal convictions access to pupils. (AQW 2228/08)

The Minister of Education: Employers must not employ anyone to work in an educational setting, who is included in the Disqualification from Working with Children List held by DHSSPS, the Unsuitable Persons List held by DE, List 99 or who has a disqualification order from the courts.

Any person who is convicted of an offence listed in the Schedule to the Education (Prohibition from Teaching or Working with Children) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 is automatically prohibited from working with children and included in the Department's Unsuitable Persons List. Persons convicted of lesser offences listed in the Schedule are subsequently allowed to make representations to the Department against being listed.

Apart from offences listed in the Schedule to the Regulations, a record does not automatically render a person unsuitable to work with children. The employer should make a judgement as to a person's suitability for appointment, taking into account only those offences which may be relevant to the particular job in question.

South Eastern Education and Library Board

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the total cost of payments, including expenses, made to the Commissioners appointed in July 2006 to run the South Eastern Education and Library Board. (AQW 2232/08)

The Minister of Education: The South Eastern Education and Library Board has advised that the total cost of payments, including expenses, made to the commissioners from 6 July 2006, when they were first appointed, until the end of October 2007 is £130,813.

Council for Education in World Citizenship Northern Ireland

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the reasons for funding no longer being made available for the Council for Education in World Citizenship Northern Ireland; and if she will review this decision. (AQW 2249/08)

The Minister of Education: The Council for Education in World Citizenship Northern Ireland (CEWCNI) application for the current round of funding for the period 1 April 2007 – 30 March 2010

was unsuccessful. Of the 59 applications received CEWCNI ranked 58th in order of merit.

The Department had a formal appeal procedure in place. CEWCNI did not exercise their right of appeal. As the Department had correct procedures and processes in place which applied to all 59 organisations in a fair and impartial way, there is no further right of appeal.

Ten-Year Children's Strategy

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether or not she will implement all the commitments by her department included in the ten year Children's Strategy. (AQW 2261/08)

The Minister of Education: Work is underway on the commitments and actions led by the Department of Education that are included in the ten year Children's Strategy. In some cases the work has been completed. In other cases the work is well advanced or is in the early stages of consideration or implementation. The actions included in the Action Plan 2007-08 are likely to be delivered.

School Holidays

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to commence a consultation process on changes to school holidays. (AQW 2266/08)

The Minister of Education: I have no plans to commence a consultation process on changes to the school holidays that would coincide with other important changes affecting our education system. This may be an issue which could be looked at in the future.

Teachers Taking Early Retirement

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education to identify the compensatory authority for teachers taking early retirement in (i) the controlled sector; and (ii) the catholic maintained sector. (AQW 2297/08)

The Minister of Education: The Compensating Authority for teachers taking early retirement in both controlled schools and Catholic maintained schools is the appropriate Education & Library Board.

Teachers' Contracts of Employment

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education to identify the employer for teachers in the (i) the controlled sector; and (ii) the catholic maintained sector;. (AQW 2298/08)

The Minister of Education: For teachers in (i) the controlled sector and (ii) the Catholic maintained sector contracts of employment are held by (i) the relevant Education and Library Board and (ii) the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools. However, certain employer functions are exercised by the Board of Governors of each individual school, depending on school management type.

Teachers Taking Early Retirement

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education to outline the consultations that were undertaken by her department before changes were made to the arrangement by which teachers taking early retirement would receive four years added service. (AQW 2299/08)

The Minister of Education: The established forum for consultation about changes to the Teachers Pension Scheme is The Northern Ireland Teachers Superannuation Consultative Committee. Members of the Committee were first made aware in February 2006 that action was required to control the escalating costs of the Premature Retirement Compensation Scheme (PRCS). PRCS was included on the agenda and discussed at subsequent meetings of the Committee held in June 2006, December 2006, June 2007 and November 2007.

Teachers leaving the profession under PRCS are entitled to compensation based on their total reckonable service. The decision to credit a teacher with additional service (up to a maximum of 4 years for Efficient Discharge and 6 2/3 years for Redundancy cases) is subject to the approval of the compensating authority (for controlled and maintained schools the Education and Library Board; for all other schools the Department). This arrangement remains unchanged. However, in order to contain the escalating cost of PRCS, with effect from 1 April 2008 the compensating authority will be required to pay any compensation for which it is liable, in accordance with Regulation 18 of the Teachers' (Compensation for Redundancy and Premature Retirement) Regulations.

Teachers Taking Early Retirement

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail, broken down by Education and Library Board, the number of teachers who applied to take early retirement and subsequently withdrew that request, in the last five years. (AQW 2300/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department does not hold this information as premature retirement is approved through the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) who are the employing authorities.

I have been advised by the Chief Executives of four of the ELBs that they do not hold this information. However the Chief Executive of the Southern Board has advised that two teachers have applied for and withdrawn their applications for early retirement in the last five years.

Teachers Taking Early Retirement

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the reasons for changing the policy in relation to the number of years that are added to the service of teachers taking early retirement mid-way during the academic year; and to detail what consideration was given by his department to the budgetary or timetable impacts of this change for the 2008/2009 school year. (AQW 2301/08)

The Minister of Education: The maximum number of added years which may be credited to a teacher under the Teachers' Premature Retirement Compensation Scheme (PRCS) remains unchanged. The award of added years is discretionary and will remain so. Until now these costs have been borne by the Teachers' Pension Scheme. With effect from 1 April 2008 the relevant employing authority will be required to pay for such enhancements.

A combination of generous levels of enhancement and an increase in the number of premature retirements has placed an unsustainable burden on the Teachers' Pension Scheme liabilities, which are increasing at a much faster rate than the current level of contributions can sustain. Action to control these escalating costs was first mooted following the publication in 2003 of a report of the Public Accounts Committee (HC473), which was critical of the high level of premature retirements among teachers. The Department has considered both the budgetary implications and the timing of the decision and has concluded that there is no alternative but to take steps to control these costs.

Sustainable Schools Strategy

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education to provide a timescale within which the strategy for sustainable schools will be finalised. (AQW 2303/08)

The Minister of Education: I expect the strategy for sustainable schools to be finalised early in the New Year.

New Build Campus for Holywood Priory

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education to detail the reasons why she was unable to meet a delegation from schools in Holywood to discuss the new build

campus for Holywood Priory and subsequent redevelopment proposals. (AQW 2304/08)

The Minister of Education: I visited Priory Integrated College earlier this year and discussed the issues for the school. I have agreed to meet with a delegation of Principals and Chairpersons from Priory Integrated College, Holywood Primary School, Redburn Primary School and Holywood Nursery School.

Classroom Assistants

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of classroom assistants in each trade union, broken down by Education and Library Board. (AQW 2307/08)

The Minister of Education: I am advised by the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards that the employers do not hold records on how many classroom assistants are in individual unions. It is the responsibility of the unions to verify their own member numbers. The Boards further advise me that the employers do have records of which employees pay deductions to trade unions through the payroll. However, while that is the required mechanism for NIPSA members, the other trade unions recommend that their members make payment by direct debit from their bank account. Consequently, the only way to find out the complete numbers of classroom assistants in each trade union is to contact each trade union directly.

Classroom Assistants

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of classroom assistants, who are members of NIPSA, that participated in each day of industrial action, since the commencement of the current dispute, broken down by Education and Library Board. (AQW 2308/08)

The Minister of Education: This information is not available in the Department. The Department has written to the Education and Library Boards' Chief Executives and asked if they could provide the Department with the information. I will write to you again when I have their response.

Priory Integrated College

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to outline her department's view on the viability of Priory Integrated College. (AQW 2309/08)

The Minister of Education: Priory Integrated College has a current enrolment of 426, including 41

pupils at post-16 and 17 statemented pupils, and a projected enrolment of 400.

The viability of the school is dependent on being able to sustain its enrolment in the context of the projected demographic changes and the level of school provision for the area. The Department is engaged with the South Eastern Education and Library Board on this issue.

Priory Integrated College

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to list those aspects of the Bain Review with which she disagrees; and to outline what impact this consideration had on her decision in relation to the re-build of Priory Integrated College. (AQW 2312/08)

The Minister of Education: I have accepted the broad direction of the Bain Report and I have also indicated that there are aspects of the report which require further consideration.

A capital scheme for Priory Integrated College was put on hold by the Direct Rule administration following the Bain Review. The project is being assessed with regard to enrolment trends and the projected demographic changes in the area, to inform a decision on the scheme.

Priory Integrated College

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of Education to outline the timescale for a decision on the rebuild of Priory Integrated College. (AQW 2320/08)

The Minister of Education: It is important that the Department and the South Eastern Education and Library Board have assessed the sustainability of provision in the area in light of enrolment trends and projected demographic changes. I appreciate the need to confirm the position for the school and I have asked the Department to conclude this work as soon as possible.

Economically Competitive Workforce

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to (i) provide a timescale within which she will answer AQW92/08 tabled on 5 September 2007; (ii) detail the reasons she has failed to answer this question; and (iii) clarify in her answer to that question what plans she has to ensure that Northern Ireland's education system delivers a workforce that is more economically competitive than that of the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 2321/08)

The Minister of Education: A combined answer to AQW 91/08 and AQW 92/08 was placed in the Member's pigeon hole on 17 September 2007. However although

this answer was forwarded to the Assembly Business Office, when published in the Official Report on 21 September 2007 reference was made only to AQW 91/08 and not to AQW 92/08 as should have been the case.

I have included the text of the answer to both questions below for your convenience.

“The revised curriculum focuses on developing the skills young people need for life and work in the 21st century. Employability, incorporating Entrepreneurship, is also an important part of the revised post-primary curriculum.

In addition, the Entitlement Framework will guarantee all pupils access to a greater range of vocational courses, equipping them with the professional and technical skills that business and industry needs. Pupils will be able to access courses appropriate to their individual needs, interests and aspirations, providing a wider choice at age 14 and an even wider choice at age 16.

To support pupils in making their choices and decisions about their futures, we are working to develop high quality careers education, information advice and guidance.

All of this will be set within a broader strategic framework for 14-19 provision, on which DE and DEL are currently engaged, ensuring that our young people are equipped with the knowledge and skills to take their place in an increasingly global workforce.”

Employment of People with Criminal Convictions

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail her policy in relation to the employment of people with criminal convictions. (AQW 2322/08)

The Minister of Education: Policies on recruitment and employment are primarily matters for the relevant employing authorities within the education sector. In the case of the Civil Service in the north of Ireland, the lead department is DFP.

Priory Integrated College

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Education what consideration she is giving to the religious make-up of Priory Integrated College, in relation to her decision on a re-build. (AQW 2342/08)

The Minister of Education: The religious make-up of Priory Integrated College is relevant to the school's integrated status but it does not form part of the current considerations over a capital scheme for the school which are focused on the provision needed for the area in light of pupil population trends.

Job Advertisements

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Education to detail the reasons why the North Eastern Education and Library Board chose to advertise only in the Belfast Telegraph for clerical officer and senior clerical officer positions, and did not advertise these posts in local papers. (AQW 2346/08)

The Minister of Education: Decisions on recruitment advertising are matters for individual Boards. It is essential that such decisions are fully in line with the commitments in each Board's Equality Scheme and their statutory duties. I have asked my Department to review the present arrangements to ensure that they are consistent with proper employment practice, including considerations of equality.

North Eastern Education and Library Board Agency Staff

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Education to detail the reasons for some agency staff, and not others, being transferred to the North Eastern Education and Library Board's payroll after 13 weeks. (AQW 2348/08)

The Minister of Education: I have been advised by the Chief Executive of the North Eastern Education and Library Board that decisions about the transfer of agency staff to the Board's payroll take into account the nature of the temporary employment and its likely duration. This does not alter the temporary employment status of the individual concerned. The use of temporary staff is a feature of the vacancy control arrangements required in the run up to the creation of the new Education & Skills Authority. I have asked my Department to review the present arrangements to ensure that they are consistent with proper employment practice, including considerations of equality.

Youth Facilities and Resources

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to address the lack of youth facilities and resources in the Crumlin area. (AQW 2363/08)

The Minister of Education: The North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) has identified the need for a new youth centre for Crumlin in its Development Plans. I understand that Antrim Borough Council's Crumlin Master Plan (August 2007) also the need for dedicated youth facilities. I have been informed that the Board has responded positively to a suggestion from Antrim Borough Council to participate in planning community, leisure and youth

facilities at the Council's recently acquired Barley Field site, and discussions will follow. A development in Crumlin would, of course, have to be considered in terms of the need and priority of other areas.

Currently, the NEELB Youth Service provides a full-time area youth worker one night a week in Crumlin. Over the last four years the Board, with funding from the Local Strategy Partnership, has provided four apprentice youth workers who work in pairs in the town on three nights per week undertaking project work. Summer schemes are run annually in partnership with Antrim Council. Additionally, the Department has funded a number of summer intervention programmes, some of which were available within the Crumlin area.

The Board has advised that St Joseph's Primary School has a youth club which operates one afternoon and one evening per week, with support from the NEELB. Discussions are also ongoing with the Principal and Board of Governors of Crumlin High School to open a youth club for 11 to 16 year olds in the school.

I am informed that there are other voluntary organisations operating in the area:

- 1st Crumlin BB
- 210th Crumlin Presbyterian Girls Brigade
- 1st Crumlin Scouts
- 16th Antrim Scouts (Catholic Boys' Scouts Ireland)

My Department has recently conducted a review of the youth estate and a report will issue early in the New Year detailing the overall needs of the youth service in relation to capital planning and development. The Department will also be developing 'Priorities for Youth' which will provide an opportunity for young people, communities and the youth sector to engage with policy makers on the planning and delivery of youth services in the future. Both these reviews will assist the Department in determining the needs of young people across all areas in the North.

School Funding

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to confirm that she will not remove funding for pupils, capital or administration in relation to schools that choose to operate independent admissions arrangements that lie outside the new system of transfer.

(AQW 2404/08)

The Minister of Education: I can confirm that core education funding will not be withdrawn from any school seeking to operate independent admissions arrangements. My Department will not however be obliged to fund the cost of any aspect of the setting up or administering of independent admissions

arrangements that lies outside of Department of Education approved processes.

Post-Primary School Teachers

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1661/08, to detail in which sector(s) the five post-primary school teachers are employed, who have a criminal record for offences resulting in imprisonment or suspended sentences.

(AQW 2406/08)

The Minister of Education: The Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards have advised that there are four post primary school teachers who have a criminal record for offences resulting in imprisonment or suspended sentences, one previously employed in a controlled grammar school and three in the controlled secondary sector, two of whom are still employed.

The Boards had previously advised that a fifth teacher was employed in a post-primary school. However, they have now confirmed that it was a primary school and that the teacher is no longer employed.

Post-Primary School Teachers

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education, further to her answer to AQW 1662/08, to identify in which sector the primary school teacher, with a criminal record for an offence resulting in imprisonment or suspended sentence, is employed.

(AQW 2407/08)

The Minister of Education: The Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards have advised that there are four post-primary school teachers who have a record for offences resulting in imprisonment or suspended sentences, employed in the controlled secondary sector, two of whom are still employed.

The Boards had previously advised that a fifth teacher was employed in a post-primary school in the controlled sector. However, they have now confirmed that it was a primary school and that the teacher is no longer employed.

The Chief Executive of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) has advised that there is one primary school teacher who received a suspended sentence and who is no longer employed.

Transfer Procedures

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education to detail the analysis her department has carried out on the cost impact of the transfer procedures she announced to the Assembly on 4 December 2007. (AQW 2408/08)

The Minister of Education: Implementation of the vision for new post-primary arrangements outlined on 4 December 2007 will require a certain amount of structural change, though the exact nature, and therefore cost, of that change can not be accurately predicted until area planning mechanisms are operational. The important point is that structural reform is required in any case due to the number of surplus places that exist across the schools' estate, and it makes sense to design flexible new transfer arrangements that make full use of spare capacity in the first instance, and which are in harmony with curriculum reform and delivery of the Entitlement Framework.

Diabetes

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children with type 1 diabetes attending schools in each Education and Library Board area. (AQW 2412/08)

The Minister of Education: Figures for the number of children with type 1 diabetes are not collected. However, the number of children recorded on the Special Education Needs register with diabetes has been provided.

CHILDREN WITH DIABETES ATTENDING SCHOOLS BY EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD AREA 2006/07

Belfast	Western	North Eastern	South Eastern	Southern	Total
55	44	33	51	40	223

Source: NI school census.

Note: Figures refer to children in nursery, special, primary and post-primary schools.

There may be some under-recording of Children with Diabetes at Stage 1 and 2 on the Special Education Needs register, as children at those Stages are only required to have needs recorded at a general level.

Insulin Treatments on School Premises

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education to detail the number and percentage of schools that (i) require pupils with type 1 diabetes to self-administer insulin; (ii) require parents or guardians to attend the school to administer insulin to pupils with type 1 diabetes; and (iii) prohibit insulin treatments on school premises. (AQW 2413/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education does not hold this information, nor, I am informed by the Chief Executive Officers, do the Education and Library Boards.

Insulin Treatments on School Premises

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children with type 1 diabetes who are (i) administered insulin by a parent or guardian during school hours; and (ii) required to leave school premises in order to receive such treatment.

(AQW 2415/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education does not hold this information, nor, I am informed by the Chief Executive Officers, do the Education and Library Boards.

Diabetes in Schools

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education to detail the number and percentage of schools that have policies and procedures in place to ensure that children with type 1 diabetes can participate fully in all extra-curricular activities, including those taking place outside school grounds. (AQW 2416/08)

The Minister of Education: My department does not record information on the number and percentage of schools that have policies and procedures in place to ensure that children with type 1 diabetes can participate fully in all extra-curricular activities.

However, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Order (SENDO), which came into effect on 1 September 2005, makes it unlawful for schools to discriminate against a child on grounds of a disability and requires them to make reasonable adjustments. Every aspect of school life is covered by this including after schools clubs and activities provided by schools to their own pupils.

SENDO also put in place an appeal mechanism for parents who feel their child has been the victim of disability discrimination at school.

Pupils with Diabetes

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to ensure that guidance is introduced for schools to ensure best practice in the management of pupils with diabetes. (AQW 2417/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education, with assistance from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, has drafted a guidance booklet to be issued to all schools entitled 'Supporting Pupils with Medical Needs'. This guidance provides wide-ranging advice and aims to provide sound protocols to enable schools to meet the medication needs of pupils within the school day. The booklet has a section dedicated to supporting pupils with Diabetes.

The booklet will be published later this school year and training will be provided in relation to the practical application of the guidance.

Foreign Nationals

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail what responsibility her department has in relation to monitoring the number of foreign nationals residing in Northern Ireland. (AQW 2431/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education does not have any direct responsibility for monitoring the number of foreign nationals residing in the North of Ireland. However, as part of the annual school census, the Department collects data, for educational reasons, on the numbers of pupils for whom English is not their first language.

Confidence and Esteem Building Measures in Schools

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Education to outline what steps she is taking to provide confidence and esteem building measures in schools; and to outline the programmes that have been introduced in schools to deliver these measures. (AQW 2487/08)

The Minister of Education: I believe schools have an important role in boosting the self-confidence and self-esteem of all our young people. The revised curriculum has a new strand of Personal Development from Year 1 onwards to equip pupils with the skills needed to develop these qualities. This is further supported by schools' pastoral care arrangements, including the new counselling service currently being utilised by 95% of post-primary schools. In addition, the extended schools programme seeks to reinforce the work of schools by offering pupils opportunities to engage in after school activities and develop their self-confidence and self-esteem as a result.

Extended Schools Programme

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to list those schools that are entitled to receive funding through the extended schools programme, but have not yet taken up their entitlement, broken down by parliamentary constituency; and to detail the amount of funding that has not been drawn down in each case. (AQW 2491/08)

The Minister of Education: The attached table shows a breakdown of the schools that were eligible for extended schools funding in 2006/07 and 2007/08

broken down by Parliamentary Constituency that were eligible for extended schools funding but did not take up the offer.

Parliamentary Constituency	2006/07	2007/08
Belfast East		
Belfast North		
Belfast South		
Belfast West	Balmoral HS £20,000	Balmoral HS £17,050
East Antrim	Woodlawn PS £24,700 Sunnylands PS £ 8,200	Woodlawn PS £24,700 Sunnylands PS £ 8,200
East Londonderry		
Fermanagh And South Tyrone		
Folye		
Lagan Valley		
Mid Ulster		
Newry And Armagh		
North Antrim	Rasharkin PS £8,900	Rasharkin PS £9,300
North Down		
South Down		
Strangford		
Upper Bann		
West Tyrone		

School Redevelopment

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQO 885/08, to provide an update on the progress of the redevelopment of (i) Islandmagee Primary School, (ii) Woodburn Primary School; and (iii) Whiteabbey Primary School; and to confirm when work on these projects will commence. (AQW 2493/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department has agreed an economic appraisal for the new primary school in Islandmagee and the North-Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) recently received funding to facilitate the purchase of a new site for that school.

With regard to Woodburn Primary School, an appraisal which recommends a new 7-classbase school on the existing, extended site, is currently under consideration by the Department's professional advisers.

In relation to Whiteabbey Primary School, I understand the NEELB has completed an Appraisal and is planning to review it to ensure the project would meet anticipated needs in the area.

It is not possible at this time to indicate when funding would be available to enable these schemes to commence.

Children and Young People

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the baseline figure of her department's budget that is allocated to services in relation to children and young people; (ii) the nature of these services; and (iii) any additional monies being spent on these services. (AQW 2507/08)

The Minister of Education: The entire budget for the Department of Education is, either directly or indirectly, used to fund services in relation to children and young people. The baseline figure for resource spending in 2007-08 was £1,725.9m and this has been increased following the outcome of in-year monitoring rounds to £1,755.9m. In addition, the Department's budget for capital investment in 2007-08 is £221.9m. These 2 budgets fund services relating to the education of children and young people and the Youth Service as well as funding the delivery of a modern and sustainable schools estate.

Extended Schools Programme

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) all schools that are entitled to receive funding through the extended schools programme, broken down by parliamentary constituency; and (ii) the amount of funding they received during the current financial year. (AQW 2512/08)

The Minister of Education: The tables below show a breakdown of the schools that were eligible for extended schools funding in 2006/07 and 2007/08 broken down by Parliamentary Constituency and the amount of funding they were allocated.

Special Schools by Constituency		Constituency	Total Allocated 2007/08
		Belfast East	
1310003	Cedar Lodge Special School	Belfast North	17,969
3316510	Hill Croft Special School	Belfast North	11,400
			29,369
1316569	Glenveagh Special	Belfast South	10,063

Special Schools by Constituency		Constituency	Total Allocated 2007/08
			10,063
1336012	St Francis De Sales	Belfast West	5,800
1336548	St Gerard's Resource Education Centre	Belfast West	20,750
			26,550
3316514	Roddens Vale Special School	East Antrim	12,420
3340002	Jordanstown Special School	East Antrim	9,600
			22,020
2310007	Limegrove School	East Londonderry	11,500
2316526	Glasvey Special School	East Londonderry	6,555
3316512	Sandelford Special School	East Londonderry	16,225
			34,280
2316234	Erne Special School	Fermanagh And South Tyrone	15,381
2316601	Elmbrook Special School	Fermanagh And South Tyrone	10,005
			25,386
2310015	Belmont House Special School	Foyle	22,109
2316525	Foyleview Special School	Foyle	16,071
			38,180
4310008	Beechlawn Special School	Lagan Valley	25,530
4316022	Brookfield Special School	Lagan Valley	15,468
			40,998
3316570	Kilronan Special School	Mid Ulster	10,200
			10,200
5316519	Rathore School	Newry And Armagh	12,400
5316577	Lisanally Special School	Newry And Armagh	14,260
			26,660
3316271	Dunfane Special School	North Antrim	19,608
			19,608
		South Antrim	
4310019	Ardmore House Special School	South Down	4,000

Special Schools by Constituency		Constituency	Total Allocated 2007/08
4316516	Knockevin Special School	South Down	11,960
			15,960
4310013	Killard House Special School	Strangford	20,470
4316273	Longstone Special School	Strangford	18,325
			38,795
5316521	Ceara Special School	Upper Bann	13,915
			13,915
2316528	Knockavoe School And Resource Centre	West Tyrone	10,465
2316661	Arvalee School And Resource Centre	West Tyrone	17,796
			28,261

Nursery Schools by Constituency		Constituency	Total Allocated 2007/08
1110002	Mcarthur Nursery School	Belfast East	8,200
1116074	Glendhu Nursery School	Belfast East	5,600
1116158	Ravenscroft Nursery School	Belfast East	8,200
1116160	Sandbrook Nursery School	Belfast East	9,545
4116216	King's Road Nursery School	Belfast East	9,430
4116240	Castlereagh Nursery School	Belfast East	8,200
			49,175
1110003	Edenderry Nursery School	Belfast North	9,430
1110007	Glenbank Nursery School	Belfast North	6,440
1110025	Tudor Lodge Nursery School	Belfast North	9,430
1110036	New Lodge Nursery School	Belfast North	9,430
1116011	Victoria Nursery School	Belfast North	6,440
1116157	Stanhope Street Nursery School	Belfast North	8,200
1116159	Oldpark Nursery School	Belfast North	8,200

Nursery Schools by Constituency		Constituency	Total Allocated 2007/08
1136229	St Mary's Nursery School	Belfast North	8,300
1136230	Holy Family Nursery School	Belfast North	8,200
1136251	Our Lady's Nursery School	Belfast North	9,430
1136360	Holy Cross Nursery School	Belfast North	9,430
			92,930
1110001	Arellian Nursery School	Belfast South	8,200
1120027	Bethlehem Nursery School	Belfast South	4,100
			12,300
1110038	Shaftesbury Nursery School	Belfast West	9,430
1116155	Hope Nursery School	Belfast West	9,430
1136106	St Martin's Nursery School	Belfast West	9,545
1136228	St Bernadette's Nursery School	Belfast West	9,430
1136302	St Paul's Nursery School	Belfast West	9,430
1136314	St Teresa's Nursery School	Belfast West	9,430
1136315	St Michael's Nursery School	Belfast West	9,430
1136316	Holy Child Nursery School	Belfast West	9,430
1136340	St Peter's Nursery School	Belfast West	9,430
1136349	Matt Talbot Nursery School	Belfast West	9,545
1136353	St Maria Goretti Nursery School	Belfast West	9,430
1136383	St Oliver Plunkett Nursery School	Belfast West	8,100
1136603	The Cathedral Nursery School	Belfast West	9,430
4136286	Good Shepherd Nursery School	Belfast West	9,545
4136368	St Luke's Nursery School	Belfast West	9,430
4136481	St Kieran's Nursery School	Belfast West	9,430
4136606	St Therese Nursery School	Belfast West	9,430

Nursery Schools by Constituency		Constituency	Total Allocated 2007/08
159,325			
3136332	St Anthony's Nursery School	East Antrim	9,430
9,430			
2116628	Limavady Nursery School	East Londonderry	9,430
3116215	Kylemore Nursery School	East Londonderry	9,373
3116263	Ballysally Nursery School	East Londonderry	8,510
27,313			
5116198	Fivemiletown Nursery School	Fermanagh Sth Tyrone	6,670
6,670			
2116023	The Academy Nursery School	Foyle	9,603
2116232	Strathfoyle Nursery School	Foyle	9,545
2116266	Bligh's Lane Nursery School	Foyle	9,660
2116267	Carnhill Nursery School	Foyle	9,430
2116336	Galliagh Nursery School	Foyle	9,430
2116345	Belmont Nursery School	Foyle	9,545
2116348	Trench Road Nursery School	Foyle	9,430
66,643			
4116018	Barbour Nursery School	Lagan Valley	8,200
4136317	Holy Trinity Nursery School	Lagan Valley	9,660
17,860			
3116177	Magherafelt Nursery School	Mid Ulster	12,420
12,420			
5136342	St Malachy's Nursery School	Newry & Armagh	8,200
5110017	Armagh Nursery School	Newry And Armagh	6,555
14,755			
3110037	Ballymena Nursery School	North Antrim	7,400
3116165	Dunclug Nursery School	North Antrim	8,400

Nursery Schools by Constituency		Constituency	Total Allocated 2007/08
15,800			
		North Down	0
3116162	Mossley Nursery School	South Antrim	8,200
3116220	Ballyclare Nursery School	South Antrim	12,363
3136183	St Joseph's Nursery School	South Antrim	9,430
29,993			
4116176	Downpatrick Nursery School	South Down	6,440
4136211	St Colmcille's Nursery School	South Down	9,430
4136212	St Patrick's Convent Nursery	South Down	9,430
5116197	Kilkeel Nursery School	South Down	9,430
34,730			
4110035	Newtownards Nursery School	Strangford	8,200
4116307	Glenbrook Nursery School	Strangford	9,430
17,630			
5116189	Millington Nursery School	Upper Bann	9,545
5136217	St John The Baptist Nursery	Upper Bann	9,430
5136631	Drumnamoe Nursery School	Upper Bann	8,300
27,275			
2116333	Ballycolman Nursery School	West Tyrone	9,430
9,430			

Post Primary Schools By Constituency		Constituency	Total Allocated 2007/08
1210014	Ashfield Girls' High School	Belfast East	32,120
1210015	Ashfield Boys' High School	Belfast East	36,754
1210266	Orangefield High School	Belfast East	25,550
4210030	Lisnasharragh High School	Belfast East	19,975
£ 114,399			

Post Primary Schools By Constituency		Constituency	Total Allocated 2007/08
1210021	Belfast Model School For Girls	Belfast North	41,711
1210022	Belfast Boys' Model School	Belfast North	40,641
1210258	Castle High School	Belfast North	17,451
1230026	St Patrick's College	Belfast North	33,080
1230032	St Gabriel's Boys School	Belfast North	16,416
1230089	Little Flower Girls' School	Belfast North	32,340
1230104	Our Lady Of Mercy Girls' School	Belfast North	33,293
1230173	St Gemma's High School	Belfast North	27,140
1260269	Hazelwood College	Belfast North	38,790
3210279	Newtownabbey Community High School	Belfast North	29,383
			£ 310,245
1230275	St Joseph's College	Belfast South	37,237
1260294	Malone Integrated College	Belfast South	33,630
			£ 70,867
1210273	Mount Gilbert Community College	Belfast West	5,208
1230053	St Louise's College	Belfast West	49,082
1230130	St Rose's High School	Belfast West	35,915
1230146	Christian Brothers Secondary School	Belfast West	31,530
1230155	St Genevieve's High School	Belfast West	35,870
1230182	La Salle Boys' School	Belfast West	37,360
1230262	Corpus Christi College	Belfast West	36,513
1240291	Colaiste Feirste	Belfast West	30,030
1420021	St Mary's Christian Brothers' Gs	Belfast West	39,970
1420029	St Dominic's High School	Belfast West	35,610
4230223	St Colm's High School	Belfast West	37,674
			£ 374,762
3210200	Monkstown Community School	East Antrim	37,881

Post Primary Schools By Constituency		Constituency	Total Allocated 2007/08
			£ 37,881
2210302	Limavady High School	East Londonderry	16,785
2230077	St Mary's Limavady	East Londonderry	38,985
	*Limavady Partnership	East Londonderry	40,000
	* Group Of 8 Schools Receiving Good Practice Funding		£ 95,770
5230293	St Patrick's College	Fermanagh And South Tyrone	35,409
			£ 35,409
2230081	St Mary's College	Foyle	39,940
2230131	St Joseph's Secondary	Foyle	39,986
2230181	St Peter's High School	Foyle	30,590
2230188	St Cecilia's College	Foyle	40,170
2230225	St Brigid's College	Foyle	39,273
2230254	Immaculate Conception College	Foyle	25,818
2260276	Oakgrove Integrated College	Foyle	39,365
2420052	Thornhill College	Foyle	45,828
2420054	St Columb's College	Foyle	46,794
			£ 347,764
4210051	Lisnagarvey High School	Lagan Valley	29,958
4210194	Dunmurry High School	LaGan Valley	30,073
4230165	St Patrick's High School	Lagan Valley	29,383
			£ 89,414
3210090	Maghera High School	Mid Ulster	17,950
5230192	St Joseph's High School	Mid Ulster	33,730
5230278	Holy Trinity College	Mid Ulster	38,215
			£ 89,895
5230056	St Joseph's Boys' High School	Newry And Armagh	33,408
5230108	St Mary's High School	Newry And Armagh	35,455
5230167	St Joseph's High School	Newry And Armagh	35,869

Post Primary Schools By Constituency		Constituency	Total Allocated 2007/08
5420062	St Colman's College	Newry And Armagh	17,185
			£ 121,917
3210124	Ballycastle High School	North Antrim	30,360
3210233	Ballee Community High School	North Antrim	30,331
			£ 60,691
3230203	Edmund Rice College	South Antrim	35,501
			£ 35,501
4230224	De La Salle Secondary School	South Down	31,510
5210016	Kilkeel High School	South Down	38,387
			£ 69,897
4210262	Dundonald High School	Strangford	31,481
			£ 31,481
5230088	St Paul's Junior High School	Upper Bann	34,328
5230213	Lismore Comprehensive School	Upper Bann	41,860
5230256	Drumcree College	Upper Bann	30,648
5250216	Brownlow Int College	Upper Bann	33,293
			£ 140,129
2210065	Castlederg High School	West Tyrone	32,718
2210164	Strabane High School	West Tyrone	26,968
2230111	St Eugene's High School	West Tyrone	18,573
2230141	St Joseph's High School	West Tyrone	4,830
2230301	Holy Cross College	West Tyrone	45,713
2410096	Strabane Gs	West Tyrone	32,028
			£ 160,830

Core Schools in the Post-Primary Sector

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to outline her understanding of the term 'core school' in the post-primary sector. (AQW 2521/08)

The Minister of Education: I understand that the term 'core school' has been used by education

authorities to refer to schools which are considered to be viable for the foreseeable future.

Wi-Fi

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of schools that (i) have wi-fi installed; and (ii) are waiting for wi-fi to be installed. (AQW 2533/08)

The Minister of Education: Wireless connectivity has been provided to all primary schools on the Classroom 2000 (C2k) network as part of the rollout of laptops which will support the computer-based assessment of P5 pupils. Two schools declined wireless connectivity. Thirty post-primary schools have independently purchased wireless access points for use on their local area networks.

All nursery, post-primary and special schools will also have wireless connectivity by the end of the current school year, although any school has the option of declining a WiFi connection if it wishes.

Answers to Assembly Questions

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education to provide figures for the average length of time taken by her department to respond to a priority written question, since the restoration of devolution in May 2007. (AQW 2534/08)

The Minister of Education: My Department has answered 52 Priority Written Assembly Questions between 08 May and 11 December 2007. The average time taken to answer each question is 9 working days.

Ministerial Visits

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of visits she has made in her capacity as a Minister to (i) Scotland; and (ii) the Republic of Ireland, since the restoration of devolution in May 2007. (AQW 2549/08)

The Minister of Education: I travelled to Edinburgh on 12 December and met with the Education Minister for Scotland. I have travelled to the south of Ireland on 9 occasions to attend events.

'Outlining a Vision for our Education System'

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Education to outline whether or not she received, or considered, any advice from other Ministers, or from members of the

Committee for Education, in relation to the content of her statement, 'Outlining a Vision for our Education system', before making the statement in the Assembly on 4 December 2007. (AQW 2577/08)

The Minister of Education: The statement 'Outlining a Vision for our Education System' on 4 December 2007 set out my overarching vision for the future of our post-primary system. It did so to provide a context for the future detailed proposals that will support it – proposals that, when fully developed, will be brought before the Executive Committee, the Assembly Committee and the Assembly. The statement was shared with Executive Ministers and the Assembly Committee before it was made. This was part of a process of engagement that has included previous appearances by myself and officials before the Assembly Committee on the issue of post-primary transfer. This process will continue.

Wi-Fi

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to monitor the health of children in schools that have Wi-Fi installed; and to outline how such a monitoring program will be operated. (AQW 2620/08)

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. There is therefore no need to undertake any monitoring programme in schools.

The HPA has recently announced, however, that while there is no scientific evidence to date that Wi-Fi adversely affects the health of the general population, it will carry out a systematic programme of research which will include measurements of exposures from Wi-Fi. It also states that it has good scientific reasons to expect the results of this research to be reassuring.

Ministerial Meeting

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to give a timescale within which she proposes to make a statement to the Assembly in relation to her meeting with the Scottish Education Minister. (AQW 2644/08)

The Minister of Education: I have no plans to make a Ministerial statement to the Assembly in relation to my meeting with the Scottish Education Minister.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Staff Undergoing Disciplinary Procedures

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he is taking to reduce the number of staff in his department undergoing disciplinary procedures as a result of an unacceptable sickness record. (AQW 2328/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): DEL, in line with all Government Departments, has developed a range of measures to prevent staff, where possible, from falling ill, and to support staff while they are absent from work because of illness. These measures include promoting health and safety at work; providing innovative work-life balance initiatives; and promoting healthy lifestyle initiatives. This range of measures is complemented by a robust implementation of the NICS Managing Attendance policy that includes the provision of timely and accurate statistics and trend analysis; consistent NICS-wide trigger points to prompt early action in sickness absence cases; and clear processes on the issuing of written warnings, sanctions, consideration of ill-health retirements and dismissals on the grounds of inefficiency.

Training for Success Programme

Mrs McGill asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to confirm whether or not he will review the remuneration levels for Level 2 Apprenticeships, under the Training for Success Programme, to ensure that trainees and/or their families are not penalised financially. (AQW 2378/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Under the current National Minimum Wage Regulations, exemptions apply to apprentices under the age of 19 and apprentices who are 19 or over and in the first 12 months of their apprenticeship. In the Operational Guidelines for Training for Success, the Department has stated that apprentices should be paid a wage commensurate with the industry rate for that job.

However, not all employers are applying this guidance. I can therefore confirm that the Department will include remuneration levels for apprentices in its first year review of Training for Success.

Ministerial Statement, 'Outlining a Vision for our Education System'

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail when, and how, he was first

notified of the Ministerial Statement, 'Outlining a Vision for our Education system'; and to confirm whether or not he had discussions with the Minister of Education on the subject matter of the statement before it was issued. (AQW 2477/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The intention of the Minister of Education to make a statement to the Assembly on her vision for the education system was first notified to me at 10.51am on 4 December, by way of a letter sent to my Private Office enclosing a copy of the statement.

While I have had a number of discussions with the Minister of Education in the last few months on matters of common interest, the subject matter of this statement was not discussed with me at any time before issue.

Children and Young People

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the baseline figure of his department's budget that is allocated to services in relation to children and young people; (ii) the nature of these services; and (iii) any additional monies being spent on these services. (AQW 2505/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

- (i) The Departmental Baseline budget being spent on Children and Young People during this financial year 2007 – 2008 is £76.82m.
- (ii) The nature of these services are described as:
Education and Maintenance Allowances - £25.8m. The purpose of this scheme is to enable young people from lower income backgrounds to remain in post-compulsory education at school or college, with the key objectives of raising participation, retention and achievement.

Training Programme - £50.9m. These services are in relation to the provision of both "Jobskills" and "Training for Success" during 2007/08, which comprise the Department's primary professional and technical training provision. The provision is designed to give children and young people the skills they need to progress to the workplace. Training for Success replaced Jobskills in September 2007, although there are a number of Jobskills trainees who are still undergoing training.

Employers for Childcare project "Childcare solutions" £12k. This payment represents 10% DEL Match funding for project costs. The main services provided by this project are a free phone Child Information Service, which includes detailed profiles of all available childcare

services, practical advice on working entitlements and information on which Northern Ireland companies provide family friendly policies. The project also works with employers to encourage them to adopt family friendly policies.

- (iii) Whilst the Department does provide some additional funding to higher education institutions to allow them to widen access for students with disabilities, it is not possible to separately identify the impact of this for differing age groups.

The £50.9m baseline for Training Programmes includes £2m for the provision of specialist support to those children and young people who have a disability and therefore require additional support.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Renewable Energy Job Losses

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is his assessment of the number of jobs that will be lost, in relation to renewable energy, once the Reconnect scheme and installer grants have ended. (AQW 2359/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): The Reconnect scheme provides grants to householders wishing to install various small scale renewable technologies. There are no grants to installers themselves.

To date around 146 installers have been involved in the 1540 Reconnect installations completed over the past 17 months.

Some 740 installers have received accredited training through the Interreg-funded Renewable Energy Installers Academy over the past 3 years and it would seem evident that many are engaged in work outside of Reconnect installations.

I do not perceive therefore that the ending of the Reconnect scheme will result in significant job losses. However, the scheme will be evaluated during 2008 to assess if it has met its objectives including the creation of a self-sustaining household renewables market.

Foreign Nationals

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what responsibility his department has in relation to monitoring the number

of foreign nationals residing in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 2428/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
The Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has no formal responsibility to monitor the number of foreign nationals residing in Northern Ireland.

DETI does have responsibility for the conduct of the NI Labour Force Survey (LFS), which can be used to provide limited information on the nationality and the country of birth of persons resident in NI. However, the LFS is a sample survey with an associated degree of sampling error and it is not designed to produce precise estimates of the number and characteristics of foreign nationals living here.

It is not possible to meet the key requirements for statistics on international migration using a single data source and the Department works closely with other NI and GB Departments to ensure that we consider all the relevant statistical information available.

Ministerial Statement, ‘Outlining a Vision for our Education System’

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail when, and how, he was first notified of the Ministerial Statement, ‘Outlining a Vision for our Education system’; and to confirm whether or not he had discussions with the Minister of Education on the subject matter of the statement before it was issued.
(AQW 2475/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
Notification of Caitriona Ruane’s Ministerial Statement ‘Outlining a Vision for our Education system’ to the NI Assembly was received in the DETI Private Office via e-mail on Tuesday 4 December 2007 at 10.51am from the Education Minister’s Private Office. Officials gave Nigel Dodds the document on 6 December following his return from visit to America.

The Education Minister did not discuss this statement with the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister prior to it being issued.

Targeting Social Need

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action he is taking to ensure that investment and business opportunities are directed to those areas and communities that experience high levels of multiple deprivation; and to confirm that targeting social need, and objective need, are taken into account in these matters.
(AQW 2486/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
As part of its commitment to targeting social need,

DETI has designated areas within Northern Ireland as disadvantaged on the basis of income and employment deprivation. These include the following six District Council areas - Newry & Mourne, Strabane, Derry, Omagh, Cookstown and Dungannon – and 80 of the 150 Super Output Areas that make up Belfast. DETI and its agencies pay particular attention to these areas, which contain 30% of the Northern Ireland population, in the delivery of policies and programmes.

It should be noted that council 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 council and constituency area boundaries. In addition, Invest NI has limited scope for ‘directing’ investment to specific geographic areas, although it is 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.

During the past five years (April 2002 – March 2007), almost £300 million of assistance was offered by Invest NI to clients located within areas of economic disadvantage. Of the 69 first time inward-investment projects offered assistance during the five years, 74% planned to establish locations in these areas, representing 78% of assistance offered to all new inward-investment projects, and 82% of associated new jobs. In addition, 4,490 offers were made in support of new business start-up projects located within disadvantaged areas.

Within Belfast District Council area, 88% of inward-investment projects offered assistance during the past five years (representing 96% of total investment), had locations within disadvantaged areas, and the remainder are accessible to those living in all parts of greater Belfast.

In addition to the programmes of business support provided by Invest NI, DETI also has responsibility for tourism and telecoms. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) during the past five years provided almost £4.4 million of support through a range of infrastructure and marketing projects located in disadvantaged areas. In relation to the telecommunications infrastructure in Northern Ireland, there are three initiatives included in the draft Programme for Government aimed at improvements which will encourage use and access. These include:

- (i) The North West Direct International Connectivity project which aims to provide the North West with direct access to the transatlantic telecommunication networks reducing the cost of international telecommunications for businesses in the region;

- (ii) Next generation broadband, which aims to deliver access to high speed broadband to 85% of businesses by the end of 2011. This initiative is focused on rural areas; and
- (iii) Broadband stimulation projects aimed at providing support to SMEs to adopt broadband technologies. This includes proposals to site two broadband demonstration centres in areas of economic disadvantage.

Regional Tourism Partnerships

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount of the proposed tourism budget for 2008-2011 that (i) will be allocated to each of the four Regional Tourism Partnerships; and (ii) the amount of this allocation that will be set aside for marketing. (AQW 2509/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Draft Budget was published for consultation and a Final Budget will be presented to the Assembly in due course. Overall allocations for tourism will be set in the Final Budget.

An independent evaluation of the Strategic Framework for Action for tourism 2004 – 2007 has recently been carried out on behalf of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and the recommendations from this will inform the development of the next phase of the Strategic Framework. In addition, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) is in the process of developing its Corporate Plan to define its priorities for the next 3 year period, against which detailed funding allocations will be made. A draft of the Corporate Plan will come to me for consideration.

Once priorities, programmes, targets and objectives for the allocation of the NITB budget are defined, consideration will be given to the most appropriate delivery mechanisms at Northern Ireland and regional level to deliver the required outcomes. Funding will be allocated to RTPs as appropriate within this context.

The Tourism (Northern Ireland) Order 1992

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to make a statement on his department's plans to update The Tourism (Northern Ireland) Order 1992. (AQW 2511/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board are reviewing the current arrangements for the regulation of tourist accommodation as contained in Part IV of the Tourism (Northern Ireland) Order 1992. A key aim of the review is to reduce the regulatory burden on tourist accommodation businesses. DETI aims to consult

on the proposed changes in 2008 following which amendments will be made to subordinate legislation and, if necessary, the Tourism Order.

Invest NI Sites

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to his answer to AQW 1999/08, to detail in relation to the South Antrim constituency land bank, (i) the total number of sites owned by Invest NI; (ii) the approximate size of each of these sites; and (iii) the location of each of these sites. (AQW 2518/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: As of 31 October 2007, Invest NI holds a total of 393.64 acres of land at 7 locations in the South Antrim constituency. The details of the landholding at each location can be found on the attached table.

The single largest Invest NI land holding in the area is at Global Point, Newtownabbey, where Invest NI holds 149.72 acres and has 93.60 acres available for industrial use. The balance being in essential site infrastructure, a watercourse and a Linear Park.

As the table demonstrates, Invest NI land at Hightown is almost exhausted and Global Point will be the next natural location for companies seeking sites in the North Belfast, Newtownabbey and South Antrim areas. It is anticipated that demand for land at Global Point will be high.

Invest NI is currently awaiting a decision concerning overall planning permissions for this site and, subject to the completion of the statutory consultation process, it is expected that the application will be taken to Council in January 2008.

Over the last number of years, Invest NI has gained planning permission and developed several phases of infrastructure within the park at a cost of circa £7m. It expects to be in a position to market and lease serviced sites to client companies as soon as overall planning approval is granted.

Invest NI land is held exclusively for its client companies with an approved business case and an immediate demonstrable property need.

TABLE 1 - INVEST NI LANDHOLDING IN SOUTH ANTRIM

Industrial Estate	Location	Land Holding	Land Available
Antrim Technology Park	Antrim	75.13	26.50
Newpark Business Park	Antrim	32.61	0.00
Rathenraw Business Park	Antrim	2.70	0.00

Industrial Estate	Location	Land Holding	Land Available
Global Point Business Park	Newtownabbey	149.72	93.60
Hightown	Newtownabbey	127.76	8.60
Monkstown	Newtownabbey	4.95	0.00
Glenville	Newtownabbey	0.77	0.00
Total		393.64	128.70

InterTradeIreland

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the expenditure committed to InterTrade Ireland in the Northern Ireland block grant in each financial year since it was established; and to detail the proposed expenditure as outlined by the draft Budget. (AQW 2553/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

- (a) The total expenditure committed to InterTrade-Ireland (ITI) in the Northern Ireland block grant in each financial year since it was established is set out in the following tables:

December 1999 to 31 March 2000 £	1 April 2000 to 31 March 2001 £	1 April 2001 to 31 March 2002 £	1 April 2002 to 31 March 2003 £
200,000	3,100,000	2,900,000	1,175,000

1 April 2003 to 31 March 2004 £	1 April 2004 to 31 March 2005 £	1 April 2005 to 31 March 2006 £	1 April 2006 to 31 March 2007 £
2,251,000	3,449,000	2,824,000	3,558,000

- (b) The total expenditure committed to InterTradeIreland in the Northern Ireland Block grant in the April 2007 to March 2008 financial year is £3,408,000.
- (c) The total projected financial provision for InterTradeIreland as set out in the draft budget statement published on 25 October 2007 is set out in the following table:

1 April 2008 to 31 March 2009 £	1 April 2009 to 31 March 2010 £	1 April 2010 to 31 March 2011 £
3,500,000	4,900,000	5,300,000

- (d) Draft provisions for the 3 years from April 2008 include an element of costs borne by DETI in respect of ITI staff pension costs (2008/09 £118k; 2009/10 £121k; and 2010/11 £124k). This is an

inescapable Departmental commitment. N/S Bodies Pension Scheme was not introduced until 2006.

The draft budget allocations are subject to continuing consideration and consultation as part of the budgetary process. They will also be examined in the context of the draft Corporate Plan for ITI, which will be subject to my detailed consideration, and in the context of the review of the North/South implementation bodies and areas of cooperation, as provided for in Annex A of the St. Andrews Agreement.

ENVIRONMENT

Listed Buildings

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail for each council area (i) the number of buildings currently listed; and (ii) the number of buildings that have been listed and de-listed, in each of the last five years. (AQW 2340/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster):

The information requested is provided in the attached tables.

NUMBER OF LISTED BUILDINGS IN EACH COUNCIL AREA

		Listed Buildings/Sites
01	Londonderry	474
02	Limavady	139
03	Coleraine	318
04	Ballymoney	85
05	Moyle	331
06	Larne	183
07	Ballymena	256
08	Magherafelt	195
09	Cookstown	189
10	Strabane	176
11	Omagh	112
12	Fermanagh	496
13	Dungannon	499
14	Craigavon	206
15	Armagh	516
16	Newry & Mourne	691
17	Banbridge	329
18	Down	716

		Listed Buildings/Sites
19	Lisburn	317
20	Antrim	232
21	Newtownabbey	44
22	Carrickfergus	64
23	North Down	254
24	Newtownards	379
25	Castlereagh	24
26	Belfast	1059
Total		8284*

* This figure represents the total number of statutory listings in Northern Ireland. However, because many listings include multiple buildings, such as terraces or farm buildings under a single listing reference, the total number of listed buildings in Northern Ireland is greater than this figure and is estimated to be about 8,500 structures.

Houses of Multiple Occupancy, South Belfast

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the action that is being taken by the Planning Service to address the high number of Houses of Multiple Occupancy (HMOs) in South Belfast; and what plans she to place a moratorium on planning approval for HMOs, and multiple apartments in South Belfast, until the register is fully updated.

(AQW 2369/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department's Planning Service prepared and published in June 2006 a draft HMO Subject Plan for the Belfast City Council area. This draft Plan aims to protect the amenity of areas where multiple occupation is, or is likely to become, concentrated whilst accommodating the need and demand for multiple occupation. It also aims to focus HMO development in areas where it can contribute to regeneration and facilitate development of purpose built student accommodation.

Representations to the published draft Plan were considered by the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) at an Independent Examination (IE) in October 2007. The PAC report on the IE is still awaited.

My Department has no plans to place a moratorium on planning applications for HMOs, but the draft Plan is a material consideration in the determination of such applications.

Finally, Planning Service officials are represented on a Belfast City Council-led intra-Agency Group to consider, on an on-going basis, issues surrounding HMOs.

Climate Change

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration she has given to providing assistance to district councils in relation to the introduction of measures to (i) reduce carbon dioxide emissions; and (ii) adapt to the effects of climate change.

(AQW 2403/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The issue of climate change is one that is relevant to everyone. Government, including district councils, need to play their part and must take responsibility for reducing emissions. There are a number of areas where the Executive and I are, and will be, providing assistance.

As part of the draft Programme for Government, subject to Executive approval, significant funds are to be made available to district councils and others in order to comply with the EU Landfill Directive. This will reduce the release of methane and carbon dioxide when biodegradable materials are broken down by organisms in the presence of air.

In April 2007, the Minister supported the allocation of £250k over a two-year period for the Community Eco-Challenge project. It works with local community groups and households to identify areas which impact on their carbon footprint and tries to minimise this by simple lifestyle changes. The project is sponsored by DOE alongside WWF and has five participating Councils under the Southern Group Environmental Health Committee.

The issue of adaptation is also an important one for district councils. My Department has provided guidance and support as follows:

The Environment and Heritage Service published in April 2005 "Guidance for Public Bodies on Climate Change Impacts in Northern Ireland". This is available and relevant to district councils.

The Scottish and Northern Ireland Forum for Environmental Research (SNIFFER) Report 2007 "Preparing for a Changing Climate in Northern Ireland" identified the potential impacts of climate change across a range of sectors and made recommendations for adaptive strategies to prepare for the unavoidable impacts of climate change in Northern Ireland. The report identifies actions required by district councils as well as other public bodies.

A Northern Ireland Climate Change Impacts Partnership (NICCIP) has been formed comprising interested and influential parties from central and local government as well as the voluntary sector, business and environmental non-government organisations to help inform the process.

Otters

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to carry out a survey of the number of otters in waterways. (AQW 2444/08)

The Minister of the Environment: It is proposed that the next otter survey should be undertaken both in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland at the same time. This would provide a larger ecological dataset for analysis, than the last Northern Ireland Survey, in 2003, which showed an overall decline of 20% in numbers over a 20-year period. This survey is planned for 2009/10.

Discarded Chewing Gum

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to address the problem of discarded chewing gum; and the costs to district councils of removing chewing gum from streets. (AQW 2450/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I appreciate that irresponsible chewing gum disposal can cost district councils a lot of money as expensive jet sprays or chemical treatments are necessary to clean up the mess. My officials have been considering how the powers of district councils could be strengthened and extended to enable them to deal more effectively with a wide range of local environmental problems including chewing gum litter and litter generally. New primary legislation will eventually be required to give effect to any future proposals for stronger and more effective powers to reduce litter. It is my intention to consult on specific proposals in due course.

Birds of Prey

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of offences carried out against birds of prey in the last 3 years. (AQW 2451/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My officials collate records of wildlife law convictions but not records of wildlife offences.

There have been no convictions for offences carried out against birds of prey in Northern Ireland over the past 3 years.

However, records of offences are submitted to the UK National Wildlife Crime Unit (NWCU) by various member organisations of the Partnership Against Wildlife Crime (PAW), which is chaired by EHS.

NWCU reports that there were 7 confirmed incidents of birds of prey being illegally killed in

Northern Ireland over the last 3 years; six of which had been poisoned and one which had been shot.

Eco-Towns and Villages

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what plans she has in relation to the development of new eco-towns and villages. (AQW 2457/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Currently there is nothing in the Department's published Planning Policy Statements (PPSs) in relation to the development of new eco-towns and villages and there are no current proposals for such in any draft or adopted Area Plan.

Generally, my Department would wish to encourage development which is environmentally friendly and sustainable.

Rathlin Island

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the assistance, financial or otherwise, that her department provides to (i) the National Trust; and (ii) the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, on Rathlin Island. (AQW 2459/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department's Environment and Heritage Service provides assistance in a number of ways to support the work of the National Trust and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) on Rathlin Island. The close co-operation between EHS, RSPB and the National Trust is reflected in the joint statement which they issued on their management objectives for their properties on the Island.

In relation to the National Trust: EHS has supported the acquisition of land near the east lighthouse at Ballycarry through its Natural Heritage Grants Programme. EHS provides financial support for a number of National Trust regional projects relating to access, education and the implementation of the National Trust's biodiversity strategy. Some of these relate to Rathlin Island.

Payments to the National Trust have also been made under the Environment Order to support the management of its lands within two Areas of Special Scientific Interest on the island. These payments supported a project on field boundaries and a five year agreement under the Management of Sensitive Sites (MOSS) scheme.

Regarding the RSPB: EHS supported the purchase and initial management of coastal grassland and sea cliff at Knockans on the White Cliffs at Rathlin Island in 2004. EHS has committed to providing funding

towards the RSPB Officer on Rathlin for 2007-2010. EHS is also supporting the RSPB's Environmental Education Delivery project which relates in part to Rathlin Island.

EHS entered into an 'in perpetuity' agreement with the RSPB in the late 1990s to ensure the future protection of its land within the Rathlin Island Coast Area of Special Scientific Interest. EHS and RSPB co-operate over the management of their respective properties at the west of the island, sharing a Warden and co-operating over transport arrangements and access to the West Light.

Grouse Action Plan

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the reasons for the delay in setting up the Environment and Heritage Service Grouse Action Plan. (AQW 2466/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The publication of a Northern Ireland Species Action Plan for red grouse is an EHS Biodiversity Implementation Plan target which is to be completed by March 2008.

The action plan has been through both departmental and public consultation. The latter consultation closed on 31st August 2007. The Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group (NIBG) has also commented on the draft plan. When EHS has considered the various responses, the action plan will be presented to the NIBG for its approval. The plan will then be published on the EHS web page before the end of March 2008.

Driver and Vehicle Licensing Identification

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the reasons why an electoral card is not accepted as proof of identity for Driver and Vehicle Licensing Northern Ireland. (AQW 2467/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department introduced Identity Checking for driving licence applications in April 1999. Given that driving licences are generally valid for 10 years, there are still many licences that have been issued without the holder being subjected to the current rigorous standards. However, the Electoral Commission will issue an Electoral Card on the strength of these licences. The Department does not, therefore, consider an Electoral Card to be sufficiently robust for the purposes of obtaining a driving licence.

Theft of Grouse Chicks and Eggs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment whether or not she will review the legislation in relation to the theft of grouse chicks and eggs, and consider increasing the penalties for these thefts.

(AQW 2468/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The unlawful taking of the eggs of game birds or molestation of nests is regulated under the Game Preservation Act (NI) 1928, which provides for a maximum penalty of £500 or 3 month imprisonment, or both, for related offences. There are currently no plans to review the existing legislation or the level of penalties for offences under the legislation.

Use of Plastic Bags

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to discourage the use of plastic bags. (AQW 2469/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My officials have been considering a number of options to reduce the local environmental problems caused by discarded plastic bags. A tax on plastic bags is one option but it may result in people turning to bags made from other materials or alternative forms of packaging instead. Alternatives to plastic bags often entail their own environmental problems and all of the issues need to be thoroughly considered before deciding on the most appropriate way forward for Northern Ireland. It is my intention to consult on specific proposals in due course.

In the meantime, my Department will continue to support voluntary initiatives aimed at reducing carrier bag usage such as the current UK-wide agreement between Government, the Waste Resources Action Programme and retailers which aims to reduce the overall environmental impact of all carrier bags by 25% by the end of 2008.

Plastic Bags Used by Retail Outlets

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment what estimate her department has made of the number of plastic bags used by shops, and other retail outlets, in each of the last three years. (AQW 2471/08)

The Minister of the Environment: There are no statistics on the number of plastic bags used by shops and other retail outlets in Northern Ireland. Statistics are only available on a UK-wide basis and latest estimates of the total number of bags distributed in the UK stand at over 13 billion. Previous estimates put the UK figure at around 8 billion.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm whether or not the key goal outlined in the Programme for Government, to reduce our carbon footprint by 25%, refers to Northern Ireland's direct carbon emissions. (AQW 2472/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The key goal in question refers to direct greenhouse gas emissions, i.e. those produced within Northern Ireland's geographical boundary, as distinct from indirect emissions associated with goods/services produced outside of the geographical boundary but which are for consumption within Northern Ireland. This is stated in the Sustainable Development Strategy as "to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25%, below 1990 levels by 2025". It is intended that the final Programme for Government document will be clarified accordingly.

Carbon Dioxide Reduction

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm whether or not she will set legally binding carbon dioxide reduction targets for Northern Ireland, in line with those in the United Kingdom Climate Change Bill. (AQW 2473/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Executive Committee and Environment Committee agree with my policy position on targets, i.e. that we should support UK targets detailed in the Bill and not proceed with Northern Ireland specific targets at this time. I have made a commitment to come back to the issue of Northern Ireland targets once I am more certain as to the Northern Ireland emissions baseline. We also need to understand better the relationship between economic competitiveness within government and more demanding cuts in Greenhouse gas emissions. Research on both of these issues is ongoing and I hope to have the findings by March or April 2008.

Draft Policy Planning Statement 14

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm whether the new draft Policy Planning Statement 14 will come into force (i) six months after her statement of 25 October; or (ii) after the consultation period has ended and a final policy has been agreed. (AQW 2506/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I refer to the proceedings following my Statement on rural planning policy to the Assembly on 25 October 2007. I indicated that a new policy will go out for consultation in six months' time, and at that stage, the new policy will

become draft PPS 14 and that the current draft PPS 14 will fall.

Ministerial Statement, 'Outlining a Vision for our Education System'

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment to detail when, and how, she was first notified of the Ministerial Statement, 'Outlining a Vision for our Education system'; and to confirm whether or not she had discussions with the Minister of Education on the subject matter of the statement before it was issued. (AQW 2528/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I received notification of the Ministerial Statement at 10:51am on Tuesday, 4 December 2007. I can confirm that I had no discussions with the Minister of Education on the subject matter of the Statement before it was issued.

Planning Applications

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of applicants who are awaiting the refund of fees after having withdrawn their planning applications, following her statement to the Assembly on 25 October 2007, in relation to draft Planning Policy Statement 14: Sustainable Development in the Countryside. (AQW 2567/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Following the Judicial Review judgement on 25 October 2007, I decided that applicants should be given the opportunity to withdraw applications received from 7 September 2007 up to 25 October 2007 inclusive, and receive a full refund of the fee paid. The number of applicants who have requested that their planning application is withdrawn and who are entitled to a refund of fees is 658.

Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of press releases issued by the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside in each of the last five years. (AQW 2568/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside has made a total of three press releases in the last five years, all of which issued in 2006.

Planning Applications

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to give a timescale for the refund of fees to those applicants who withdrew planning applications, following her statement to the Assembly on 25 October 2007, in relation to draft Planning Policy Statement 14: Sustainable Development in the Countryside.

(AQW 2569/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Following the Judicial Review judgement on 25 October 2007, I decided that applicants should be given the opportunity to withdraw applications received from 7 September 2007 up to 25 October 2007 inclusive, and receive a full refund of the fee paid.

Processing of the refunds is currently underway and letters informing applicants of this and confirming the refund amount should be with them over the next few weeks. A cheque will follow shortly thereafter.

Development at the Old Sirocco Site

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment, in relation to the proposed development at the old Sirocco site, to detail the impact it will have on (i) the overall figures; and (ii) the windfall potential gain figures, contained in the draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan.

(AQW 2572/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The old Sirocco site was not zoned for a specific land use in the draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan but was identified as a development opportunity site suitable for a variety of uses including housing.

If housing is approved on the site, it will impact on housing windfall figures and will only be taken into account if and when built and occupied.

The number of units provided will of course be dependent on the housing element of any mixed use development proposals submitted for the site and as such proposals are only at the early stages of consideration, I am not yet able to advise on the detailed impact on windfall provision.

Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (i) the reasons why no revised capacity study has been carried out in relation to the draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan; and (ii) what plans she has to undertake such a study.

(AQW 2573/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Strategic housing land supply for the Belfast Metropolitan Area

Plan area was considered at length at the recent Public Inquiry held by the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC).

As part of this process, Planning Service in January 2007 prepared and presented to the Inquiry a paper setting out its approach to addressing the housing deficit arising from the uplift in regional housing growth indicators.

In June 2007, Planning Service published a further paper which assessed the appropriateness of specific green belt sites that had been the subject of objections in terms of meeting additional housing supply needs.

While both a revised urban capacity study and a revised windfall allowance were addressed as part of the preparation of these papers, neither was considered by Planning Service to be necessary at this point in time. The PAC will, however, be making recommendations to the Department on these issues in its Inquiry Report.

In these circumstances, I have therefore no plans at this point in time to undertake a further urban capacity study.

Similarly I have no further plans to re-assess the estimated windfall allowance within the BMAP area not least because while recent windfall yield rates in terms of approvals are close to the windfall allowance made in BMAP, windfall can actually only be counted after these approvals are built and occupied. In addition, there is no evidence to suggest that the recent windfall yield rate will continue over the remainder of the Plan period.

Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to detail why there has been no reassessment of the estimated windfall potential gain figures in the latest draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan, for the Belfast City Council area, given that the current estimated figures for 2015 have already been exceeded.

(AQW 2574/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Strategic housing land supply for the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan area was considered at length at the recent Public Inquiry held by the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC).

As part of this process, Planning Service in January 2007 prepared and presented to the Inquiry a paper setting out its approach to addressing the housing deficit arising from the uplift in regional housing growth indicators.

In June 2007, Planning Service published a further paper which assessed the appropriateness of specific

green belt sites that had been the subject of objections in terms of meeting additional housing supply needs.

While both a revised urban capacity study and a revised windfall allowance were addressed as part of the preparation of these papers, neither was considered by Planning Service to be necessary at this point in time. The PAC will, however, be making recommendations to the Department on these issues in its Inquiry Report.

In these circumstances, I have therefore no plans at this point in time to undertake a further urban capacity study.

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Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to detail why there has been no reassessment of the estimated windfall potential gain figures in the latest draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan. (AQW 2575/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Strategic housing land supply for the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan area was considered at length at the recent Public Inquiry held by the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC).

As part of this process, Planning Service in January 2007 prepared and presented to the Inquiry a paper setting out its approach to addressing the housing deficit arising from the uplift in regional housing growth indicators.

In June 2007, Planning Service published a further paper which assessed the appropriateness of specific green belt sites that had been the subject of objections in terms of meeting additional housing supply needs.

While both a revised urban capacity study and a revised windfall allowance were addressed as part of the preparation of these papers, neither was considered by Planning Service to be necessary at this point in time. The PAC will, however, be making recommendations to the Department on these issues in its Inquiry Report.

In these circumstances, I have therefore no plans at this point in time to undertake a further urban capacity study.

Similarly I have no further plans to re-assess the estimated windfall allowance within the BMAP area

not least because while recent windfall yield rates in terms of approvals are close to the windfall allowance made in BMAP, windfall can actually only be counted after these approvals are built and occupied. In addition, there is no evidence to suggest that the recent windfall yield rate will continue over the remainder of the Plan period.

Data Protection

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline her plans to increase awareness about, and develop understanding of, information systems, data security, and data protection laws amongst senior staff in (i) her department; (ii) the Driver and Vehicle Agency; and (iii) other relevant agencies. (AQW 2624/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I am fully aware of the need to ensure that the staff of my department and agencies at all levels should have an understanding of the importance of protecting data and information it holds.

The supply and management of information systems and services is very specialised and we are dependent on suppliers from within the Northern Ireland Civil Service and third parties. It is absolutely crucial that effective data security is properly reflected in their delivery of systems and services, and in the day to day system management practices.

The senior management teams in my Department are aware of the need for proper data and information security and recent events here and in Great Britain have brought this into clear focus.

I am considering how best to deal with the issues. I am determined to ensure that my Department implements best practice in relation to all aspects of data security and to ensure that it meets the highest possible standards to protect information, particularly personal data. The results of the data security review across the Civil Service will inform the means by which this can be achieved.

Data Security

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (i) her department's policy on the sending of encrypted computer disks, containing driver and vehicle data, from the Driver and Vehicle Agency; and (ii) the qualifications in Information Systems that are held by (a) policy makers in the Driver and Vehicle Agency; (b) the Chief Executive and other senior managers in the Driver and Vehicle Agency; and (c) the Permanent Secretary of the Department of the Environment. (AQW 2625/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Currently there is no existing departmental policy in relation to the sending of encrypted computer disks whether that is in respect of driver and vehicle data or any other data. The Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) has commenced a review of all data transmitted, including the transmission method and will, as part of that review, consider data encryption. A considerable amount of data sent by DVA already goes by secure network and as such does not require encryption.

(a) and (b) The DVA policy making forum is the Strategic Management Board, consisting of the Chief Executive, four Group Directors and a Non-Executive Director. Two members of the Strategic Management Board have significant knowledge of information systems built up over a number of years working in this field, one having over 20 years relevant experience. All decisions made by the Strategic Management Board, in respect of Information Systems, are informed by suitably qualified DVA ICT Personnel:

Senior Systems Analyst:	BSc Hons. Mathematics, Statistics and Computing.
Senior Systems Analyst:	BSc in Computing.
Systems Analyst:	HND in Computing.
Systems Analyst:	HND in Computing.

All other ICT staff have at least the minimum entry Information Systems qualifications and in the main considerably more than the minimum.

The Agency has conducted training events, for Data Protection and Freedom of Information across the Agency and all new staff, are advised of their responsibilities in relation to information management.

As a direct consequence of recent events the Agency plans to instigate a refresher training programme on Data Security for all staff, including senior management, as a matter of urgency.

In addition, the Agency uses the services of the Department's Information Technology Security Officer (ITSO) and Internal Audit Services for advice, guidance and review of all information systems.

The Information Commissioner has agreed to conduct an information management and data security audit on the agency in late January/early February 2008 which will include any training requirements that may be identified.

(c) The Permanent Secretary of the Department of the Environment holds no specific qualifications in Information Systems but is advised on IS matters by the Department's Information Technology Security Officer (ITSO), the Information Systems Unit (ISU) and Internal Audit. He can also draw on advice from other IS expertise from the wider NI Civil Service.

Planning Policy Statement 12

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail her plans to revise Planning Policy Statement 12: Local Development Frameworks to ensure the delivery of a minimum 20% developer contribution to help address the lack of social and affordable housing. (AQW 2632/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Responsibility for Planning Policy Statement 12 (Housing in Settlements) will shortly transfer from the Department of Regional Development to my Department. The Affordable Housing policy within that Statement is under review; this is associated with cross-Departmental work on affordable housing led by the Minister for Social Development to which my Department already contributes. On taking responsibility for the Statement I will carefully consider this policy, including the need for any revision.

Fly Posting

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the proposed timescale for her department to produce proposals in relation to fly posting. (AQW 2637/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My officials have been 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, including fly posting, which affect the quality of life in our local environment or neighbourhoods. This work is known as the Clean Neighbourhoods Agenda and primary legislation, preceded by appropriate consultation exercises with key interests, will be required to implement stronger provisions. 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.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the proposed timescale for the creation and full operation of the Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit. (AQW 2290/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): I am currently considering the remit and

organisational structure of the Unit, and will be making detailed comments on the issue in my Final Budget statement to the Assembly in late January.

However, in terms of timing, my intention is to ensure the Unit is operational early next year.

Regional Rate Bill

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the amount by which the average regional rate bill would increase in (i) monetary terms; and (ii) percentage terms, in order to raise £600 million. (AQW 2293/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The average domestic regional rate bill in Northern Ireland is currently £404. This would need to rise by £920 or 228% in order to raise an additional £600 million in 2008-09.

Staff Undergoing Disciplinary Procedures

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to his answer to AQW 1629/08, to detail the contact his department has had with (i) DEL; and (ii) DARD, in addressing the high number of staff in both these departments, compared to other government departments, who are undergoing a disciplinary process as a result of an unacceptable sickness record. (AQW 2327/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Contact with both DEL and DARD has been no different to that with other departments in this regard. The sickness absence policies, including the inefficiency process, are consistent across the whole of the NICS. Any decision to invoke the inefficiency procedures, including the issuing of written warnings or dismissal, rests with each department. DFP works closely with all departments and provides policy advice when required.

Staff Undergoing Disciplinary Procedures

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant his answer to AQW 1629/08, to detail the steps his department is taking, across the Northern Ireland Civil Service, to reduce the number of staff who are undergoing a disciplinary process as a result of an unacceptable sickness record. (AQW 2329/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: DFP's role includes policy development and providing advice and guidance when required to Northern Ireland departments. DFP has developed a multi-faceted approach to managing sickness absence which

includes policies aimed at preventing staff from getting ill in the first instance, supporting them while they are off ill and providing rehabilitative support to assist with an early return to work. Further details about the NICS approach is set out in the attached Annex.

These generally supportive interventions are underpinned by a robust inefficiency policy which includes written warnings and sanctions and ultimately dismissal. The decision to invoke such action rests firmly with the employing department who is best placed to make important and informed decisions on an individual's attendance and whether it is acceptable or not.

It would not be the role of DFP to intervene or influence such decisions.

Across-The-Board Efficiency Savings

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the basis on which he has made the assessment that scope exists for across-the-board efficiency savings of 3%. (AQW 2362/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: At the point of restoration of Devolved Government in Northern Ireland on 8 May 2007, work by NI Departments in the context of the Comprehensive Spending Review was already well underway thus the Executive agreed, for the purposes of the Budget 2008-11, to continue to operate on the basis of the 3% per annum efficiency savings target inherited from Direct Rule Ministers.

However, in recognition of the variations in the rate of efficiency between, and within, Departments, I have established a Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit to examine the scope for generating additional cash-releasing efficiencies within specific spending programmes.

Foreign Nationals

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail what responsibility his department has in relation to monitoring the number of foreign nationals residing in Northern Ireland. (AQW 2429/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department of Finance and Personnel has no formal responsibility in monitoring the number of foreign nationals residing in Northern Ireland.

Migration policy is an excepted matter and responsibility lies with the Home Office.

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) does however publish annual estimates of

the resident population of Northern Ireland, which include estimates of the level of annual migration into and out of Northern Ireland. These population estimates do not distinguish between foreign nationals and others. A question on nationality is also being considered for the 2011 Census.

Building Control Fees

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to review building control fees; and what action he will take to introduce a greater range of charging levels, rather than the two levels which currently apply. (AQW 2448/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: A review of the Building (Prescribed Fees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997 will commence early next year. Public consultation and stakeholder engagement will inform this review and suggestions would be welcomed as to how to improve the delivery of the service.

Location of Public-Sector Jobs

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the progress that has been made on the review of policy on the location of public sector jobs, that was announced to the Assembly in September 2007. (AQW 2525/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Executive agreed the terms of reference for the review at its meeting on 25 November 2007. I am pleased to say that an independent team chaired by Professor Sir George Bain has now been appointed to take forward the review. The terms of reference and membership of the group can be accessed on the Department of Finance and Personnel's website at <http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/>.

I expect the team to begin work in the next few weeks and to report by summer 2008. I can also confirm that a framework to support interim decision making has been published on the Review of Public Administration website. This provides guiding principles and a detailed methodology to help decision makers in the short term until such times as the review has been completed.

Staff Sick Leave

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the amount of sick leave, in government departments and agencies, that can be attributed to harassment, discrimination and bullying, in each of the last three years. (AQW 2539/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The information requested is not available. The NICS uses the World Health Organisation's International Classification of Diseases (ICD 10) coding system for recording and analysing the medical reasons for sick absence. Harassment, discrimination and bullying are not included in this classification system.

Ministerial Advisers

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the security measures that have been carried out in relation to those who are employed as advisers to Ministers. (AQW 2540/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Consistent with the procedures established previously and have been in place since 1999, no security measures have been carried out in relation to those who are employed as advisers to Ministers.

Ministerial Drivers

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the security measures that have been carried out in relation to those who are employed as Ministerial drivers. (AQW 2541/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The security measures that have been carried out in relation to those employed as Ministerial drivers were agreed and completed prior to the restoration of Devolution on 8 May 2007.

All drivers supplied by the DFP car pool to drive Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive have had security vetting undertaken and are cleared to drive Ministers and Senior Officials.

Transport and Security Costs for Ministers

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the costs incurred in providing (i) transport; and (ii) security, for Ministers, since 8 May 2007. (AQW 2542/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel:

- (i) The following costs can be associated with the transport of Ministers since May 2007:

Purchase of Vehicles	£112,000
Cost of Fuel	£11,445
Estimated salary costs	£110,200

This excludes the First Minister and the DFP Minister who have incurred no costs to the NICS.

- (ii) No costs have been incurred in providing security for Ministers since May 2007.

Rating of Vacant Domestic Properties

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an estimate of the revenue that would be raised by rating vacant domestic properties. (AQW 2545/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In my statement to the Assembly on 27th November 2007 on the outcomes of the Executive Review of Domestic Rating, I indicated that the potential revenue gain from the rating of vacant domestic property could be in the region of £15 - £20 million per annum, in terms of the Regional and District Rates.

You will be aware from your membership of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, and in particular the evidence presented to that Committee by my officials and researchers from the University of Ulster on 10th October 2007, that this figure depends on what exclusions and exemption periods (if any) are to be applied, following further consultation on the policy, and also on the quality of the vacant stock – for example, some properties may be uninhabitable and therefore would not be rateable.

Since my statement to the Assembly, the University has provided some emerging findings from Phase 2 of its work, which involved looking at a small sample of the dataset of vacant properties provided by Land and Property Services. This work was considered necessary in order to check the reliability of the data, gauge the condition of the vacant housing stock and assist with establishing the causes of the vacancies.

These emerging findings suggest that, at 100% rating (without significant exemptions or exemption periods), the rating of vacant homes may raise less than the original prediction of £15 million, with the figure more likely to be closer to a potential £10 million per annum initially. In addition, with there being no difference in liability between occupied and unoccupied houses, the measure would also help flush out undeclared and undiscovered occupied houses, which could raise almost the same amount of revenue again in the first few years.

Such an outcome, however, is dependent on Land and Property Services being adequately resourced and prepared in advance to implement what amounts to a radical departure from the existing system which only bills dwellings that are occupied. This work will involve the identification of the owners of vacant properties which is a major exercise in its own right.

Finally, as I stated in the Assembly, the rating of vacant homes is more than a revenue raising measure.

It also has important social aims, such as bringing idle property back onto the market for sale and rent. If successful, therefore, revenues generated by this particular measure will diminish as the number of vacancies reduces and the policy begins to contribute to wider housing affordability objectives. Work to be undertaken by DSD on the issue of affordable housing involving an inspection of some of the houses on the Land and Property Services' dataset of vacant properties will also help inform revenue projections for the rating of vacant homes.

Ministerial Code

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) to detail the substance of his meeting with the Minister of Education and the Chair of the Committee for Education, on 3 December 2007; and (ii) to confirm whether or not he raised issues relating to the Ministerial Code with the Minister of Education. (AQW 2576/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: At the meeting involving the Chairman of the Education Committee on 3rd December, the Minister for Education indicated that she would be making a statement the following day on the issue of transfer to post primary schools. However, contrary to misleading, mischievous and distorted press comment from irresponsible individuals which were clearly motivated by narrow party political considerations the detail of the statement was not provided.

The Chair of the Committee for Education and I made clear our position that any future arrangements would require to leave open the option of academic selection to obtain the support of our party. This is required because of the success of the DUP in achieving amendments to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 contained within the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006.

This is in contrast to the arrangements under the last Assembly and Executive, negotiated by the Ulster Unionist Party, where Ministers had considerable latitude to take significant and controversial decisions. The new Statutory Ministerial Code as approved by the Northern Ireland Assembly on 20th March requires the Executive to agree a way forward on such matters in order for decisions to be taken. The Minister for Education is aware of this position and has indicated the need for Executive decisions on this matter.

In particular in this case the Ministerial Code is relevant to decisions that remain to be taken rather than a statement of the Education Minister's vision on the way forward.

Underspend

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the amount of underspend in relation to (i) resource expenditure; and (ii) capital expenditure, at the end of each of the last five financial years. (AQW 2581/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The following table sets out the level of departmental resource and capital underspending in each of the last five financial years.

	£m 2003-04	£m 2004-05	£m 2005-06	£m 2006-07	£m 2007-08
Resource	160.3	117.9	150.6	158.8	53.7
Capital	170.0	171.9	227.5	96.7	114.6

The figures are based on the provisional outturn provided by departments, except in the case of 2007-08. The figures for 2007-08 are the latest forecast underspends provided by departments, which is based on spend to the end of November 2007.

Over-Committed Expenditure

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the amount of expenditure that was over-committed in the budget, in relation to (i) resource expenditure; and (ii) capital expenditure, in each of the last five financial years. (AQW 2583/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The table below details the amount of resource expenditure and capital investment overcommitment in each of the last five financial years. For each year, the level of overcommitment was then subject to revisions during the in-year monitoring process, reducing the flexibility to reallocate resources in-year.

	£m 2003-04	£m 2004-05	£m 2005-06	£m 2006-07	£m 2007-08
	Budget 2002	Budget 2003	Budget 2004	Budget 2005	
Resource	-130.6	-158.2	-149.8	-130.3	-148.6
Capital	-16.7	-20.1	-98.6	-176.6	-171.1

Procurement Process

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm that the consideration of social outcomes will form part of the procurement process to ensure the delivery of equality and sustainability. (AQW 2611/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Procurement Board has recently approved guidance on Equality of Opportunity and Sustainable Development in Public Sector Procurement. The guidance will assist policy makers, service providers and procurement practitioners to deliver positive social, economic and environmental outcomes via the procurement process and to more effectively take account of existing statutory duties related to equality and sustainable development.

The guidance is due to be published in the New Year.

Unpaid Rates

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline what action is being taken by his department to recover unpaid rates. (AQW 2617/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: From 1 April 2007 Land and Property Services have issued 78,000 final notices for unpaid rates. Just over 7,500 court processes have also been issued to secure payment. Land and Property Services continue to robustly pursue unpaid rates.

Industrial Derating Policy

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make a statement in relation to the future of industrial derating policy. (AQW 2658/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: During the debate on the draft budget on 25 October 2007, I announced that I was minded to hold industrial rates at 30% liability over the CSR period, ie until the end of March 2011. On 18 December 2007 the Executive ratified my decision and the Committee for Finance and Personnel also endorsed it. A statutory rule to give effect to the decision will be made soon by way of an Order subject to affirmative resolution. If the Assembly approves the statutory rule, the revised percentage can take effect from the start of the new billing year in April 2008.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Budget Allocations

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any analysis his department has undertaken of budget allocations relating to other departments, with a view to identifying monies that could be re-allocated to his department. (AQW 2226/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Departmental officials have not carried out any detailed analysis of other Department's budgets with a view to identifying monies that could be re-allocated other than to consider the comparison of expenditure per head on various NI programmes as published in the HMT Public Expenditure Statistical Analysis (PESA).

It is for the Executive to decide how to revise the budget allocations, following consultation responses on the draft Budget.

Health Service Productivity

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment he has made of the productivity of the health service in Northern Ireland, in comparison with the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQW 2279/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: An accurate measurement of productivity, in a complex business area such as the provision of health and social care, is far from straightforward. Aside from issues concerned with adequately capturing the total volume of activity which takes place in a diverse range of settings, and taking into account the changing skill mix of the workforce, any robust productivity measure must also take into account changes in the quality of services. My Department is currently taking work forward on all of these fronts with the UK Centre for the Measurement of Government Activity (UKCeMGA) who are at the leading edge of developments in the measurement of Government productivity.

Based on the work of the Appleby Review there is an assessed workforce productivity gap of 11% between hospital services here and in England. However this figure requires further work and there are many possible reasons for this, including the scale and distribution of hospitals here.

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 4 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.

Fire and Rescue Service: False Alarm Calls

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of false alarms received by the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service in the last five years. (AQW 2424/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below shows the number of

false alarm calls received by the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service over the previous five years.

Year	Mobilised	Non Mobilised
2002 / 2003	12032	20938
2003 / 2004	12555	22229
2004 / 2005	12317	20528
2005 / 2006	12040	20010
2006 / 2007	11920	20564

Fire and Rescue Service: False Alarm Calls

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what action he is taking to reduce the number of false alarms received by the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service.

(AQW 2425/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Fire and Rescue Service is committed to reducing the number of false alarms by taking forward a range of interactive programmes within local communities and the public and private sectors. These include:

- **The Local Intervention Fire Education [LIFE] Scheme** - a 5 day development programme for 14 – 19 year olds delivered by NIFRS at local Fire stations. One of the main aims of the scheme is to build a better understanding between young people within our community and NIFRS personnel.
- **Safety Team** [8 – 9 year olds] & **Firestorm** [12 – 13 year olds] - Educational Fire Safety packages delivered in Schools across NI.
- **Cadet Scheme** - a voluntary youth scheme within Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service, aiming to provide a varied and interesting programme of fire and rescue activities for young people, raise awareness of the activities of the Service and instill a sense of community spirit.
- **Joint initiatives** - With British Telecom, NI Ambulance Service and PSNI aimed at highlighting the dangers to the community as a consequence of making false alarm calls.
- **Call challenging** - Regional Control Centre personnel will challenge callers believed to be giving hoax calls.
- **Management of Unwanted Fire Signals Policy** - aimed at reducing the growing number of false alarms due to Automatic Fire Alarm Systems apparatus.

Management Structures in Health and Social Care Trusts

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the Health and Social Care Trusts that have arrangements in place for an Allied Health Professional Representative to be included in their management structures at tier three level or higher, as directed by his department in correspondence with all Trusts in September 2007.

(AQW 2432/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: To date the position is that, in all five Trusts, a director (second tier) has been designated as having a co-ordinating responsibility for Allied Health Professional (AHP) services. In addition:

- The Southern Trust has two AHPs at tier 3 level, one leading on governance and workforce development, the other as Assistant Director of Primary Care.
- The Belfast Trust has a third tier Co-director for Therapy and Therapeutic services, who is not an AHP. The intention is that the heads of each therapy profession will participate in a Trust clinical advisory forum.
- The South East Trust has actively engaged AHPs in determining the proposed structure and following consultation will shortly be appointing an AHP lead at 3rd tier level.
- In the Northern Trust, a number of third tier posts were open to applications from AHP managers but none were successful in the appointments process. A professional forum has now been established within Trust, chaired by the Chief Executive, to ensure appropriate advice is available from all professions.
- The Western Trust has recently agreed their AHP structure with the professions and will shortly be appointing an AHP lead who will report directly to the Executive Director with responsibility for AHP service on all professional matters.

The Department will be writing to the Trust Chief Executives to make sure this issue is addressed.

Mental-Health Unit for Children and Teenagers at Forster Green Hospital

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (i) make a statement on the continuing planning delays surrounding the project to create a mental health unit for children and teenagers at Forster Green Hospital; (ii) provide a timescale for the completion of the project; and (iii) detail how far the project is behind schedule.

(AQW 2436/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am pleased to inform you that outline planning permission has now been granted for the Regional Adolescent Mental Health Inpatient Unit and the Child and Family Centre at Forster Green. Although there has been a lengthy planning process, work has been progressing in parallel, namely:

- alterations to a former residential unit to create decant accommodation for the existing Children's Unit;
- the issue of tender documentation for the demolition of the existing buildings on the site;
- preparation of contract documentation for the construction of the new facilities; and
- selection of a main contractor for the project.

The Trust's decision to proceed with this work in parallel has meant that no delay to the overall project programme has been caused by the planning process.

It is anticipated that the demolition of the existing buildings will be complete in April 2008 and that construction of the new buildings will commence in May 2008. The Regional Adolescent Mental Health Inpatient Unit and the Child and Family Centre therefore remain on course for completion in July 2009 and January 2010 respectively.

Annual Leave Entitlement for Medical Consultants

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the annual leave entitlement for medical consultants, compared to other health staff. (AQW 2454/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Consultants employed on a full-time contract within the Health and Social Care, with less than seven years service are entitled to 30 days annual leave per year. This increases to 32 days annual leave per year once seven or more year's service is completed. In addition two statutory holidays may, by local agreement, be converted into annual leave. Where this happens this would equate to 32 days annual leave for consultants with up to seven years service and 34 days for consultants with seven or more years service.

Non-medical staff, employed on Agenda for Change arrangements, are entitled to 27 days annual leave per year on appointment. After 5 year's service this increases to 29 days and after 10 year's service is further increased to 33 days annual leave per year.

These annual leave entitlements are in addition to ten public holidays each year.

Agenda for Change

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the savings that have been made under the Agenda for Change.

(AQW 2455/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Agenda for Change pay agreement is designed to address equal pay issues and to assist in delivering improvements to the Health and Social Care service for patients and staff. These areas of improvement include, redesigning services around patients with extended service at evenings and weekends, additional service input, higher quality care, designing the right jobs, boosting recruitment and retention, greater flexibility in the use of staff and reduced administration.

Fourth Report by the Capitation Formula Review Group

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm when the recommendations of the Fourth Report by the Capitation Formula Review Group will be fully implemented; and to detail the amount of (i) under-funding; and (ii) over-funding, in each Health and Social Services Board, in the current financial year.

(AQW 2456/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Fourth Review of the Formula recommended that the component formulae for Acute Services and Elderly Care be updated. The proposed changes will be released for public consultation in 2008. Changes to this position will need to be phased over several years.

In 2007/08, after £12m was allocated to reduce under funding, the four HSS Boards were assessed as being the following distances from their target fair shares.

Health and Social Services Board	2007/08 Distance from Target Share.
Eastern Board	£22.7m over funded
Northern Board	£8.4m under funded
Southern Board	£7.9m under funded
Western Board	£6.4m under funded

A Fifth Review is underway and if a new formula is introduced funding gaps will need to be recalculated.

Multiple Sclerosis Sufferers

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the

provision of physiotherapy treatment for multiple sclerosis sufferers. (AQW 2458/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Physiotherapy is available in hospitals and in a range of settings in the community for those patients assessed as requiring physiotherapy, including those with multiple sclerosis.

Physiotherapy services available in Health and Social Care Trusts provide assessment, treatment and care for people with multiple sclerosis, either in out-patient and day care settings or in the patient's own home, depending on their individual needs.

Fire and Rescue Service

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to ensure that the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service will receive the necessary funding to enable it to deliver its service to the highest standards. (AQW 2489/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: You will be aware that since the publication of this Draft Budget, I have highlighted the difference in the long term funding for health, social services and public safety here and in England and the failure of this budget to provide resources for DHSSPS that are adequate to deliver services that match those in the rest of the UK.

There are a range of essential priorities which I have to address across key public services and given the very limited additional funding which my Department has been allocated in the Draft Budget means that difficult choices will have to be made.

The Draft Budget is the subject of ongoing consultation and I will continue to strenuously press the case for adequate resources to be provided for the Fire and Rescue Service.

Pharmacy Regulations

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to ensure that regulations in relation to pharmacies are made by his department rather than by Westminster. (AQW 2492/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The regulation of pharmaceutical services is a devolved matter and all current regulations concerned with the delivery of these services have been made under the terms of the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972. Any amendments to the regulations would be taken forward through the Northern Ireland Assembly legislative process.

Fire and Rescue Service Call Outs

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of call outs by the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service; (ii) the nature of these call outs; and (iii) the number of hoax calls, broken down by parliamentary constituency, over the last three years. (AQW 2510/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is shown in the three Tables below. The data relate to Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) mobilised incidents for the last three years - 2004/5, 2005/6 and 2006/7. NIFRS does not record information on a Parliamentary constituency basis. The information has been provided by mapping information held to reflect as far as possible a constituency based answer. As such it cannot be assumed to be totally accurate for each constituency.

TABLE 1. NIFRS MOBILISED INCIDENTS 2004/5

Constituency	CF	EX	FDA	FG	FM	MF	SB	SF	SSC	TE	Total
BelfastEast	9	1	539	156	76	210	3	887	74	44	1999
BelfastNorth	12	4	433	175	130	339	7	939	113	50	2202
BelfastSouth	14	2	1334	285	230	645	20	1280	168	49	4027
BelfastWest	5		408	163	110	428	6	746	51	53	1970
EastAntrim	72	2	198	97	54	140		363	44	2	972
EastLondonderry	90	1	301	159	108	244	5	754	61	4	1727
FermanaghandSouthTyrone	196	2	443	129	64	315	2	756	110	7	2024
Foyle	85	1	890	192	152	422	120	531	118	60	2571
Laganvalley	67		316	130	25	166	21	262	75	43	1105

Constituency	CF	EX	FDA	FG	FM	MF	SB	SF	SSC	TE	Total
MidUlster	66		176	52	19	131	5	164	70	12	695
NorthAntrim	103		284	130	67	191	2	438	81	35	1331
NorthDown	111	1	302	139	65	169	4	420	67	24	1302
NewryandArmagh	53		298	288	150	346	19	956	134	33	2277
SouthAntrim	45	1	634	199	113	320	1	924	99	10	2346
SouthDown	86		314	206	148	223	17	1200	93	8	2295
Strangford	78		206	140	59	156		554	79	9	1281
UpperBann	72	1	346	157	81	301	8	566	118	17	1667
WestTyrone	122		290	93	63	197	1	473	65	15	1319
Total	1286	16	7712	2890	1714	4943	241	12213	1620	475	33110

TABLE 2.NIFRS MOBILISED INCIDENTS 2005/6

Constituency	CF	EX	FDA	FG	FM	MF	SB	SF	SSC	TE	Total
BelfastEast	14	4	541	135	66	228	9	681	70	82	1830
BelfastNorth	4	3	411	167	103	290	10	1050	88	42	2168
BelfastSouth	18	6	1430	293	199	640	13	1323	157	59	4138
BelfastWest	9	1	409	178	107	438	15	798	90	29	2074
EastAntrim	63	1	252	95	29	135	3	371	68		1017
EastLondonderry	102	1	352	146	70	202		539	65		1477
FermanaghandSouthTyrone	185	2	428	140	57	311	1	650	116	10	1900
Foyle	90	4	784	193	124	404	82	606	110	47	2444
LaganValley	64		285	133	29	138	6	240	92	27	1014
MidUlster	63	2	176	66	29	162		183	49	1	731
NewryandArmagh	65		305	220	94	318	10	937	148	16	2113
NorthAntrim	133	1	323	108	43	235		455	89	25	1412
NorthDown	105	1	284	138	62	203	1	480	52	49	1375
SouthAntrim	62	1	665	176	93	340		729	107	12	2185
SouthDown	110		278	224	114	220	5	1111	100	7	2169
Strangford	71	1	210	128	30	149		506	63	12	1170
UpperBann	76		370	163	62	282	5	446	72	29	1505
WestTyrone	120		350	90	83	180	1	397	58	6	1285
Total	1354	28	7853	2793	1394	4875	161	11502	1594	453	32007

TABLE 3.NIFRS MOBILISED INCIDENTS 2006/7

Constituency	CF	EX	FDA	FG	FM	MF	SB	SF	SSC	TE	Total
BelfastEast	6	4	523	147	58	174	2	635	91	39	1679
BelfastNorth	4		454	160	97	279	6	861	97	44	2002
BelfastSouth	15	2	1257	333	189	566	9	1280	174	70	3895
BelfastWest	6		423	169	75	439	7	916	79	32	2146
EastAntrim	60	3	264	134	25	127		534	74		1221
EastLondonderry	113		367	139	72	203	3	530	88	1	1516
FermanaghandSouthTyrone	142	2	376	141	72	311	5	647	134	2	1832
Foyle	84	3	804	205	119	382	81	645	123	43	2489

Constituency	CF	EX	FDA	FG	FM	MF	SB	SF	SSC	TE	Total
LaganValley	54		312	105	33	151	5	247	72	29	1008
MidUlster	56		179	45	25	156	8	195	72	1	737
NewryandArmagh	48		293	240	82	306	11	1088	119	24	2211
NorthAntrim	117	2	328	114	65	227	10	430	82	29	1404
NorthDown	101	1	305	154	37	169	2	390	65	18	1242
SouthAntrim	43	2	606	212	70	329	8	865	133	13	2281
SouthDown	71	1	335	193	93	228	2	1162	101		2186
Strangford	63	1	267	127	47	125	1	478	96	8	1213
UpperBann	81	1	381	153	65	298	5	710	95	29	1818
WestTyrone	113	1	287	109	55	165	2	486	85		1303
Total	1177	23	7761	2880	1279	4635	167	12099	1780	382	32183

Table Key

CF - Chimney Fire

EX - Exercise

FDA - False Alarm due to Apparatus [Mainly automatic alarm systems]

FG - False Alarm good intent.

FM - False Alarm Malicious [Hoax calls]

MF - Major Fire.

SF - Secondary Fires

SB - Standby incidents

SSC - Special Service Calls [Road Traffic Accidents, flooding, chemicals, other rescues etc.]

TE - Test

Funding for Community Organisations

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list all community organisations in South Belfast that received funding from the Eastern Health and Social Services Board, or the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, in the last two financial years. (AQW 2516/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The community organisations in South Belfast who received funding from the Eastern Health and Social Services Board in 2005/06 and 2006/07 were as follows:

HIV Support Centre
NI Chest Heart & Stroke Assoc
Chinese Welfare Assoc
Diabetes UK
Eating Disorder Assoc
Family Planning Assoc
Headway
NEXUS
NIACRO
NIAMH
RETHINK
PAPA
Parent Advice Centre
Relate

Ireland Special Olympics
Cedar Foundation
VOYPIC
Women's Aid
South Belfast Partnership Board
Windsor Women's Centre
NIPPA
Engage with Age
Oasis

In addition to the above, the Eastern Health and Social Services Board also gave funding to the following additional community groups in 2006/07:

Lorag
South Belfast Highway to Health
Cruse
British Red Cross
Action Cancer
Contact Youth
NICAS

The community organisations in South Belfast who received funding from the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (formally the South East Community Health and Social Services Trust) in 2005/06 and 2006/07 were as follows:

	Funded 2005/06	Funded 2006/07
ACET	x	<input type="checkbox"/>
Action Mental Health	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Age Concern	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Alzheimers Society	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Arthritis Care	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Autism	<input type="checkbox"/>	x
Aware Defeat Depression	x	<input type="checkbox"/>
Barnardos	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Belfast Carers Centre	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Belfast City Council	x	<input type="checkbox"/>
Belfast Womens Aid	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
BIFHE	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Blind Centre	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bryson House	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Carers Grant	<input type="checkbox"/>	x
Carers Respite	x	<input type="checkbox"/>
Caring Breaks Ltd	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
CAUSE	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cedar Foundation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Chinese Welfare Association	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Citizens Advice Bureau	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Contact Youth Council	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Contact Youth	x	<input type="checkbox"/>
Crossroads	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
CRUSE	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Currie Community		<input type="checkbox"/>
Data Link Reprographics	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dial-A-Bus	x	<input type="checkbox"/>
Drumalis	x	<input type="checkbox"/>
Edgecumbe Club for VisuallyImpaired	<input type="checkbox"/>	x
Engage with age	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Extern	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Extra Care	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Families in Contact	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Family Mediation N.I.	x	<input type="checkbox"/>
Glenluce Quality Care	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Glenluce Carers Centre	<input type="checkbox"/>	x
Harmony Community Trust	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Funded 2005/06	Funded 2006/07
Headway Belfast	x	<input type="checkbox"/>
Include Youth	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Jigsaw	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lagan Village Home	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lee Hestra Association Novas Group	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Mencap	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Newtownbreda Church	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Mencap Society	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
NIDementia Forum	<input type="checkbox"/>	x
NI Music Therapy	<input type="checkbox"/>	x
MS Society	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
NI Attention Deficit Disorder	<input type="checkbox"/>	x
N I Deaf Youth Association	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
N.I. Ass for Mlth Health	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
N.I. Chest, Heart &Stroke	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Nexus	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
NHS Retirement Fellowship	<input type="checkbox"/>	x
NIAMH	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
NICAS	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
NIPPA	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
NSPCC	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Opportunity Youth	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Orchardville Society	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
PAPA	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Praxis Care Group	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reconnect	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
RNIB	<input type="checkbox"/>	x
Rethink (National Schiz Fellowship)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Royal National Institute for the Deaf	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
S & E Belfast Crossroads Care	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Salvation Army	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Senior Citizen Clubs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Shopmobility	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
SpeechMatters	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Starting Point	<input type="checkbox"/>	x
South Belfast Partnerships	<input type="checkbox"/>	x
South Belfast Highway to Health	<input type="checkbox"/>	x
Sure Start South	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Funded 2005/06	Funded 2006/07
The Hopefuls	□	x
VSB	□	□
Windsor Women's Centre	□	□

Residential Placement Delays

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area who have been detained in hospital because there was no residential home place available, for each of the last 12 months. (AQW 2517/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Western Health and Social Care Trust Patients Delayed in Hospital waiting on a Residential Placement – 1st January – 19th December 2007

	Private Residential Home	Western Trust Statutory Residential Home	Private EMI Residential Home
Jan-07	2	2	1
Feb-07	1	1	0
Mar-07	1	1	0
Apr-07	0	3	0
May-07	2	0	0
Jun-07	3	1	0
Jul-07	3	3	0
Aug-07	3	2	0
Sep-07	1	1	0
Oct-07	2	2	2
Nov-07	2	0	2
Dec-07	0	2	2

Psychosis

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of adults and children who have been diagnosed with psychosis in the last three years. (AQW 2519/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of adults and children who have been diagnosed with psychosis in the last three years is not available. However, information on the total number of people registered with a Mental Illness (including people with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder

and other psychoses) is available from the dataset used to administer the Quality & Outcomes Framework (QOF) of the General Medical Services contract. In January 2007 the total number of people registered with a Mental Illness was 13,665. This equates to a prevalence of 7.53 per 1,000 of population.

Oesophageal Cancer

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the occupations of those who have been diagnosed with oesophageal cancer in the last five years. (AQW 2522/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Cancer Registry does not hold occupation information for diagnosed cancers. However General Register Office (GRO) death data has an occupation field. As oesophageal cancer has poor survival rates, death information should give a good reflection of the occupation mix of patients.

The table below gives the number of deaths registered between 2002 and 2006 where the underlying cause of death was recorded as 'Malignant neoplasm of the oesophagus' (International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision code C15) by Standard Occupational Classification.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF DEATHS REGISTERED IN NORTHERN IRELAND FROM CANCER OF THE OESOPHAGUS BY STANDARD OCCUPATIONAL CLASSIFICATION, 2002-2006

Standard Occupational Classification Groups ¹	Registration Year 2002-6
1 Managers and senior officials	47
2 Professional occupations	38
3 Associate professional and technical occupations	55
4 Administrative and secretarial occupations	41
5 Skilled trades occupations	169
6 Personal service occupations	13
7 Sales and customer service occupations	13
8 Process, plant and machine operatives	87
9 Elementary occupations	98
Not classified ²	217
All deaths from cancer of the oesophagus	778

Notes:

¹ Occupations recorded on death certificates are coded using Standard Occupational Classification 2000 version (SOC2000).

² Prior to 2006 for married or widowed women who died only their husband's occupation was classified to the standard occupational classification, therefore for these deaths the occupation has been recorded as not classified.

Ambulance Cover in the Ards Peninsula Area

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm (i) that the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service is using a jeep as an ambulance for the Ards Peninsula area; and (ii) that an ambulance, rather than a jeep, would be called out to any accidents in this area. (AQW 2523/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) has advised that single-paramedic Rapid Response Vehicles (RRVs) are based at Newtownards and Bangor Ambulance Stations. NIAS deploys the nearest resource to emergency calls and, in some cases, this is a RRV. RRVs are equipped to the same standard as patient-carrying A&E ambulances to provide emergency care and treatment. However, an A&E ambulance is always deployed simultaneously with an RRV to emergency calls to enable the patient to be transported to hospital if necessary.

Bamford 1 and 2

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the reasons why his Department's bids, entitled 'Bamford 1 and 2', include spending on new builds, rather than on measures to encourage patients back into their own homes and communities, as recommended in the report. (AQW 2524/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department's bids 'Bamford 1 and 2' did not include spending on new build.

Food Safety Promotion Board

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the expenditure committed to the Food Safety Promotion Board in the Northern Ireland block grant in each financial year since it was established; and to detail the proposed expenditure as outlined by the draft Budget. (AQW 2551/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Expenditure committed to the Food safety Promotion Board in the NI block grant in each financial year it was established.

2001/2002	£ 1,500,000
2002/2003	£ 1,251,500
2003/2004	£ 1,598,000
2004/2005	£ 1,824,000

2005/2006	£ 1,849,000
2006/2007	£ 2,083,000
2007/2008	£ 1,938,000

PROPOSED EXPENDITURE OUTLINED IN THE DRAFT BUDGET 2008-2011

2008/2009	£2,000,000
2009/2010	£2,100,000
2010/2011	£2,200,000

Details of the proposed expenditure are included in FSPB draft corporate plan 2008-10. The draft corporate plan has not yet been formally approved and is with the Department of Finance and Personnel for comment.

Ballymena Fire Station

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that no cuts will be made to the number of whole time firefighters based at Ballymena Fire Station. (AQW 2555/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am unable to confirm that cuts will not be made to the number of wholetime Firefighters based at Ballymena Fire Station.

The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service Chief Fire Officer has day to day responsibility for the manning levels of the organisation. The Chief Fire Officer has advised that the proposed budget allocation for Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service over the next 3 years will mean that he will need to keep wholetime Firefighter numbers under constant review right across Northern Ireland.

Braid Valley Health and Care Centre

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what priority he is giving to the Braid Valley Health and Care Centre; and to confirm whether or not the new centre will be open by 2010. (AQW 2556/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The proposed new Health and Care Centre at the Braid Valley site in Ballymena is included in the new Primary and Community Care Infrastructure Programme. This project has been identified as a top priority by the Northern Health and Social Services Board and the Northern Health and Social Care Trust in this new programme of investment and is one of the five initial projects for which business cases are currently being assessed by the Department. Subject to business case approval, which is anticipated

for early in the New Year, and the availability of the requisite capital and revenue resources to be confirmed in the current draft Comprehensive Spending Review it is expected that the new facility will be completed and ready to deliver services in early 2011.

Draft Budget

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) his reasons for selecting and prioritising the five projects named in the draft Budget; and (ii) the criteria that were applied in this process. (AQW 2559/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The projects named in the draft Budget 2008-2011 are examples of the key developments to be funded as part of the continuation of Health's major hospital modernisation and primary and community care reform programmes. All of the developments listed have already commenced and have been prioritised on the basis that they are contractual commitments.

The draft budget has not provided Health with the level of capital expected, and the constraints on the budget for 2008-2011 mean that most of the budget is taken up with projects which are currently contractually committed.

Health Strategy

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the reasons for placing mental health 17th on his list of priorities within the health strategy. (AQW 2560/08)

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 inescapable pressures and service development needs.

By definition the inescapable bids relate to unavoidable pressures. These pressures have to be funded if cuts in service provision are to be avoided and as such there is no priority ranking of these. They represented the first 16 bids from my 50 as to maintain services at existing levels and meet existing commitments.

Within the draft budget for consultation, my Department has only £16m/£32m/£97m available to meet service developments after the inescapable pressures of £236m/£460m/£700m have been met.

In terms of the service developments mental health and learning disability is my highest priority and is ranked first.

Recruitment and Retention Payments

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not he will extend recruitment and retention payments to include maintenance and craft workers.

(AQW 2571/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A national recruitment and retention premium is payable, under the Agenda for Change agreement, to qualified maintenance crafts persons and qualified maintenance technicians working in the Health and Social Care; who require full electrical, plumbing or mechanical crafts qualifications in order to do their job. There are no plans at present to extend this national premia to other staff groups working in the Health and Social Care.

Health and Care Centres

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the process by which the five new health and care centres, listed for opening by 2011 in the draft Investment Strategy, were prioritised; and to confirm what priority was given for the new facility at the Braid Valley site in Ballymena.

(AQW 2586/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The five new Health & Care Centres listed for opening by 2011 in the draft Investment Strategy are projects which have already commenced procurement and construction and which will complete in the next budget period. They have been prioritised on the basis that they are contractual commitments, and therefore must continue to be funded.

The proposed new integrated, modern Health and Care Centre at the Braid Valley site in Ballymena is included in the new Primary and Community Care Infrastructure Programme. This project has been identified as the top priority by the Northern Health and Social Services Board and Northern Health and Social Care Trust in this new programme of investment.

IVF Treatment

Mr Brady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the reasons why the waiting list for patients from the Southern Health and Social Services Board area to receive IVF treatment in the regional fertility centre, is longer than for patients from other health board areas; (ii) the action he is taking to reduce this waiting list; and (iii) the plans he has to ensure that all patients have equal access to this service. (AQW 2592/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The funding available for fertility treatment is allocated to the four Health and Social Services Boards on an equitable basis using the Department's capitation formula. It is then the responsibility of each Board to commission, within its allocation, an appropriate number and balance of treatments/procedures for patients within their Board area. Waiting lists are managed in strict chronological order within each Board area.

Following the debate in the Assembly on 25 October I agreed to review the criteria within which patients access fertility treatment. This review will also look at how waiting lists are managed.

Suspension of Northern Ireland Ambulance Service Personnel

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the recent suspension of Northern Ireland Ambulance Service personnel in Derry/Londonderry. (AQW 2593/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are no suspensions of Ambulance personnel currently within the Derry / Londonderry area. However, I understand that the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) has suspended two ambulance personnel working from the Regional Emergency Medical Dispatch Centre (REMDC) in Belfast in line with agreed disciplinary procedures. The ensuing internal investigation is a matter for NIAS.

Hospital Waiting Times

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide details of (i) the average cost of sending a patient, who has been on a waiting list for six months and over, to other parts of the United Kingdom for treatment; and (ii) the average cost of bringing a consultant to Northern Ireland for the purpose of performing a number of procedures locally. (AQW 2596/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There has been a significant improvement in hospital waiting times over the last two years. At the end of March 2006, there were 74,000 people waiting over six months for a first outpatient appointment, and 6,600 patients waiting over six months for inpatient or daycase treatment. By March 2007, only 32 patients were waiting over six months for an outpatient appointment, and one for inpatient or daycase treatment. This transformation has been achieved through the implementation of a comprehensive

programme of reform together with investment in additional capacity, including the transfer of some patients to independent sector providers in Northern Ireland and other parts of the United Kingdom.

The cost to commissioners of sending a patient for treatment to a provider outside Northern Ireland varies depending on the type of procedure and the patient's individual circumstances. It can range from some £1,000 for day case procedures to as much as £15,000 for more complex procedures such as cardiac surgery. There may also be additional travel and accommodation costs for patients and their relatives.

In relation to the cost of bringing a consultant to Northern Ireland to perform surgery, this is a matter between individual consultants and their employing organisation and the Department does not have details of such costs.

Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2214/08, to detail (i) the date of each failure to comply notice; (ii) the details of each notice; and (iii) the name of the establishment and individual involved. (AQW 2597/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is provided in the table below.

Name of Home/ Provider	Date of notice	Details of 'Failure to comply' notice
King's Castle Nursing Home, Mrs SV Ward, Messana Investment Ltd (2 issues)	May 2005	The Nursing Home Regulations (NI) 2005 Regulation 13(4) - control of medication Regulation 13(4) - control of medication
Clairville Residential Care Home; Mrs V Reid (4 issues)	July 2005	The Residential Care Home Regulations (NI) 2005 Regulation 27(4) - fire safety Regulation 20(1)(a) - staffing Regulation 18(2)(a) - infection control Regulation 13 (4) - storage, control and administration of medicine

Name of Home/ Provider	Date of notice	Details of 'Failure to comply' notice
Bangor Care (Nursing) Home McKeown Suite , Audrey Lockhead, Four Seasons (6 issues)	December 2005	The Nursing Home Regulations (NI) 2005 Regulation 13(4)(b) - administration of medication as prescribed Regulation 12(1) - to provide treatment to meet individual needs Regulation 18(2)(c) - to provide adequate floor coverings Regulation 18(2)(i) - to maintain satisfactory standards of hygiene Regulation 18(2)(n) - to provide activities Regulation 20(b) - to ensure that temporary staff provide continuity of nursing.
Greenville Manor Nursing Home , Audrey Lockhead, Four Seasons (4 issues)	April 2006	The Nursing Home Regulations (NI) 2005 Regulation 13, 20 - to ensure nursing staff demonstrate competent nursing skills in relation to a patient's needs Regulation 15(2) - to ensure an assessment of patient's needs is kept under review Regulation 13 - to adequately assess the effect of medication on a patient Regulation 16 - to maintain a written nursing plan which reflects the patients' needs
Cromore House Nursing Home , Audrey Lockhead, Four Seasons (16 issues)	September 2006	The Nursing Home Regulations (NI) 2005 Regulation 13(4) - storage, control and administration of medicine Regulation 19(1) - maintenance of patients' records (medicines) Regulation 20(1)(c)(i) - training of staff (medicines) Regulation 15(1)(a), (b) - assessment of patients Regulation 15(1)(a), 15(2)(a) - falls risk assessment Regulation 16 - quality of care planning Regulation 12(1)(a), (b) - patients receiving treatment as appropriate from professional Regulation 13(1)(b) - supervision of patients Regulation 14(3) - moving and handling assessments Regulation 19(2)(a) - maintenance of records (nursing) Regulation 18(2)(m), (n)(i) - activity programmes Regulation 20(1)(a) - staffing levels Regulation 17 - care quality reviews

Name of Home/ Provider	Date of notice	Details of 'Failure to comply' notice
		Regulation 14(2)(c) - management of risk Regulation 20(1)(c)(iii) - staff training - care Regulation 13(3) - consultation with residents regarding care/wishes
Gallagher House Residential Care Home , Irene Sloan, Praxis Care (2 issues)	March 2007	The Residential Care Home Regulations (NI) 2005 Regulation 27 - fitness of premises Regulation 20(1)(c)(i), 13(4) - storage, control and administration of medicine
Armagh Care (Nursing) Home , Audrey Lockhead, Four Seasons (14 issues)	March 2007	The Nursing Home Regulations (NI) 2005 Regulation 12(1)(a),(b) - care practices to meet individual needs Regulation 12(4)(a) - food and fluids Regulation 13(1)(b) - health and welfare of patients Regulation 13(8) - privacy and dignity Regulation 14(2)(c) - management of risk - patient's health and safety Regulation 14(3) - assessment of moving and handling of patients Regulation 14(4) - staff training - protection of vulnerable adults from abuse, and whistle-blowing Regulation 14(5), 14(6) - restraint - arrangements, reports pertaining to patients being restrained Regulation 15(2)(a),(b) - assessment of patients Regulation 16(2)(b) - arrangements for care planning Regulation 18(n)(i),(ii) - training for activity therapist, and planned activities provided Regulation 18(2)(j) - keep home free from offensive odours Regulation 20 (1)(a),(b) - suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons working in home Regulation 27(4)(a),(b) - adequate precautions against risk of fire
Ashbrooke Nursing Home , Pauline McKeever, Southern Cross (2 issues)	April 2007	The Nursing Home Regulations (NI) 2005 Regulation 13(4) - storage, control and administration of medicine Regulation 20(3) - to ensure that at all times a nurse is working at the nursing home and that the registered manager carries out a competency and a capability assessment with any nurse who is given responsibility of being in charge of a home for any period of time in their absence

Name of Home/ Provider	Date of notice	Details of 'Failure to comply' notice
Templemoyle Nursing Home , Pauline McKeever, Southern Cross (1 issue)	April 2007	The Nursing Home Regulations (NI) 2005 Regulation 13(4) - storage, control and administration of medicine
Ardlough Nursing Home , Audrey Lockhead, Four Seasons (1 issue)	April 2007	The Nursing Home Regulations (NI) 2005 Regulation 30(1)(g) - to report any allegation of misconduct by the registered person or any person who works at the nursing home
Drumragh Nursing Home , Audrey Lockhead, Four Seasons (4 issues)	April 2007	The Nursing Home Regulations (NI) 2005 Regulation 18(2)(n)(i)(ii) - to ensure where activities are provided there are arrangements to ensure that they are planned and provided with regard to the needs of the patients; and patients are consulted Regulation 13(1)(a)(b) - to ensure that the nursing home is conducted to promote and make proper provision for the nursing, health and welfare of patients and make proper provision for the nursing and where appropriate, treatment and supervision of patients Regulation 20(1)(a) - to ensure that at all times suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons are working at the nursing home in such numbers as are appropriate for the health and welfare of patients Regulation 30(1)(d) - to give notice to RQIA of any event in the nursing home which adversely affects the well-being or safety of any patient
Greenville Manor Nursing Home , Audrey Lockhead, Four Seasons (6 issues)	April 2007	The Nursing Home Regulations (NI) 2005 Regulation 20(1)(a),(2) - to ensure suitably qualified, competent and experienced staffing, and to ensure appropriate staff supervision Regulation 12(4)(a),(b) - to ensure food and fluids are provided with adequate quantities and at appropriate intervals and are properly prepared, wholesome and nutritious Regulation 14(2)(c) - to ensure unnecessary risks to health or safety of patients are identified and so far as possible eliminated Regulation 14(2)(d) - to ensure suitable arrangements for the training of persons employed in first aid Regulation 14(3) - to ensure suitable arrangements to provide a safe system for moving and handling patients

Name of Home/ Provider	Date of notice	Details of 'Failure to comply' notice
		Regulation 30(1)(a),(d) - to ensure notification to RQIA of occurrence of the death of a patient, or any event which adversely affects the well being and safety of any patient
Glenwood Residential Care Home , John Compton, SE Health and Social Care Trust (1 issue)	May 2007	The Residential Care Homes Regulations (NI) 2005 Regulation 12(5) - to ensure food and drink are provided in adequate quantities, at appropriate intervals, properly prepared, wholesome and nutritious, suitable for the needs of the residents, provide choice for the residents and the menu is varied at suitable intervals
Flaxfield Children's Home , John Compton, SE Health and Social Care Trust (5 issues)	May 2007	The Children's Home Regulations (NI) 2005 Regulation 28(1) - ensure a record of menus served is maintained at all times Regulation 24(1)(a),(b), 24(2) - ensure sufficient number of suitably qualified, competent and experienced staff employed Regulation 24(1),(2), 26(4)(a) - ensure appropriate induction, training and supervision of staff Regulation 29(1)(3) - to confirm all notifiable events are reported to RQIA in writing Regulation 31(a)-(e) - ensure fire safety arrangements in home
Barrhall Residential Care Home , Mr & Mrs B Muskett (1 issue)	June 2007	The Residential Care Homes Regulations (NI) 2005 Regulation 13(4) - storage, control and administration of medicine.
Domnall Nursing Home , Audrey Lockhead, Four Seasons (5 issues)	June 2007	The Nursing Home Regulations (NI) 2005 Regulation 13(4)(a) - storage, control and administration of medicine Regulation 13(7) - to ensure all areas of the home are clean Regulation 15(2)(a),(b) - to ensure risk assessments are carried out on all patients and preventative care plan put in place, and care records are regularly reviewed and evaluated Regulation 16(1), 16(2)(b) - to ensure that each patient has a care plan in place and that these are updated in accordance with their needs Regulation 20(1)(a), 20(2) - to ensure that at all times suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons are working in the home, and that proper supervision is in place

Name of Home/ Provider	Date of notice	Details of 'Failure to comply' notice
South Parade Residential Care Home, Mr I Emerson, (7 issues)	July 2007	<p>The Residential Care Homes Regulations (NI) 2005</p> <p>Regulation 20(1)(a),(2) – to ensure suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons are working in the home at all times and that the persons working in the home are appropriately supervised</p> <p>Regulation 14(2)(d) – to ensure suitable arrangements are made for the training of persons employed in first aid</p> <p>Regulation 30(1),(d) – to ensure notice is given to the RQIA of any serious injury to a resident or any event which adversely affects the care, health, welfare or safety of any resident</p> <p>Regulation 16(1) – to ensure that a written care plan is prepared in consultation with the resident or resident's representative to meet the resident's needs in respect of care, health and welfare</p> <p>Regulation 24(1),(3),(5) – to ensure that a procedure is established for receiving, managing and responding to complaints</p> <p>Regulation 13(1)(a),(b) – to ensure proper provision is made for the health and welfare of residents and their care, treatment and supervision</p> <p>Regulation 19(1)(a),(3),(6) – to ensure maintenance of records in respect of each resident and that records are available for inspection</p>
Mount Lens Nursing Home, Audrey Lockhead, Four Seasons (2 issues)	July 2007	<p>The Nursing Home Regulations (NI) 2005</p> <p>Regulation 13(4) – storage, control and administration of medicine</p> <p>Regulation 19(1)(a) – to ensure adequate record keeping</p>
Laurelhill Residential Home, John Compton, SE Health and Social Care Trust (1 issue)	July 2007	<p>The Residential Care Homes Regulations (NI) 2005</p> <p>Regulation 12(5) – to ensure that food and drink are provided in adequate quantities, at appropriate intervals, properly prepared wholesome, nutritious, suitable for needs of the residents, menu varied at suitable intervals</p>

Name of Home/ Provider	Date of notice	Details of 'Failure to comply' notice
Victoria Nursing Home, Dr & Mrs Lynass (6 issues)	July 2007	<p>The Nursing Home Regulations (NI) 2005</p> <p>Regulations 13(1)(a),(b) - to ensure proper provision for the nursing, health and welfare of patients</p> <p>Regulation 13(4) - Storage, control and administration of medicine</p> <p>Regulation 20(1)(a) - to ensure that at all times suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons are working in the nursing home</p> <p>Regulation 21(1)(a),(b),(c) - to review the home's policies and procedures in relation to recruitment and selection</p> <p>Regulation 21(4)(a),(b),(c) - to ensure persons employed are fit to work in the nursing home</p> <p>Regulation 27(2)(c) - to ensure equipment provided is in good working order and properly maintained</p>
Cherry Tree House Nursing Home, Dr D Harron (2 issues)	August 2007	<p>The Nursing Home Regulations (NI) 2005</p> <p>Regulation 13(4) - storage, control and administration of medicine</p> <p>Regulation 19(1)(a) - maintain a record of all patient medicines</p>
Dhu Varren House Children's Home, Norma Evans, Northern Health and Social Care Trust (1 issue)	October 2007	<p>The Children's Home Regulations (NI) 2005</p> <p>Regulation 4(b) - Statement of Purpose and registration</p>
Mount Lens Nursing Home, Audrey Lockhead, Four Seasons (1 issue)	December 2007	<p>The Nursing Home Regulations (NI) 2005</p> <p>Regulation 13(4) - Storage, control and administration of medicine</p>

Note: Failure to comply notice issued subsequent to response to AQW 2214/08

Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of providers of Day Care Settings, Residential Family Centres, Domiciliary Care and Adult Placement, that had applied for registration with the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority, by the deadline of 30 November 2007, in order to comply with Article 12 (1) of the Health and Personal Social Services (Quality,

Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003. (AQW 2598/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority had received 587 applications for the registration of Day Care Settings, Residential Family Centres, Domiciliary Care, and Adult Placement Agencies by 30 November 2007. The table below provides a breakdown of these applications by service category:

Applications from Managers of Services	425
- Domiciliary Care Agencies	178
- Day Care Settings	236
- Residential Family Centres	3
- Adult Placement Agencies	8
Applications from Responsible Persons (Providers who are not personally managing a service or group of services)	92
Applications currently being categorised for processing	70
Total applications received	587

Diabetes

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not he will provide diabetes with its own service framework. (AQW 2604/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has a process in place for the identification, prioritisation and selection of the next round of service frameworks.

The Boards and Trusts, working with local interest groups, have submitted a list of regional priorities for future service framework development to my Department. These proposals are currently under evaluation and a decision regarding the next round of service frameworks will be taken in early 2008.

Medical Secretaries

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to avert strike action by medical secretaries at Antrim Area Hospital in 2008. (AQW 2605/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have instructed all Health and Social Care employers that I expect all staff to be in receipt of the Agenda for Change rates of pay by the end of March 2008. I have been given an assurance by the regional staff representatives that they will not support any

strike action by their members in relation to Agenda for Change during this implementation process.

Doctor-Led 'Out of Hours' Service

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the provision of a doctor-led 'out of hours' service in (i) the Mid-Ulster constituency; and (ii) Northern Health and Social Services Board area. (AQW 2612/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Dalriada Urgent Care, having consulted the Northern Health and Social Services Board, intend to pilot changes in the staff skill mix operating within the Out of Hours services in its Primary Care Centres between the hours of midnight and 7:30am from 22 January 2008.

There will be no reduction in services for patients within the Mid-Ulster constituency, or the Northern Health and Social Services Board area as a whole, and they will continue to receive a doctor-led service with telephone advice, nurse triage, the opportunity to attend a doctor at one of the current Primary Care Centres or a home visit (should this be appropriate) during the Out of Hours period.

The purpose of this pilot is to develop the most appropriate skill mix for Out of Hours services during the period midnight to 7:30am, a period during which urgent care demands are significantly different from any other Out of Hours period. The pilot will be monitored closely and adjustments to staff skill mix made to ensure that patients throughout the Northern Health and Social Services Board area continue to receive a safe, effective and efficient service.

Doctor-Led 'Out of Hours' Service

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of the impact of the reduction of the cover provided by a doctor-led 'out of hours' service in (i) the Mid-Ulster constituency; and (ii) Northern Health and Social Services Board area, on the rural population in these areas. (AQW 2613/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Dalriada Urgent Care, having consulted the Northern Health and Social Services Board, intend to pilot changes in the staff skill mix operating within the Out of Hours services in its Primary Care Centres between the hours of midnight and 7:30am from 22 January 2008.

There will be no reduction in services for patients within the Mid-Ulster constituency, or the Northern Health and Social Services Board area as a whole, and

they will continue to receive a doctor-led service with telephone advice, nurse triage, the opportunity to attend a doctor at one of the current Primary Care Centres or a home visit (should this be appropriate) during the Out of Hours period.

The purpose of this pilot is to develop the most appropriate skill mix for Out of Hours services during the period midnight to 7:30am, a period during which urgent care demands are significantly different from any other Out of Hours period. The pilot will be monitored closely and adjustments to staff skill mix made to ensure that patients throughout the Northern Health and Social Services Board area continue to receive a safe, effective and efficient service.

Doctor-Led 'Out of Hours' Service

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm at what date he was aware of the decision to reduce the cover provided by the doctor-led 'out of hours' service at the Dalriada doctor service in Moneymore.

(AQW 2614/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Dalriada Urgent Care, having consulted the Northern Health and Social Services Board, intend to pilot changes in the staff skill mix operating within the Out of Hours services in its Primary Care Centres between the hours of midnight and 7:30am from 22 January 2008.

There will be no reduction in services for patients within the Mid-Ulster constituency, or the Northern Health and Social Services Board area as a whole, and they will continue to receive a doctor-led service with telephone advice, nurse triage, the opportunity to attend a doctor at one of the current Primary Care Centres or a home visit (should this be appropriate) during the Out of Hours period.

The purpose of this pilot is to develop the most appropriate skill mix for Out of Hours services during the period midnight to 7:30am, a period during which urgent care demands are significantly different from any other Out of Hours period. The pilot will be monitored closely and adjustments to staff skill mix made to ensure that patients throughout the Northern Health and Social Services Board area continue to receive a safe, effective and efficient service.

Pay Increase for Nurses

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the reasons why Health and Social Care Trusts have neither increased the pay of nurses by the 2.5% which was recently

awarded, nor paid the associate arrears; and (ii) a timescale within which these payments will be made.
(AQW 2616/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: (i) Agreement was reached with staff representatives on 14 November to accept the 2.5% pay increase for staff on Agenda for Change rates of pay from 1 April 2007. While this was too late to implement in the November salaries all Health and Social Care Trusts have made arrangements to pay the 2.5% basic salary increase in December salaries. (ii) Trusts have also put in place arrangements for the payment of any arrears due. The Northern, Southern and South Eastern Trusts plan to pay arrears due in January salaries; payroll pressures in the Belfast Trust and the Western Trust may result in arrears not being paid until the end of February.

Speech and Language Services

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to (i) outline the bid for improvements to Speech and Language Services under the Comprehensive Spending Review; (ii) detail the resources allocated for Speech and Language Services in the draft Budget; and (iii) make a statement on the impact the allocation will have on these services.

(AQW 2626/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In my original bids to DFP, improvements to Speech and Language Services were contained within two separate bids, one covering the Mainstreaming of the Children's and Young People's Package (C&YPP) and the second relating to Disability Services.

Under the C&YPP funding was being sought to provide 25 additional Speech and Language therapists working with schools to reduce waiting times to three months. In the Disability Services bid, I sought funding to improve therapy services generally and specifically to provide 30 additional therapists supported by therapy assistants. Further, it would have allowed me to mainstream the funding for the six speech and language therapists provided under the Renewing Communities Initiative in North & West Belfast.

The allocation provided in the draft Budget falls far short of that required to cover unavoidable pressures and to deliver the service developments that I envisaged in my original bids. The mainstreaming of the C&YPP is considered unavoidable and this bid will be fully funded thereby allowing me to reduce waiting times for Speech and Language Therapy Services to three months by providing the additional therapists working with schools.

Although the indicative allocation covers all unavoidable pressures, this is not the case for service developments. The original Disability Services bid was for £5m/£7m/£12m for a range of disability services including wheelchairs, respite care and speech and language therapy. To work within the constraints of the greatly reduced indicative allocation the Disability Services proposal is now £1m/£2m/£7m, covering a range of disability services with limited impact on speech and language therapy. As the period of consultation has not yet ended I am not in a position to advise how the funds will be allocated, nor to fully assess the impact of the reduced funding.

Costs of Administrators

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total staff costs of administrators in the Health Service in each of the last five years. (AQW 2634/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below shows administrative staff costs for the latest five years available.

Year	Trusts £m	Boards £m	Central Services Agency £m	Total £m
2001/02	141.9	13.5	11.4	166.8
2002/03	154.0	14.6	12.0	180.6
2003/04	173.9	17.9	13.1	204.9
2004/05	189.4	20.6	14.7	224.7
2005/06	204.6	20.0	16.0	240.6

Social Education Centres

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development to outline her Department's current plans for providing social education centres in the Newry and South Armagh areas. (AQW 2591/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In June 2005 my Department approved a business case which proposed the provision of two new 40 place Day Care Centres, one in Newry and one in Crossmaglen, which was envisaged would replace the services currently provided from the existing Newry Social Education Centre and the small Crossmaglen Day Centre.

Delivery of these Centres has been delayed due to difficulties with design, identification of a suitable site in Crossmaglen and specifically due to delays in securing appropriate planning permission for the

Newry site. As a direct result the capital costs for the projects have increased from the original £6.2m to an estimated £9.7 million. Due to the constraints on the current draft Comprehensive Spending Review the allocation of funding cannot be considered until the Trust has resolved the ongoing site issues and secured the appropriate planning permissions.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Planning Policy Statement 14

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total cost to the taxpayer of the judicial review in relation to Planning Policy Statement 14: Sustainable Development in the Countryside. (AQW 2313/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): It will not be possible to detail the total cost to the taxpayer of the judicial review until all claims for cost have been received. The Department has not yet received a claim for costs on behalf of Omagh District Council. However, on the information available to me at present I estimate the cost of the Department's legal representation and the time of officials preparing papers will be £84,000.

Road Signage

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm whether or not his department has made a change in policy in relation to signage on roads near military installations, given the increase in signage to RAF Aldergrove on the approach to the base. (AQW 2314/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: There has been no change in policy in relation to signage on roads near military installations. Military establishments have always been eligible to be considered for the provision of direction signage for normal traffic management and road safety reasons. As a result of the normalisation of the security situation in the north, Defence Estates requested my Department's Roads Service to review direction signage to a number of military establishments, including to RAF Aldergrove. Some modest additions to direction signage were agreed and implemented.

Alternative Fuels for Buses

Mr Cree asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail those Translink buses that use alternative fuels as their motive power. (AQW 2414/08)

The Minister for Regional Development:

Translink has advised that it generally uses diesel for road vehicles and gas oil for trains. Translink currently operates its Metro fleet of about 130 buses based in Short Strand on a blend of 5% bio-diesel and 95% diesel. It is likely that the complete Translink bus fleet will convert to this fuel blend during 2008, dependent on availability and commercial considerations.

Foreign Nationals

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what responsibility his Department has in relation to monitoring the number of foreign nationals residing in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2427/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Department for Regional Development does not have any responsibility for monitoring the number of foreign nationals residing in the North.

Diamond Road, Crumlin

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development what is his assessment of the safety of Diamond Road, Crumlin; and to detail any works his Department is planning to improve the safety record of this road.

(AQW 2435/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I very much regret the recent collision on the Diamond Road, Crumlin, in which a local man was fatally injured. The circumstances relating to the collision are still under investigation by the Police.

I understand that a local official from of my Department's Roads Service met with Dr McCrea MP, MLA, local police, residents and you earlier this year. A number of traffic management measures were introduced following this meeting and I understand that these were welcomed by the residents. You will also be aware that Roads Service has given a commitment to include some footway links in a future programme for minor footway improvements for the Antrim area.

I trust that the works already completed and the proposed footway links will go some way to reducing your concerns about Diamond Road.

Structural Roads Maintenance

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to address the underspend on structural roads maintenance in comparison to the spend in England and Wales.

(AQW 2461/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I can assure the Member that my Department's Roads Service will continue to bid strongly for additional structural maintenance funding in the various public expenditure rounds.

You may be interested to note that the draft Budget 2008 – 11, announced on 25 October 2007, would mean that funding for structural maintenance would increase to some £56.3 million, £71.8 million and £70.4 million per year, during the 3-year budget period, allowing increased maintenance across the road network.

All-Island Port at Bremeore

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development whether or not he has had discussions with his counterparts in the Republic of Ireland in relation to the construction of a new all-island port at Bremeore.

(AQW 2462/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am aware that consideration is being given to development of port facilities at Bremeore although I have had no formal discussions with the South's Minister for Transport, Noel Dempsey TD, on this matter.

Speed Limits

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to extend speed limits.

(AQW 2463/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has prepared new draft guidance on the setting of speed limits in the North and I have asked the Regional Development Committee for their comments prior to finalising these proposals.

Speed limits are a key source of information to road users as an indicator of the nature of the risk posed by the road and the purpose of this policy is to provide Roads Service traffic engineers with a consistent framework for setting local speed limits here.

Whilst I have at present no plans to extend speed limits in general, any request for an extension of a limit on a particular road will be assessed on its own merits.

'Safer Routes to School' Programme

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to list the schools in (i) Newtownabbey Borough Council; (ii) Carrickfergus Borough Council; and (iii) Larne Borough Council areas that are included in the 'Safer Routes to School' programme; and to

detail those schools which are on the priority list for inclusion in the programme in 2008. (AQW 2464/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that details of those schools that have been successful in their application for inclusion the 2008/09 Safer Routes to School programme will be determined early in 2008, once all applications have been received.

The list below details those schools in the council areas to which the member refers where work has been completed, or where work will be completed early in 2008.

Newtownabbey Borough Council:	Glengormley High School, Mallusk and Whitehead Primary Schools;
Carrickfergus Borough Council:	Carrickfergus College and Carrickfergus Grammar School;
Larne Borough Council:	Larne Grammar School.

Railway Upgrade

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a breakdown of how the funding relating to the proposals to upgrade the Coleraine to Derry/Londonderry section of the Belfast to Derry/Londonderry railway will be spent; and to provide a timeframe within which detailed plans for these proposals will be produced that satisfy European Union criteria for funding. (AQW 2482/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The draft Budget includes some £1m for the preparation of a business case for the upgrade of the railway between Coleraine and Derry. At this point it is not possible to break down the costs further, other than to say the funding will be spread across the three-year period to 2010.

The project will involve preparation of a statement of need which will allow Translink to develop a full feasibility study and ultimately a detailed economic appraisal. Subject to approval, Translink will then proceed to recruit the relevant expertise to develop and design the detailed programme of works to be carried out.

Translink aim to have all the preparatory work completed by the end of 2010 and to start the programme of works on site in 2011.

My Department will seek to maximise the opportunity for EU funding in support of any eligible capital works planned for the Derry Line. TENs is one possible source of funding, but my officials will also explore the possibility of securing funding from other EU Programmes.

Water Mains Supply

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of residential properties in (i) North Antrim; and (ii) Northern Ireland, that are not connected to a water mains supply. (AQW 2484/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Northern Ireland Water has advised me that during the development of a comprehensive customer database, in preparation for the introduction of domestic water charging from April 2007, some 5,750 occupied domestic properties across Northern Ireland were identified as not being connected to the mains water supply. However, owing to the subsequent deferral of domestic charging, Northern Ireland Water was unable to verify this data. Furthermore, as the customer database does not record domestic properties by Parliamentary constituency, Northern Ireland Water is unable to provide the breakdown sought for the North Antrim area.

Road Maintenance Budget

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he is taking to ensure that budget reductions in relation to road maintenance will not impact on the number of fatalities that occur on roads. (AQW 2500/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I can assure the Member that the safety of the travelling public continues to be the top priority for my Department's Roads Service, and that Roads Service is fully committed to making its contribution towards the achievement of the targets set out in the Northern Ireland Road Safety Strategy, to reduce deaths and serious injuries on our roads.

In relation to road maintenance, you may be interested to note that the draft Budget 2008-11, announced on 25 October 2007, would mean that funding for structural maintenance would increase to some £56.3 million, £71.8 million and £70.4 million respectively, during the three-year Budget period, allowing increased expenditure across the road network. I would also advise that a system of regular safety inspections is in place to ensure that essential responsive maintenance is identified and completed as necessary.

In relation to the impact of road maintenance on traffic accidents, I would point out that there is no evidence from the police collision reports covering the ten year period to 2006, that road surface defects had been identified as being a contributory factor in any fatal collisions.

The key fact remains that driver behaviour is responsible for about 95% of all collisions, and it is

essential for drivers to take more responsibility for their behaviour on the roads if we are to continue to reduce the carnage on the road network.

Carbon Emissions

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm whether or not any environmental impact assessments, in relation to carbon emissions, have been carried out on (i) the installation of speed ramps; and (ii) the installation of traffic lights or other road safety measures; and to detail the result of these assessments. (AQW 2526/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service does not carry out Environmental Impact Assessments on the installation of speed ramps, the installation of traffic lights or other road safety measures.

The environmental impacts of such schemes are considered in conjunction with the full range of transport proposals which comprise my Department's Transport Plans. The environmental impacts are published within the Transport Plans in an Appraisal Summary Table which address issues including local air quality, greenhouse gases and biodiversity.

Roads Service does carry out Environmental Impact Assessments for large scale strategic highway works, or for any project where the area of the proposed works exceeds one hectare, or is situated in an environmentally sensitive area. In these cases an Environmental Statement is published.

Under-Used Assets

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the consultation process that will take place before his Department disposes of any 'under-used assets'. (AQW 2529/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: As outlined in Government Accounting NI, the holding of a Department's assets should be limited to the minimum needed to meet planned and future requirements and as such decisions to dispose of under-utilised assets are made on this basis.

Although no external process of consultation is carried out prior to the disposal of any under-utilised assets, in the case of surplus land and buildings identified by public sector bodies, guidelines have been drawn up by the Central Advisory Unit of Land and Property Services. These guidelines provide for the circulation of surplus land to relevant public bodies requesting notification of interest and precede any offer to the former owner or an open market sale. A copy of these guidelines entitled 'Disposal of Public

Sector Property in Northern Ireland', have been placed in the Assembly Library.

Under-Used Assets

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any 'under-used assets' that his department is considering disposing of. (AQW 2530/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In this financial year 2007-08, Road Service expects to dispose of some £8.6m of land. This includes: Hibernia St. car park and land at Redburn Square Holywood; Abbey St. car park Coleraine; transfers to registered housing associations; and miscellaneous sales. These are not all necessarily under-utilised assets and where this is the case alternative provision will be provided for those operations.

Across the ten year period of Draft ISNI 08 a target of some £1m per annum for miscellaneous asset disposals has been set for Roads Service. The Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company has included £11.6m for asset disposals in 2010-11.

As you may be aware an exercise, commission by the Executive, is being carried out by the Capital Realisation Taskforce to review the potential for further asset disposals, or their re-use, across all Northern Ireland Departments. This exercise is still at an early stage and additional disposals may be identified through their work.

Under-Used Assets

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his department's definition of 'under-used asset'. (AQW 2532/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: No specific definition exists to cover 'under-utilised assets' within DRD. As with all NI Departments, DRD bases its asset management on the principle set out in section 24.2.2, that is "Holding of land and buildings should be limited to the minimum needed to meet present and planned future requirement." The same principle is applied to other assets.

E.U. Structural Funds

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline any applications, either completed or pending, for E.U. Structural Funds for (i) the upgrading of the railway line between Ballymena and Coleraine; and (ii) the dualling of the A26 Frosses Road. (AQW 2535/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My officials have advised that: (i) The railway line between Ballymena and Coleraine is part of the Trans European Network System – Transport (TENS-T). While no EU Structural Fund applications to assist with the upgrading of the line have been completed, and none are pending, the Department will seek to maximise the opportunity for EU funding in support of any eligible capital works planned for the line; and (ii) The A26 Frosses Road does not meet the criteria for EU structural funding. Consequently, no EU Structural Fund applications for the dualling of the A26 Frosses Road have been made.

Traffic Lights on Garvagh Main Street

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans for the installation of traffic lights on Garvagh Main Street. (AQW 2537/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it has carried out a number of assessments of the need for traffic signals at the junction of Main Street with Limavady Road and Bridge Street in Garvagh but that, to date, these have concluded that signals are not required.

Kilrea By-Pass Scheme

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 1361/07, to give a timescale within which the Kilrea by-pass scheme will be added to his Department's works programme. (AQW 2538/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The draft Budget 2008 and draft Investment Strategy 2008-2018 (ISNI) were announced for consultation on 25 October 2007. Once the outcome of ISNI is known, early in 2008, I will be better placed to finalise the content of the Roads Service Forward Planning Schedule.

I would, however, make you aware that the guidance which my Department's Roads Service use for selecting schemes to be included within the major works programme is set out in the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) and the Regional Transportation Strategy. These strategies highlight that improvement schemes on the Strategic Road Network (as identified in the RDS) attract highest priority. The A54, which passes through Kilrea, is not part of the Strategic Road Network.

Traffic Delays

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2106/08, and with reference to the same survey dataset, to provide a

similar summary of traffic delays on all other citybound routes approaching Sandyknowes roundabout, between 7:00am and 9:30am on the day of the survey. (AQW 2563/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In response to AQW 2563/08, regarding your request for information on traffic delays on citybound routes approaching Sandyknowes roundabout, I would advise that my Department's Roads Service does not hold any information on actual delays. I have, however, attached below, journey time information on citybound routes approaching Sandyknowes roundabout, during the times requested, surveyed during the same period as the information contained in response to AQW 2106/08. I have also included journey time information for the A8(M) that has been resurveyed since the response to AQW 2106/08 because, as previously stated, journey times provided in that response were affected by an incident on the M2 on the morning of the survey.

Location and Direction of Survey – Week commencing 19 November	Time of day	Time taken
Hightown Rd/Mallusk Road junction to Sandyknowes R't via Scullions Rd.	7.34am	3 mins
Hightown Rd/Mallusk Road junction to Sandyknowes R't via Scullions Rd.	7.56am	3 mins
Hightown Rd/Mallusk Road junction to Sandyknowes R't via Scullions Rd.	8.33am	6 mins
Hightown Rd/Mallusk Road junction to Sandyknowes R't via Scullions Rd.	9.03am	3 mins

Location and Direction of Survey – Week commencing 26 November	Time of day	Time taken
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R' bt	7.23 am	2 mins
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R' bt	7.28 am	2 mins
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R' bt	7.34 am	2 mins
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R' bt	7.39 am	4 mins
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R' bt	7.48 am	4 mins
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R' bt	7.56 am	5 mins
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R' bt	8.05 am	8 mins
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R' bt	8.18 am	7 mins
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R' bt	8.40 am	13 mins

Location and Direction of Survey – Week commencing 26 November	Time of day	Time taken
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R'bt	8.57 am	4 mins
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R'bt	9.04 am	5 mins
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R'bt	9.13 am	1 min

Location and Direction of Survey – Week commencing 19 November	Time of day	Time taken
Mallusk Road from Mallusk Village to Sandyknowes R'bt via Scullions Rd.	7.43 am	3 mins
Mallusk Road from Mallusk Village to Sandyknowes R'bt via Scullions Rd.	8.10 am	5 mins
Mallusk Road from Mallusk Village to Sandyknowes R'bt via Scullions Rd.	8.48 am	6 mins
Mallusk Road from Mallusk Village to Sandyknowes R'bt via Scullions Rd.	9.10 am	4 mins

Location and Direction of Survey – Week commencing 19 November	Time of day	Time taken
Ballyhenry Rd (from reaching back of queue) to Sandyknowes R'bt	7.41 am	5 mins
Ballyhenry Rd (from reaching back of queue) to Sandyknowes R'bt	8.09 am	9 mins
Ballyhenry Rd (from reaching back of queue) to Sandyknowes R'bt	8.49 am	11 mins
Ballyhenry Rd (from reaching back of queue) to Sandyknowes R'bt	9.04 am	4 mins

Location and Direction of Survey – Week commencing 26 November	Time of day	Time taken
A8(M) Corrs Corner to Sandyknowes Roundabout	7.27 am	3 mins
A8(M) Corrs Corner to Sandyknowes Roundabout	7.32 am	6 mins
A8(M) Corrs Corner to Sandyknowes Roundabout	7.41 am	7 mins
A8(M) Corrs Corner to Sandyknowes Roundabout	7.51 am	8 mins
A8(M) Corrs Corner to Sandyknowes Roundabout	8.02 am	12 mins
A8(M) Corrs Corner to Sandyknowes Roundabout	8.20 am	14 mins
A8(M) Corrs Corner to Sandyknowes Roundabout	8.40 am	16 mins
A8(M) Corrs Corner to Sandyknowes Roundabout	8.59 am	12 mins
A8(M) Corrs Corner to Sandyknowes Roundabout	9.14 am	8 mins

Location and Direction of Survey – Week commencing 26 November	Time of day	Time taken
A8(M) Corrs Corner to Sandyknowes Roundabout	9.25 am	6 mins

In response to AQW 2564/08, I can advise that my Department's Roads Service has been able to extract average speed values from the system using Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) technology, to measure journey times on the M2 citybound between Sandyknowes and Greencastle. These are shown in the table below:-

SANDYKNOWES – GREENCASTLE 10-14 DECEMBER 2007

Time	Avg Speed Mon	Avg Speed Tues	Avg Speed Wed	Avg Speed Thurs	Avg Speed Fri
0800	11.4 mph	11.9 mph	11.7 mph	13.0 mph	13.3 mph
0830	11.6 mph	11.0 mph	11.7 mph	12.1 mph	16.3 mph
0900	10.2 mph	6.0 mph	12.7 mph	21.4 mph	33.9 mph
0930	11.4 mph	4.5 mph	34.4 mph	46.8 mph	43.8 mph

M2 Citybound Between Sandyknowes and Greencastle

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an estimate of the average speed of citybound vehicles on the M2 between Sandyknowes roundabout and the Greencastle exit, on weekdays between 8:00am and 9:30am. (AQW 2564/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In response to AQW 2563/08, regarding your request for information on traffic delays on citybound routes approaching Sandyknowes roundabout, I would advise that my Department's Roads Service does not hold any information on actual delays. I have, however, attached below, journey time information on citybound routes approaching Sandyknowes roundabout, during the times requested, surveyed during the same period as the information contained in response to AQW 2106/08. I have also included journey time information for the A8(M) that has been resurveyed since the response to AQW 2106/08 because, as previously stated, journey times provided in that response were affected by an incident on the M2 on the morning of the survey.

Location and Direction of Survey – Week commencing 19 November	Time of day	Time taken
Hightown Rd/Mallusk Road junction to Sandyknowes R'bt via Scullions Rd.	7.34am	3 mins

Location and Direction of Survey – Week commencing 19 November	Time of day	Time taken
Hightown Rd/Mallusk Road junction to Sandyknowes R'tb via Scullions Rd.	7.56am	3 mins
Hightown Rd/Mallusk Road junction to Sandyknowes R'tb via Scullions Rd.	8.33am	6 mins
Hightown Rd/Mallusk Road junction to Sandyknowes R'tb via Scullions Rd.	9.03am	3 mins

Location and Direction of Survey – Week commencing 19 November	Time of day	Time taken
Ballyhenry Rd (from reaching back of queue) to Sandyknowes R'tb	8.09 am	9 mins
Ballyhenry Rd (from reaching back of queue) to Sandyknowes R'tb	8.49 am	11 mins
Ballyhenry Rd (from reaching back of queue) to Sandyknowes R'tb	9.04 am	4 mins

Location and Direction of Survey – Week commencing 26 November	Time of day	Time taken
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R' bt	7.23 am	2 mins
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R' bt	7.28 am	2 mins
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R' bt	7.34 am	2 mins
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R' bt	7.39 am	4 mins
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R' bt	7.48 am	4 mins
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R' bt	7.56 am	5 mins
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R' bt	8.05 am	8 mins
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R' bt	8.18 am	7 mins
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R' bt	8.40 am	13 mins
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R' bt	8.57 am	4 mins
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R' bt	9.04 am	5 mins
A6 (Antrim Rd) from Chimney Corner Hotel to Sandyknowes R' bt	9.13 am	1 min

Location and Direction of Survey – Week commencing 26 November	Time of day	Time taken
A8(M) Corrs Corner to Sandyknowes Roundabout	7.27 am	3 mins
A8(M) Corrs Corner to Sandyknowes Roundabout	7.32 am	6 mins
A8(M) Corrs Corner to Sandyknowes Roundabout	7.41 am	7 mins
A8(M) Corrs Corner to Sandyknowes Roundabout	7.51 am	8 mins
A8(M) Corrs Corner to Sandyknowes Roundabout	8.02 am	12 mins
A8(M) Corrs Corner to Sandyknowes Roundabout	8.20 am	14 mins
A8(M) Corrs Corner to Sandyknowes Roundabout	8.40 am	16 mins
A8(M) Corrs Corner to Sandyknowes Roundabout	8.59 am	12 mins
A8(M) Corrs Corner to Sandyknowes Roundabout	9.14 am	8 mins
A8(M) Corrs Corner to Sandyknowes Roundabout	9.25 am	6 mins

In response to AQW 2564/08, I can advise that my Department's Roads Service has been able to extract average speed values from the system using Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) technology, to measure journey times on the M2 citybound between Sandyknowes and Greencastle. These are shown in the table below:

SANDYKNOWES – GREENCASTLE 10-14 DECEMBER 2007

Time	Avg Speed Mon	Avg Speed Tues	Avg Speed Wed	Avg Speed Thurs	Avg Speed Fri
0800	11.4 mph	11.9 mph	11.7 mph	13.0 mph	13.3 mph
0830	11.6 mph	11.0 mph	11.7 mph	12.1 mph	16.3 mph
0900	10.2 mph	6.0 mph ³	12.7 mph	21.4 mph	33.9 mph
0930	11.4 mph	4.5 mph	34.4 mph	46.8 mph	43.8 mph

Note: On Tuesday 11 December there was a collision on the hill section of the M2 Northbound carriageway at 0815 hrs which was moved to the hard shoulder at 0845 hrs. Traffic on the citybound side queued back to Templepatrick junction and this did not clear until approx 1100 hrs.

Location and Direction of Survey – Week commencing 19 November	Time of day	Time taken
Mallusk Road from Mallusk Village to Sandyknowes R'tb via Scullions Rd.	7.43 am	3 mins
Mallusk Road from Mallusk Village to Sandyknowes R'tb via Scullions Rd.	8.10 am	5 mins
Mallusk Road from Mallusk Village to Sandyknowes R'tb via Scullions Rd.	8.48 am	6 mins
Mallusk Road from Mallusk Village to Sandyknowes R'tb via Scullions Rd.	9.10 am	4 mins

Location and Direction of Survey – Week commencing 19 November	Time of day	Time taken
Ballyhenry Rd (from reaching back of queue) to Sandyknowes R'tb	7.41 am	5 mins

Flooding in Warrenpoint

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the funding that will be made available to the occupants of dwellings in Warrenpoint that were flooded on 8 December 2007.

(AQW 2565/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Department of the Environment has advised me that the Emergency Financial Assistance Scheme, which it established in June 2007 to deal with widespread flooding across the North, closed on 12 September 2007.

Northern Ireland Water has advised me that following heavy rainfall on 8 December 2007, three properties in Warrenpoint were affected by internal flooding. The precise cause of the flooding is not yet known but initial indications are that a number of factors may have contributed. Investigations by Northern Ireland Water to establish the cause are continuing. Householders affected by the flooding may submit a compensation claim for consideration to Northern Ireland Water, Claims and Compensation Branch, Hampton House, 55 Royal Avenue, Belfast BT1 1FX. Compensation will only be offered if it is established that damage was caused by either Northern Ireland Water's negligence or its failure to carry out its statutory duty.

Proposed Footpath Between Hall Street and the A6

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm whether or not all landowners along Craigadick Road, Maghera, have been contacted by the Roads Service, in relation to the proposed footpath between Hall Street and the A6.

(AQW 2570/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has confirmed that a footpath already exists along parts of Craigadick Road from Hall Street to Craigadick Park and from Falgortrevy Road to the approaches to Milltown Bridge. Three further schemes have been identified which, if implemented, will provide a continuous footpath to the junction with the A6.

The first of these schemes, which is included in this year's programme for the Magherafelt District, will extend the existing footway from Craigadick Park to Milltown Bridge. This will provide a substantial pedestrian link between Maghera town and the link road to Maghera GAA complex.

Roads Service is currently in negotiations with the land owners affected and the eventual timing of the

works will depend on successful completion of these negotiations.

The further works proposed include the provision of a pedestrian footbridge at Milltown Bridge and an extension of the footway from Falgortrevy Road to the A6. These schemes are not in the current two year draft Local Transport and Safety Measures programme and will have to compete for inclusion in future programmes with the many other desirable schemes proposed for the Magherafelt District. Accordingly, Roads Service has not yet made contact with the associated landowners.

Pedestrian Crossing at Thornhill College

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what plans he has for a pedestrian crossing on the Culmore Road at the entrance to Thornhill College.

(AQW 2579/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service is not aware of any previous requests, or need, for a pedestrian crossing at the entrance to Thornhill College on the Culmore Road. As such, there are no current plans to provide such a facility.

However, in light of your question, Roads Service is arranging to carry out a survey, to determine whether this location meets the criteria for provision of pedestrian crossing facilities.

It is envisaged that the survey will be carried out during January 2008 and I have asked the Divisional Roads Manager, Mr Jim Beattie, to inform you of the outcome.

Culmore Sea Wall

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what plans he has for the designation of the Culmore sea wall.

(AQW 2584/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service does not have a legislative responsibility for either coastal erosion or coastal defence systems. Formal designation of sea walls as defence against tidal flooding would be a matter for the Drainage Council for Northern Ireland. In the North, land owners with frontages along the shoreline, are responsible for the protection of their land from coastal erosion.

There are long-standing inter-departmental arrangements in place for undertaking essential protection works arising as a consequence of coastal erosion of departmental property. Roads Service is responsible for the structural integrity of roads, including footways and promenades, which have been

adopted into the public road network. Where part of the network is affected by coastal erosion, Roads Service is responsible for its repair, including works to stabilise the retaining structure or embankment. Roads Service inspect and maintain approximately 350 metres of the wall retaining Culmore Point Road.

Lighting in Larne

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the progress made to date in relation to (i) the proposed lighting along the Coast Road from Larne to Drainsbay, before the Black Arch; and (ii) the lights along the promenade in Larne.

(AQW 2594/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials from my Department's Roads Service have confirmed that following a meeting with Larne Borough Council, in response to Member's previous question (AQW 782/07), they are assessing possible options for low level lighting near the Black Arch at Drain's Bay, Larne. When a suitable proposal has been finalised it will be discussed with Larne Borough Council prior to implementation.

The Promenade in Larne is owned and maintained by Larne Borough Council and the provision of lighting at this location would be a matter for the Council to consider.

Ballyeastborough Road

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm the date for completion of the final surfacing of tarmac on the Ballyeastborough Road.

(AQW 2601/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: You will be aware that, during the past 18 months, NI Water has been carrying out works to place a new water main in Ballyeastborough Road. My Department's Roads Service advises that the contractor for NI Water has completed the temporary reinstatement on the excavation and that negotiations are ongoing with NI Water in relation to completion of the final reinstatement.

Unfortunately I am not in a position to provide you with the date for completion of this work at present.

Repair of Sewers

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answers to AQW 518/08 and 2107/08, to detail the compensation to be paid to residents of Bramblewood in relation to expenses they

have incurred due to sewerage problems.

(AQW 2607/08)

The Minister for Regional Development:

Northern Ireland Water has advised me that it has not adopted the sewers at Bramblewood as they were not constructed to a satisfactory standard by the developer. The sewers in the development are therefore the responsibility of the developer, not Northern Ireland Water, and the question of compensation payments to residents by Northern Ireland Water does not arise.

Traffic Congestion in the Newry Area

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the steps he is taking to (i) reduce traffic congestion in the centre of Newry; (ii) reduce tailbacks from Camlough to the Egyptian Arch roundabout on the Camlough Road; (iii) reduce tailbacks from the end of the new dual carriageway north of Newry, southbound to the Mourne country roundabout; and (iv) reduce tailbacks from Cloghogue roundabout, Newry, to Five Ways roundabout, Newry.

(AQW 2608/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan and the Sub Regional Transport Plan contain proposals which will improve traffic flow in and around Newry.

Work has commenced on the A1 Beechhill to Cloghogue dual carriageway scheme, which on completion, will bring substantial improvement to traffic movements at all the locations to which the Member refers.

Within the centre of Newry my Department's Roads Service is also examining a number of junctions with the view of adjusting signal timing to be more in line with peak traffic movements. This will also assist traffic movement and help alleviate congestion.

Much of the current City centre congestion is now associated with traffic from the Warrenpoint direction. You will be aware that Roads Service has commissioned a feasibility study to investigate options for a Southern Relief Road which will link the Warrenpoint Road with the strategic Belfast to Dublin Route. Unfortunately, at this stage, I cannot give you any indication if funding can be made available for such a scheme.

Repair of Sewers

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answers to AQW 518/08 and AQW 2107/08, to detail (i) what assurance he can provide that work will commence in January to make

the necessary repairs to the roads and sewers in Bramblewood; (ii) the quality control procedures that will be employed by his department to ensure that the necessary standards are achieved; and (iii) the action he will take if the repair work to the roads and sewers is not of an acceptable standard. (AQW 2610/08)

The Minister for Regional Development:

Northern Ireland Water and my Department's Roads Service have advised me that it is the responsibility of the developer to undertake the necessary remedial work to bring the sewers and roads at Bramblewood up to adoption standard, and he has undertaken to commence work in mid January 2008.

All work undertaken by the developer will be monitored and inspected by Northern Ireland Water and Roads Service to ensure that appropriate standards are met for adoption.

If the remedial work is not completed to an acceptable standard, or the developer defaults, then Northern Ireland Water and Roads Service will consider the use of their contractors to undertake the work subject to the availability of funding, and will recover the reasonable cost from the developer.

**Sewer Extension to
Milform Manor, Newtownards**

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a timescale for the commencement and completion of work by Northern Ireland Water in relation to the installation of a sewer extension to Milform Manor, Movilla Road, Newtownards. (AQW 2622/08)

The Minister for Regional Development:

Northern Ireland Water has advised me that work to extend the sewer to provide sewerage services for a development at Movilla Road, Newtownards, is scheduled to commence in early January 2008 and will be completed by mid March 2008.

Social Housing

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to the answer to AQW 1587/08, whether or not the portion of land adjacent to No 41 Movilla Street can now be sold. (AQW 2623/08)

The Minister for Regional Development:

Officials from my Department's Roads Service have confirmed that a portion of land adjacent to No 41 Movilla Street has been adopted by Roads Service and that the land is currently used as an informal off-street parking area.

I have also been advised that Roads Service has recently received a request, from a developer, to

dispose of this land to facilitate a development. Roads Service is currently assessing this request and will determine the most appropriate disposal mechanism, should the land be declared surplus to requirements. I would stress that such processes can be lengthy and that no guarantees can be given to any particular developer interested in the acquisition of this land.

Road Upgrade

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made on plans to upgrade the road from Derry/Londonderry to the east of Dungiven, including the Dungiven Bypass; and to detail the anticipated (i) timescale; and (ii) expenditure figures, for this project. (AQW 2627/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In July 2007 I announced the next stage of the upgrade to the A6 from Derry to Dungiven, including the Dungiven Bypass, through the appointment of civil engineering consultants to examine options to enable the selection of a preferred route.

Public Information events were held in Drumahoe and Dungiven during September to outline the preferred corridor for the new route to the public and elected representatives.

The consultants are currently examining a variety of different route options within this corridor and plan to consult on these options before Summer 2008. Following further detailed appraisal it is planned to announce the 'preferred route' for the new dual carriageway in Spring 2009. Roads Service would then be in a position to carry out more detailed work, on the selected route, and bring forward the Direction Order, Environmental Statement and draft Vesting Order. Following successful completion of the statutory orders, and subject to the availability of funding at that time, it is expected that work could commence on site within the latter stage of the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan period.

The preliminary cost estimate for the scheme was £250 million, at 2005 prices. This will be reviewed as the scheme is developed.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Zero-Carbon Housing

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development to outline what discussions her department has had with manufacturers of building materials in relation to the development of construction materials for zero-carbon housing. (AQW 2423/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

My Department has had no specific discussions with manufacturers of building materials in relation to the development of construction materials for zero-carbon housing. Assistance to manufacturers of building materials in the development of new products may fall within the remit of Invest NI.

Investment in Urban Regeneration

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the investment in urban regeneration made by her department in each district council area, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2543/08)

The Minister for Social Development:

Information in relation to my Department's investment in urban regeneration is not held on the basis of local authority districts. Investment may occur across a number of local authority areas. Information in the form requested is not therefore readily available and could only be compiled at disproportionate cost.

Vacant Properties

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an estimate of the number of vacant properties in Northern Ireland, broken down by each district council area.

(AQW 2546/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The table below details the most up to date available figures for empty homes, across all housing tenures, throughout Northern Ireland. Information on the private sector was obtained from Rates Collection Agency data. Information on Housing Executive property comes from its internal records and includes 51 dwellings that are awaiting imminent relet, 394 difficult to let dwellings, 1874 that are undergoing major improvements and 553 that are pending demolition or sale.

TOTAL PRIVATE SECTOR AND HOUSING EXECUTIVE VOIDS* BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA (AT SEPTEMBER 2006)

District Council	Voids
Antrim	906
Ards	1394
Armagh	1462
Ballymena	1032
Ballymoney	410
Banbridge	1024
Belfast	7542

District Council	Voids
Carrickfergus	620
Castlereagh	939
Coleraine	1514
Cookstown	1008
Craigavon	1821
Derry	1873
Down	1434
Dungannon	1748
Fermanagh	1805
Larne	732
Limavady	547
Lisburn	1520
Magherafelt	767
Moyle	440
Newry and Mourne	2165
Newtownabbey	1287
North Down	1482
Omagh	1575
Strabane	779
Total	*37826

Seven hundred and eleven Housing Association properties are also vacant but a breakdown of this information by District Council area is not readily available. Two hundred and twenty one of these dwellings are awaiting imminent relet, 266 are difficult to let, 171 are undergoing major improvements and 53 are pending demolition or sale.

The report which I commissioned from the Housing Executive on empty homes identifies the main reasons for properties being vacant as rural unfit, disrepair, second homes and investment properties. Only 4900 vacant private sector properties have been identified as suitable for restoration. I have asked the Housing Executive to do further work to establish feasibility and value for money.

Housing Executive Improvement Schemes

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the Northern Ireland Housing Executive improvement schemes that have been cancelled in the North Down constituency.

(AQW 2548/08)

The Minister for Social Development: No Northern Ireland Housing Executive improvement schemes programmed for 2007/08 have been cancelled

in the North Down constituency. All capital programmes are facing a degree of uncertainty pending finalisation of the capital investment budget.

Oakfield Drive, Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm if Oakfield Drive in Carrickfergus was withdrawn from the market after being listed at auction for opening bids of approximately £9 million. (AQW 2595/08)

The Minister for Social Development: A site at Oakfield Road was placed on the open market by public advertisement and not by auction. The site was subsequently withdrawn because of a Roads Service requirement for a developer contribution to the construction of a road. The site will be placed on the open market again when Roads Service requirements have been clarified.

On 29 November 2007 a separate site at Oakfield Drive was advertised in the Belfast Telegraph. This site has not been withdrawn and remains on the market.

Job Losses in Newtownards Social Security Office

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to (i) give her assessment of the projected number of job losses in Newtownards Social Security Office; and (ii) outline the reasons for these job losses. (AQW 2602/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Social Security Agency uses its Integrated Complementing System to determine the appropriate staffing levels within each Social Security Office/Jobs & Benefits office. This is based on the volume of work received in an office and the time taken to process that work, using a scientific, HM Treasury approved methodology. Currently Newtownards office is fully complemented and at this stage there are no planned job losses.

The Agency is carrying out a Strategic Business Review to examine how best to deliver services to the public in the future. As the options involve centralisation of back office processing in the local office network, this will necessitate some redeployment of staff. However, as no decisions have been made on the numbers and locations of the back office processing centres, the Agency is not in a position to say which local offices will be impacted.

Dove Gardens, Derry/Londonderry

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development what priority she is giving to the proposed development of 59 houses and 4 bungalows at Dove Gardens, Derry/Londonderry; and to confirm that finances are in place to start this work in the 2008/09 financial year. (AQW 2615/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This North & West Housing scheme of 59 houses and 4 bungalows is programmed to be onsite in the 1st Quarter of 2008/09. The original planning application (for 53 units) was submitted on 11th January 2007 but a subsequent redesign increasing the number of units to 63 units required a resubmission. Once Planning approval and Northern Ireland Housing Executive project approval are in place, North & West intends to proceed to onsite stage. However all new capital projects are currently at risk pending the outcome of the draft budget.

Semple Review

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the progress made by the Interdepartmental group considering the recommendations of the Semple Review, with particular reference to the recommendation of a 20% developer contribution. (AQW 2631/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Interdepartmental Affordability Review Group has now concluded their work and presented findings to me. I have also received reports from the Advisory Panel of Experts, established alongside this Interdepartmental Group and Baroness Ford, formerly Chair of English Partnerships, who have also commented on the potential use of developer contributions in Northern Ireland.

There is a wide body of evidence on the important role that developer contributions play in the delivery of affordable and social housing. Indeed Northern Ireland is unique within Great Britain and Ireland in that there is currently no provision here for such a contribution. In taking forward the Semple recommendations, I will be looking to end this anomaly as I am satisfied that developer contributions have an important role to play in increasing the supply of social and affordable housing.

Semple Review

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister for Social Development to give her assessment of whether or not a minimum 20% developer contribution, as recommended in the

Semple Review, is necessary to help tackle the lack of social and affordable housing. (AQW 2633/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Interdepartmental Affordability Review Group has now concluded their work and presented findings to me. I have also received reports from the Advisory Panel of Experts, established alongside this Interdepartmental Group and Baroness Ford, formerly Chair of English Partnerships, who have also commented on the potential use of developer contributions in Northern Ireland.

There is a wide body of evidence on the important role that developer contributions play in the delivery of affordable and social housing. Indeed Northern Ireland is unique within Great Britain and Ireland in that there is currently no provision here for such a contribution. In taking forward the Semple recommendations, I will be looking to end this anomaly as I am satisfied that developer contributions have an important role to play in increasing the supply of social and affordable housing.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Energy Efficiency Study of Parliament Buildings

Mr O'Dowd asked the Assembly Commission what plans it has to carry out an energy efficiency study of Parliament Buildings; and to outline (i) the findings of any previous study undertaken; and (ii) the actions taken to implement these findings. (AQW 2375/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): An environmental audit is currently being carried out by Office of the Keeper and Research within Parliament Buildings to inform a scoping paper for a larger piece of work that might look at the following:

- current environmental management at Parliament Buildings (including inter alia recycling, procurement, energy usage);
- a desk-study examining examples of best practice for 'greening' public buildings of this type, especially listed buildings; and
- recommendations for improvements in these areas, including targets and implementation measures

It is hoped that this paper will be ready in January 2008.

An audit was previously undertaken by the Carbon Trust in 2002 at Parliament Buildings and the attached table presents the key recommendations and actions implemented.

Cost of Heating Parliament Buildings

Mr Wells asked the Assembly Commission to detail the cost of heating Parliament Buildings in each of the last five years. (AQW 2470/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): The Assembly Commission has spent the following amount on heating for Parliament Buildings and Annexe C:

2002-2003	£44,452.23
2003-2004	£72,523.62
2004-2005	£81,720.85
2005-2006	£106,772.37
2006-2007	£53,906.65

It should be noted that Parliament Buildings was heated by oil up until 2005 and then converted to gas.

Carbon Dioxide Emissions

Mr Wells asked the Assembly Commission to detail the amount of carbon dioxide produced through the use of energy in Parliament Buildings in each of the last five financial years. (AQW 2578/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): The Assembly Commission is very aware of the need to become more energy efficient and as such has been taking part in the Public Sector Energy Campaign since 1999. Following an audit in 2000 it was determined that Parliament Buildings emitted 1,957,054 kg of CO₂. This figure remained the same for 2001 and 2002 and then dropped to 1,901,420 kg in 2003. In 2004 the CO₂ emissions were reduced again to 1,559,613 kg before rising slightly to 1,590,919 kg in 2005. By 2006 CO₂ emissions had reduced to 1,165,561 kg, a reduction of 40.4% from 2000. This large saving is mainly due to the fact that Parliament Buildings converted from using oil burners in 2005 to gas.

Parliament Buildings is involved in the ongoing PSEC energy campaign, where each public sector site in NI is asked to reduce their CO₂ emissions by 20% by 2010 and by 60% by 2050.

All of this information is in the public domain on DFPs website: www.dfpni.gov.uk/index/public-sector-energy-campaign/psec-publications.htm.

Broadband Network Infrastructure in Parliament Buildings

Mr Burns asked the Assembly Commission to detail (i) the specifications of the broadband network infrastructure in Parliament Buildings; (ii) the capacity of the local network broadband link to the internet; and (iii) any proposals to ease network congestion and increase internet connection speeds between the hours of 12pm and 2pm. (AQW 2606/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): In response to the first part of your question, the network in Parliament Buildings is being upgraded and the majority of locations now enjoy connections of 1Gigabit per second from Desktop PCs to the internal network. While the majority of servers also connect at this speed some of the older servers, scheduled for replacement this year, can only connect at 100 Megabits per second and may now appear slower than others.

With regard to the second section of your question, the NI Assembly currently shares an Internet connection with the NI Civil Service with a capacity of 34 Megabits per second. This “shared services” arrangement enables the NI Assembly to take advantage of the NICS’s dedicated Anti Virus, Anti Spam and Internet security systems at a lower cost than if the NI Assembly undertook the work itself. The NI Assembly uses technology called “caching” to enhance the capacity of the link.

- Finally, the IS Office monitors the performance of the Internet connection on a daily basis. The speed of response can be affected by;
- The time of day (which influences the response of websites based in America in particular);
- The total number of people sharing the outgoing connection; and
- The size of any particular website’s connection to the Internet.

The issue of the apparent congestion was last raised formally with the NICS at a meeting on the 14th December 2007 and the IS Office are currently awaiting a reply.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 18 January 2008

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Ageing in an Inclusive Society

Mrs M Bradley asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on 'Ageing in an Inclusive Society'.
(AQW 2121/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley and Mr M McGuinness): Work is currently on-going within the department on this issue. We are intending to submit a paper to colleagues in the Executive seeking agreement to adopt the strategy on "Ageing in an Inclusive Society", including underlying principles, objectives and an Action Plan in the near future.

Pension/Gratuity Payments to Royal Ulster Constabulary Reservists

Mr McNarry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether or not it has obtained the additional information it was seeking from the Northern Ireland Office in relation to pension/gratuity payments to Royal Ulster Constabulary reservists.
(AQW 2358/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We have not yet received the additional information

we requested about aspects of the Northern Ireland Office's assessment of the economic viability of a pension scheme for Royal Ulster Constabulary Part-time Reservists. We approached the Northern Ireland Office to seek an update on our request and were advised on 31 December that they have written to the Government Actuaries Department for further information. We will write to the Member as soon as this information is received.

Capital Investment Projects

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to list all (i) current; and (ii) proposed, capital investment projects by the department; and to detail the costs or estimates for each project scheduled in (a) 2007/08; (b) 2008/09; (c) 2009/10; and (d) 2010/11.
(AQW 2433/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: As Assembly Questions number 2433/08 and 2585/08 request similar information, this response deals with both questions together.

OFMDFM has three main capital investment projects. These are: the demolition and remediation of the Maze/Long Kesh; the demolition, remediation and infrastructure costs of the Ebrington site under Ilex; and the regeneration of the Crumlin Road Gaol.

OFMDFM has two proposed capital projects in addition to its three main projects: the fit out costs for new accommodation for the North South Ministerial Council Joint Secretariat; and, the North Belfast City of Learning (Boys/Girls Model School). Funding for fit-out costs for the new accommodation for the North/South Ministerial Council Joint Secretariat will be bid for through the in-year monitoring process and has not been included in budget allocations as stated in the Draft Budget for the years 2008-11. The approximate cost of this project is £0.5m - £0.75m.

The Department also incurs capital spend in relation to capital grants, and the acquisition of office and IT equipment.

The following table sets out the Department's current and proposed capital investment projects and detail the costs or estimates for each project scheduled in 2006/07, 2007/08, 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2010/11.

	Project	Description	2006/07 (£m)	2007/08 (£m)	2008/09 (£m)	2009/10 (£m)	2010/11 (£m)
Current Projects	Maze Long Kesh	Regeneration and redevelopment of site works	0.46	1.18	0	0	0
	Crumlin Road Gaol	Regeneration and redevelopment of site works	0.28	1.0	3.1	15.4	14.3
	Misc Capital	Purchase of miscellaneous office and IT equipment	0.08	0.15	0.2	0.2	0.2
	Capital Grants	Capital Grants to Community Groups	0.62	0.14	0.3	0.3	0.3
Proposed Projects	Ebrington Barracks	Demolition/remediation and infrastructure			8.4	7.2	5.3
	North Belfast City of Learning	Boys/Girls Model School			0.4	0	0
	Total		1.44	2.47	12.4	23.1	20.1

Sustainable Development Strategy

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the progress that has been made by the Executive in relation to the delivery of the targets set out in the Sustainable Development Strategy. (AQW 2499/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Of the 63 targets in the Sustainable Development Strategy, 24 have been achieved or are on track for achievement during 2008. Thirty-one are long-term targets scheduled for achievement in a longer timeframe. Eight other targets are the subject of delays or have measurement difficulties.

OFMDFM is currently working to review and refine where necessary the targets in light of these findings and to ensure alignment with the Programme for Government. We intend to make the precise status of all targets clear in the new Implementation Plan.

Child Poverty

Mr Hamilton asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to estimate the number of children living in poverty in each (i) district council area; and (ii) parliamentary constituency. (AQW 2544/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: In response to the Member's question, the estimated number of children living in poverty in each (i) district council area; and (ii) parliamentary constituency is as shown in the attached tables (1) and (2).

These numbers are based on the relative income poverty indicator.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN RELATIVE INCOME POVERTY BY DISTRICT COUNCIL FOR 2003/2004, 2004/2005 AND 2005/06 COMBINED

District Council	Relative Poverty (BHC)	
	Number	Percentage
Antrim	3,600	24%
Ards	4,700	32%
Armagh	3,300	22%
Ballymena	4,000	25%
Ballymoney	2,000	17%
Banbridge	500	4%
Belfast	13,400	26%
Carrickfergus	1,400	16%
Castlereagh	1,700	13%
Coleraine	3,600	28%
Craigavon	5,700	26%
Downpatrick	5,100	25%
Dungannon	6,000	40%
Fermanagh	4,400	28%
Limavady	2,400	32%
Lisburn	3,200	11%
Derry	12,200	37%
Newry & Mourne	9,200	35%
Newtownabbey	3,500	16%
North Down	4,000	20%
Cookstown & Magherafelt ¹	5,900	29%
Larne & Moyle ¹	3,800	37%
Omagh & Strabane ¹	5,300	26%

District Council	Relative Poverty (BHC)	
	Number	Percentage
All	109,000	25%

Source: Households Below Average Income 2003/2004, 2004/2005 and 2005/2006

Notes: 1. Two LGDs combined due to sample size requirements.
2. As with any sample survey there is a degree of error attached to the estimates.

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN RELATIVE INCOME POVERTY BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY FOR 2003/2004, 2004/2005 AND 2005/06 COMBINED.

Parliamentary Constituency	Relative Poverty (BHC)	
	Number	Percentage
Belfast East	2,100	15.1%
Belfast North	5,200	30.3%
Belfast South	2,500	18.6%
Belfast West	6,000	28.7%
East Antrim	4,300	21.5%
East Londonderry	6,000	29.3%
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	8,900	33.2%
Foyle	12,200	37.1%
Lagan Valley	2,400	9.2%
Mid Ulster	7,500	30.6%
Newry and Armagh	7,500	26.6%
North Antrim	7,500	24.1%
North Down	4,500	20.9%
South Antrim	6,000	19.9%
South Down	8,800	26.7%
Strangford	6,300	29.1%
Upper Bann	6,000	21.4%
West Tyrone	5,300	25.7%
All	109,000	25.3%

Source: Households Below Average Income 2003/2004, 2004/2005 and 2005/2006

North/South Ministerial Council

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the expenditure committed to the North/South Ministerial Council in the Northern Ireland block grant in each financial year since it was established; and to detail the proposed expenditure as outlined by the draft Budget.

(AQW 2557/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

Details of the budget allocated from the Northern Ireland block grant to the North/South Ministerial Council Joint Secretariat in each financial year since 1999 and the proposed expenditure outlined by the draft budget in May 2007 are set out in the table below:

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL JOINT SECRETARIAT (NORTH)

Year	Budget Allocation £	Actual Expenditure £
2000/2001	905K	795K
2001/2002	820K	899K
2002/2003	735K	619K
2003/2004	642K	603K
2004/2005	602K	577K
2005/2006	612K	612K
2006/2007	695K	694K
2007/2008	851K	-
2008/2009 (Proposed)	808K	-
2009/2010 (Proposed)	882K	-
2010/2011 (Proposed)	977K	-

Capital Investment Projects

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the nature and cost of each of its capital investment projects under the following categories: (i) actual expenditure during 2006/2007; (ii) expenditure plans for 2007/2008; (iii) draft Budget proposals for 2008/2009; (iv) draft Budget proposals for 2009/2010; and (v) draft Budget proposals for 2010/2011. (AQW 2585/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

As Assembly Questions number 2433/08 and 2585/08 request similar information, this response deals with both questions together.

OFMDFM has three main capital investment projects. These are: the demolition and remediation of the Maze/Long Kesh; the demolition, remediation and infrastructure costs of the Ebrington site under Ilex; and the regeneration of the Crumlin Road Jail.

OFMDFM has two proposed capital projects in addition to its three main projects: the fit-out costs for new accommodation for the North/South Ministerial Council Joint Secretariat; and, the North Belfast City of Learning (Boys/Girls Model School). Funding for fit out costs for the new accommodation for the North South Ministerial Council Joint Secretariat will be bid for through the in-year monitoring process and has not

been included in budget allocations as stated in the Draft Budget for the years 2008-11. The approximate cost of this project is £0.5m - £0.75m.

The Department also incurs capital spend in relation to capital grants, and the acquisition of office and IT equipment.

The following table sets out the Department's current and proposed capital investment projects and detail the costs or estimates for each project scheduled in 2006/07, 2007/08, 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2010/11.

	Project	Description	2006/07 (£m)	2007/08 (£m)	2008/09 (£m)	2009/10 (£m)	2010/11 (£m)
Current Projects	Maze Long Kesh	Regeneration and redevelopment of site works	0.46	1.18	0	0	0
	Crumlin Road Jail	Regeneration and redevelopment of site works	0.28	1.0	3.1	15.4	14.3
	Misc Capital	Purchase of miscellaneous office and IT equipment	0.08	0.15	0.2	0.2	0.2
	Capital Grants	Capital Grants to Community Groups	0.62	0.14	0.3	0.3	0.3
Proposed Projects	Ebrington Barracks	Demolition/remediation and infrastructure			8.4	7.2	5.3
	North Belfast City of Learning	Boys/Girls Model School			0.4	0	0
	Total		1.44	2.47	12.4	23.1	20.1

Ministerial Code

Mr Storey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of whether or not the Minister of Education adhered to the Ministerial Code in the way she informed the Executive of her statement in relation to post primary education. (AQW 2587/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

There is no statutory requirement for Ministers to advise the Executive of their intention to make statements to the Assembly, though it is normal for them to do so in the interests of good order. Officials within the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister were informed of the Minister of Education's intention on the afternoon of 3 December and the information was subsequently conveyed to us in the USA. A letter was received by the department at 10.51 on the day the Minister made her statement.

The Minister is required by the Ministerial Code to bring to the attention of the Executive any matter which is significant or controversial and outside the scope of the Programme for Government. In answering questions after her statement, the Minister undertook to bring proposals on the matters raised in her statement both to the Executive and to the Committee for Education for consideration and comment in due course.

Ministerial Statement on Post-Primary Education

Mr Storey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the process by which the Minister of Education informed the Executive of her statement on post primary education. (AQW 2588/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

There is no statutory requirement for Ministers to advise the Executive of their intention to make statements to the Assembly, though it is normal for them to do so in the interests of good order. Officials within the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister were informed of the Minister of Education's intention on the afternoon of 3 December and the information was subsequently conveyed to us in the USA. A letter was received by the department at 10.51 on the day the Minister made her statement.

The Minister is required by the Ministerial Code to bring to the attention of the Executive any matter which is significant or controversial and outside the scope of the Programme for Government. In answering questions after her statement, the Minister undertook to bring proposals on the matters raised in her statement both to the Executive and to the Committee for Education for consideration and comment in due course.

Post-Primary Education

Mr Storey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how the Executive will process the proposals relating to post primary education brought before the Assembly by the Minister of Education. (AQW 2589/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

There is no statutory requirement for Ministers to advise the Executive of their intention to make statements to the Assembly, though it is normal for them to do so in the interests of good order. Officials within the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister were informed of the Minister of Education's intention on the afternoon of 3 December and the information was subsequently conveyed to us in the USA. A letter was received by the department at 10.51 on the day the Minister made her statement.

The Minister is required by the Ministerial Code to bring to the attention of the Executive any matter which is significant or controversial and outside the scope of the Programme for Government. In answering questions after her statement, the Minister undertook to bring proposals on the matters raised in her statement both to the Executive and to the Committee for Education for consideration and comment in due course.

Shared Society

Mr Lunn asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what is its assessment of the part which a shared society will play in achieving the Executive's sustainability targets. (AQW 2672/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

When published in 2006 the Sustainable Development Strategy for Northern Ireland identified A Shared Future, the previous administration's policy for improved good relations and community cohesion, as integral to the delivery of quality public services.

The Executive is currently considering a new Implementation Plan for the Sustainable Development Strategy. This strategy will reflect forthcoming proposals for a Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration which will be presented to the Assembly in the immediate future.

Good Relations Commitments

Mr Lunn asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to make a statement on the new good relations commitments contained in the draft Programme for Government. (AQW 2673/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The draft Programme for Government, including the

key goals and associated PSA framework, was developed with a focus on addressing the key challenges and seizing the opportunities to deliver a better and more sustainable future. The goals outlined in the Programme for Government are not, therefore, framed along departmental lines but rather are presented as goals for the entire Executive.

The objective of improving "societal relations" is specifically addressed within the PSA framework. By contributing to the Executive's aim of building a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland, with respect for the rule of law, all of the key goals outlined in the draft Programme for Government can be seen to set the context for the promotion of good relations.

As stated previously, we are fully committed to promoting the interests of the whole community towards the goal of a shared and better future and a prosperous, peaceful and settled society. Having considered progress made, we are currently working on detailed proposals for a programme of cohesion, sharing and integration. Key objectives, actions and targets will be developed in the context of these proposals.

'A Shared Future'

Mr Lunn asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to make a statement on the status of the document 'A Shared Future' and the associated Triennial Action Plan in the context of the draft Programme for Government. (AQW 2674/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The draft Programme for Government, including the key goals and associated PSA framework, was developed with a focus on addressing the key challenges and seizing the opportunities to deliver a better and more sustainable future. The goals outlined in the Programme for Government are not, therefore, framed along departmental lines but rather are presented as goals for the entire Executive.

The objective of improving "societal relations" is specifically addressed within the PSA framework. By contributing to the Executive's aim of building a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland, with respect for the rule of law, all of the key goals outlined in the draft Programme for Government can be seen to set the context for the promotion of good relations.

As stated previously, we are fully committed to promoting the interests of the whole community towards the goal of a shared and better future and a prosperous, peaceful and settled society. Having considered progress made, we are currently working on detailed proposals for a programme of cohesion, sharing and integration. Key objectives, actions and targets will be developed in the context of these proposals.

Planning Appeals

Mr Wells asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps have been taken to reduce the backlog of appeals awaiting a decision by the Planning Appeals Commission. (AQW 2688/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Planning Appeals Commission is a tribunal Non Departmental Public Body. Given its independent tribunal status it is appropriate for the Chief Commissioner to provide a response directly to you, and we understand she has written to you in the following terms:

“The Commission deals with the backlog of appeals on an ongoing basis. At 31 December 2007 the backlog was 3,208 and our projected output for the current financial year is 1,117. Future clearance rates will depend on Commissioner complement and the level of referred work from Planning Service, particularly in relation to Area Plans. The above figures do not make allowances for the future intake of appeals, which is approximately 140 per month.

The Commission made a bid for additional resources in December 2006 and provision has been made in the draft budget for extra funding. Final confirmation of additional funding arising out of the Comprehensive Spending Review is expected soon. Once confirmed, the Commission aims to be in a position to secure additional Commissioner resources to further address the backlog.

I would be happy to provide any further information you require arising out of this response or to meet with you to discuss the matter if that would be more suitable.”

OFMDFM is fully committed to providing the Commission with the resources required to address the appeals backlog. The additional funding allocations for PAC in the Draft Budget 2008-2011 will provide the Chief Commissioner with the funding certainty to enable her to recruit additional commissioners. This additional funding has the potential to fund a significant number of additional commissioners, although the actual number to be appointed will be for the Chief Commissioner to determine, taking account of the Commission's capacity to manage a greatly increased complement and also subject to the availability of suitable people from within a limited and specialised market. Arrangements are already under way to deliver a competition for commissioners.

We have recently made a number of appointments to the Commission.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Flooding in the Glens of Antrim

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress she is making in relation to solving the flooding problem which occurred in the Glens in July 2007. (AQW 2762/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Following the July 2007 flood event DARD Rivers Agency undertook limited emergency maintenance on the undesignated Glenaan River. However, it is considered that this work would not enable the river channel to contain river flows of the magnitude and severity of the July event. Rivers Agency has commissioned a feasibility study of flood defence improvements at the locations at Tromra Road that were affected by flooding. This commission will take into account not only watercourse related flooding but also flooding from roads and overland flows aimed at providing an integrated solution.

This report is scheduled for completion in July 2008. Any improvement proposals will of course have to be viable and be subject to availability of resources.

Foreign Nationals

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what responsibility her department has in relation to monitoring the number of foreign nationals residing in Northern Ireland. (AQW 2887/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department has no responsibility in relation to monitoring the number of foreign nationals residing in the North of Ireland.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Museums Policy

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the anticipated timeframe for the completion of the museums policy. (AQW 2671/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): My Department had been considering the development of a museums policy and had taken the process as far as producing draft Terms of Reference and consulting key stakeholder bodies on these terms of reference.

However in light of the draft CSR settlement and other pressing priorities I have looked at this matter and have concluded that resource pressures within the department are such that the development of a museums policy will not be possible, at this time.

In September 2007 I met with the Northern Ireland Museums Council and they offered that they could develop a museums policy with minimal additional resources and I tasked them with producing a paper outlining how this could be done. I have recently received their paper and will be giving it due consideration.

Community Festival Funding

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the budget for community festival funding for each district council area, following the transfer of delivery of this fund to councils in April 2008; and (ii) how the level of funding is determined for each district council. (AQW 2763/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The following table details the Community Festivals Fund allocations to each district council:

District Council	Dcal Allocation (£)
Antrim	12,300
Ards	18,000
Armagh	13,700
Ballymena	15,600
Ballymoney	6,800
Banbridge	10,600
Belfast	77,300
Carrickfergus	9,700
Castlereagh	15,800
Coleraine	14,200
Cookstown	8,500
Craigavon	22,600
Derry	31,200
Down	1,600
Dungannon	12,800
Fermanagh	15,000
Larne	8,000
Limavady	8,900
Lisburn	28,400
Magherafelt	9,900
Moyle	4,400

District Council	Dcal Allocation (£)
Newry & Mourne	25,400
Newtownabbey	20,400
North Down	18,600
Omagh	13,100
Strabane	12,400
	£450,000

The allocations are determined on the basis of population distribution, with a 10% weighting applied for deprivation as measured by the Noble Multiple Deprivation Measure. It is expected that each district council will match the amount allocated by DCAL.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what consideration he has given to initiating a police investigation into the deficit accumulated by the Northern Ireland Events Company. (AQW 2792/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In my statement to the Assembly on 26 November 2007, I said that I was commissioning an independent review of all the circumstances surrounding the deficit accumulated by the Northern Ireland Events Company. If at any time evidence of criminal activity emerges then this matter will be referred to the police. I will consider any further relevant actions following the completion of the review.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what instructions were given by his department to the Northern Ireland Events Company after 20 September 2007, in relation to future trading, when it was known that the organisation was in financial difficulty. (AQW 2881/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: On 1 October 2007 and on 4 December 2007, the Department instructed the Northern Ireland Events Company that it should not enter into further commitments pending resolution of the Company's financial difficulties.

EDUCATION

False Addresses

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Education what steps she will take to address the situation whereby families resident in the Republic of Ireland are using false addresses, in order for their children to attend schools in Northern Ireland. (AQW 785/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): The Department issued comprehensive guidance on this issue on October 11. This guidance advised all schools and pre-schools of the implications for them of the judgment in a recent Judicial Review: that they now may be covered by a “duty to verify” information within applications where a problem with false information is suspected. This guidance gave all schools and pre-schools practical recommendations for requesting verifying documents from applicants within the admissions process.

Notwithstanding this I believe that the way forward for education is that children attend local schools regardless of which side of the border they are on. I will therefore be reviewing the requirements in primary legislation on all schools and preschools to prioritise all applicants resident in the North of Ireland before those who are not resident in the North of Ireland, and this review will take account of a possible conflict with EU legislation.

Contracting and Subcontracting Process for New Build Schools

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to outline the policies relating to, and the process of, contracting and sub-contracting for new build schools within the North Eastern Education and Library Board area. (AQW 1685/08)

The Minister of Education: The current practice for procuring new schools within the North Eastern Education and Library Board area is through an open advertisement for main contractors who wish to be included in a select list of contractors. All contractors who respond to this are then evaluated against the criteria identified in the advertisement and a short list of contractors is prepared.

Sub-contractors (mechanical, electrical and, on occasions, structural steelwork contractors) are procured through the same process of open advertisement and evaluation.

Classroom Assistants' Dispute

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of schools at which educational facilities are currently being disrupted due to the ongoing classroom assistants' dispute. (AQW 1983/08)

The Minister of Education: During the week ending 23 November 2007 there were 25 special schools disrupted to varying degrees due to the strike action by classroom assistants. Currently there are no schools subject to disruption since the strike action has now ended.

Promotion of Community Pride

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to outline the steps she is taking to improve the self-concept of children in inner-city and large resettlement estate-based schools through developing a pride in their own community background. (AQW 2019/08)

The Minister of Education: I agree that it is important that all of our young people have an opportunity to learn about and celebrate the identity of their own community as well as an understanding and appreciation of the culture of other communities on this island. Through the revised curriculum, we are offering teachers greater flexibility in responding to the needs of those in their classrooms and in creating a culture of aspiration and achievement and providing young people with the opportunity to develop their self-esteem and preparing them to play a positive role in their local community and as contributors to wider society and our economy. Through our extended schools programme, we are also facilitating those schools which draw their intakes from the most disadvantaged sections of our community in providing after-school activities which meet the needs of the communities they serve.

Additionally, my Department's Community Relations Policy is aimed at promoting and developing community relations in the education and youth service sectors in the age range 3 to 25. To enable this, the Department encourages and provides opportunities for young people from different backgrounds and cultures to meet so that they can learn about each other, to respect each other's beliefs and backgrounds whilst at the same time, recognising and learning to appreciate the common ground they share. Through the community relations various funding schemes organisations work with young people to help them become more secure in their own personal sense of identity whilst at the same time, becoming more understanding and sensitive to those who are different.

Integrated Education

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education to make a statement on the failure to include any reference to integrated education in the Programme for Government; and to confirm whether or not this omission will have an impact on the future of Priory Integrated College. (AQW 2341/08)

The Minister of Education: The draft Programme for Government reflects the careful consideration that the Executive have given to its priorities. When education is referred to in the draft Programme for Government, it refers to all sectors. There is also a statutory duty placed upon the Department of Education to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education.

The draft Programme for Government does not impact on the specific issues under consideration regarding Priory Integrated College's capital scheme.

Exemptions Under Article 18 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the total number of primary schools that have been issued with an exemption under Article 18 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, in relation to premises that her department is satisfied would not conform to the published standards; and (ii) the number of grant-maintained integrated primary schools that received an exemption. (AQW 2453/08)

The Minister of Education: As far as the department is aware no primary schools have been issued with an exemption under Article 18 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. This includes grant maintained integrated primary schools.

Primary School Capital Build Programmes

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQO 885/08, to detail the primary school capital build programmes that have been approved in the East Antrim constituency, in each of the last ten years. (AQW 2494/08)

The Minister of Education: Schools requiring capital build projects have been identified in the first instance by the relevant education authorities. There has been one major primary school project approved for funding in East Antrim in the last ten years. This was a replacement school building for St MacNissi's Primary School, Larne. Construction work on this new

school was started in April 1999 and completed in July 2000.

Extended Schools Programmes

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education, further to the draft Budget, to detail (i) all extended schools programmes that will no longer be funded; (ii) the location of each of these schemes; (iii) the number of children involved in each scheme; and (iv) what consideration she has given to the value and viability of the schemes that will no longer receive funding. (AQW 2503/08)

The Minister of Education: Draft Budget proposals were published on 25 October, and I am currently considering the implications of these for Education budgets, including extended schools programmes. Final decisions on the budgets for services, including Education, will not be taken until after the public consultation period, which ends on 4 January.

School Sprinkler Systems

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education whether or not a sprinkler system is installed as standard during the construction of a new school. (AQW 2513/08)

The Minister of Education: All schools must comply with the fire regulations. There is no requirement under the regulations to provide sprinkler systems and I understand that no schools currently have sprinkler systems installed.

School Sprinkler Systems

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of primary and secondary schools that do not have a sprinkler system installed, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 2515/08)

The Minister of Education: All schools must comply with the fire regulations. There is no requirement under the regulations to provide sprinkler systems and I understand that no schools currently have sprinkler systems installed.

Wi-Fi in Schools

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education what consultation she has undertaken with parents and local communities in relation to the setting up of Wi-Fi in schools. (AQW 2603/08)

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. In light of this advice, no consultation has been undertaken with parents and local communities on the use of WiFi in schools.

The HPA has, however, recently announced 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 await the findings of this research.

Astroturf Facility at Limavady Grammar School

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Education to provide an update in relation to community use of the astroturf facility located at Limavady Grammar School. (AQW 2618/08)

The Minister of Education: I am advised that officers from the Western Education and Library Board together with the Board's solicitors met with Limavady Council's Director of Development and the Principal of the school on 12 December to discuss and agree the terms of the lease for use of the Astroturf pitch and it is proposed that a draft lease will be issued to the Council for agreement and approval at the beginning of January 2008.

Pending the completion of the legal agreement the school is continuing to allow the use of the pitch by community groups that have appropriate insurance.

Wi-Fi Health Concerns

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail what information was requested from her department, and from whom, in relation to health concerns about the installation of Wi-Fi in schools. (AQW 2621/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education has received requests for information in

relation to health concerns about the installation of Wi-Fi in schools from the following:

Request from	Number of requests	Subject
MLAs	4	i. Requests for information about the installation of Wi-Fi in schools; what research has been carried out on possible health effects; ii. what health advice the Department sought prior to authorising the installation of Wi-Fi technology in primary schools (AQW 871/08); iii. the Education Minister's assessment of a statement of the Chairperson of the Health Protection Agency about the radiation exposure levels of a Wi-Fi unit (AQW 1377/08); and iv. the Education Minister's plans to monitor the health of children in schools that have Wi-Fi installed (AQW 2620/08).
Assembly Education Committee	1	Request for the Department of Education's comments on an e-mail sent to the Education Committee.
Principals/staff of schools	2	Request for advice on a reply to an enquiry from a parent about the use of Wi-Fi in the school; and a request for an interview with the Education Minister to hear the Minister's views on Wi-Fi.
Members of the Press	1	Request for answers to questions about the use of Wi-Fi in schools.
Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People	1	Request on behalf of a private individual for answers to questions about the installation of Wi-Fi systems in schools.
Private individuals	1	Request for a meeting with the Education Minister to discuss the promotion of Wi-Fi in schools.

Statementing Process

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to harmonise the statementing process across all Education and Library Boards. (AQW 2638/08)

The Minister of Education: The 5 Education and Library Boards follow the same statementing process which is laid down in the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005, the Education (Special Educational Needs) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005, the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs (1998) and the Supplement to the Code (2005).

The Department commenced a review of special educational needs (SEN) and inclusion in April 2006 to address a range of issues associated with the current SEN framework, a key feature of which is the statementing process. I am presently giving consideration to draft policy proposals which have emerged from this review. Subject to my approval the draft policy proposals will be made available for public consultation in the usual manner.

Financial Resources Allocated to CCEA

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education to detail the financial resources allocated to the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessments (CCEA) in (i) 2006/2007; and (ii) 2007/2008, in relation to financing the current 11 plus transfer tests, from design to the issuing of results; and to outline the proposed allocation for 2008/2009. (AQW 2639/08)

The Minister of Education: The information requested is detailed below.

FINANCIAL RESOURCES ALLOCATED TO CCEA

	2006/07	2007/08
Transfer Procedure Development	£142,000	£142,000
Transfer Procedure Processing	£177,170	£208,688
Transfer test – test unit		£ 25,500
Total	£319,170	£376,188

The Department is currently considering CCEA's proposed Transfer Procedure allocation for 2008/09.

Strategic Plan for Transfer at 14 Years

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education whether or not she will immediately publish her detailed strategic plan for transfer at 14 years. (AQW 2640/08)

The Minister of Education: I made a statement in the Assembly on 4 December of my vision for education in the North which explained that young people will enjoy equal access to their post-14 educational pathway in a number of ways. The detail of how this will operate in each area will be determined through area based planning mechanisms. I will be making a further statement to the Assembly in the new year on progress towards the establishment of area based planning mechanisms, and on negotiations with key stakeholders on the detail of arrangements for transfer in September 2010.

Transfer Procedure

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education what consideration she has given to establishing an alternative body to provide a procedure for post-primary transfer; and to detail such plans.

(AQW 2641/08)

The Minister of Education: I consider the current system of academic selection to be both unjust and unnecessary. I have no plans to establish an alternative body to provide a procedure for post-primary transfer.

Transfer Procedure

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education to (i) detail the expected savings from the abolition of the 11 plus procedure; and (ii) outline how savings will be re-allocated. (AQW 2642/08)

The Minister of Education: The information requested is detailed below.

ESTIMATE OF SAVINGS FROM THE ABOLITION OF THE 11 PLUS PROCEDURE

CCEA costs (Estimate)	£376,188
Cost of ELB Invigilation: (Estimate)	£ 84,814

Invigilation cost for 2007/08 is an estimate as the information is not yet available from the Education and Library Boards.

The Education and Library Boards do not record separately other costs in respect of Board Staff involved in the operation of the transfer tests or the cost of issuing results to schools and parents.

The Department has overall responsibility for the transfer procedure policy but no staff are involved in operating the test.

Based on the estimated expenditure for the 2007/08 year, it would appear that savings from the abolition of the 11 plus procedure will be in the region of some £461k.

As no financial bid will be made following the abolition of the transfer tests, there will be no re-allocation of funds.

Transfer Procedure

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of restructuring the school system to accommodate transfer at 14 years in relation to (a) capital investment; (b) staff re-training and transfer; and (c) transport and other ancillary costs; and if she will publish these details. (AQW 2643/08)

The Minister of Education: In my statement to the Assembly on 4 December I explained that young people will enjoy equal access to their post-14 educational pathway in a number of ways. The detail of how this will operate in each area will be determined through area based planning and therefore it is not possible at this stage to detail the financial and human resource implications. With dramatically falling pupil numbers, the need to make all our schools sustainable already requires structural change in order to avoid continuing inefficiency, failure and cost.

Ministerial Statement

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail what consideration she gave to the explanatory notes to the Northern Ireland (St. Andrews Agreement) Act 2006, paragraph 20, in preparing her Assembly statement on the schools transfer system.

(AQW 2645/08)

The Minister of Education: I have made clear that I want a legislative underpinning of my proposals for future transfer arrangements, I want Executive and Assembly approval, and I am confident that a consensus can be achieved which will facilitate that.

Education System

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to confirm that efforts to improve the education system will prioritise those parts of the system that show the highest failure rates.

(AQW 2646/08)

The Minister of Education: I want every young person to have the same opportunity to succeed, regardless of socio-economic background, gender or race. A key priority is to narrow the gap in achievement that exists between the most advantaged and most disadvantaged in our community while at the same time raising overall levels. This will involve working with all schools but focussing, in particular on those schools where performance is lower than expected.

Funding for the Commission for Catholic Education

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost to her department in funding the Commission for Catholic Education since it was established.

(AQW 2647/08)

The Minister of Education: The Commission for Catholic Education in the north of Ireland has not

received funding from the Department of Education since it was established.

Transfer Procedure

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail what measures she is taking to ensure that her proposals for a schools transfer system receive cross-community support in (i) the Executive; and (ii) the Northern Ireland Assembly.

(AQW 2648/08)

The Minister of Education: My proposals will be welcomed by many within the education system, and I believe there is already broad support for them across communities in the North. The meetings that I am currently holding with key stakeholders are intended to achieve a consensus on the detail of post-primary transfer arrangements for 2010 and beyond. Once achieved, I believe I will be in a strong position to gain cross-community support in the Executive and Assembly behind proposals that are widely supported across communities and by education professionals.

Transfer Procedure

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, in relation to those schools wishing to implement a transfer procedure separate to that planned by her department, to confirm whether or not her statement that she is under no obligation to provide funding applies (i) to pupils, capital costs and administration costs; or (ii) only to the costs of operating a separate transfer procedure.

(AQW 2649/08)

The Minister of Education: I can confirm that core education funding will not be withdrawn from any school seeking to operate independent admissions arrangements. The Department will not however be obliged to fund the cost of any aspect of the setting up or administering of independent admissions arrangements that lie outside of Department of Education approved processes.

Post-Primary Education in Maghera

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what plans she has for (a) the future of Maghera High School; and (b) the provision of post-primary education in Maghera and its surrounding areas.

(AQW 2676/08)

The Minister of Education: Maghera High School falls within the remit of the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) which is consulting locally on the future for post-primary provision in the area. The NEELB has indicated that a Board decision on the way forward is likely to be taken in February or March.

Newbuilds

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what (a) new builds are proposed for post-primary education in (i) Moyle District Council area; (ii) Ballymoney Borough Council area; and (iii) Ballymena Borough Council area; and (b) the commencement dates for these new builds. (AQW 2677/08)

The Minister of Education: A new build school is currently being planned for Ballymoney High School, which is in the Ballymoney Borough Council area. The proposed new school is at Outline Business Case stage. It is estimated that construction work would start in early 2010.

There are currently no other post-primary new build projects in the Moyle, Ballymoney or Ballymena Council areas.

Post-Primary Transfer Procedure

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to outline the work undertaken by her department, since her announcement on 4 December 2007, in relation to new arrangements for the transfer procedure. (AQW 2678/08)

The Minister of Education: A series of meetings have taken place with stakeholders representative of post-primary schools to ascertain views on suitable transfer arrangements for 2010 and beyond. A series of follow-up meetings have been arranged which will be used to establish the basis for a consensual approach to new arrangements. Progress is being made on the establishment of area based planning mechanisms, preparations are being made for the launch of the *Every School A Good School* policy, and meetings have been held with the education spokespersons of all the Executive political parties.

Carlane Primary School, Toomebridge

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education what the current position is in relation to the future of Carlane primary school, Toomebridge. (AQW 2703/08)

The Minister of Education: Carlane is a maintained primary school and as such its future is a matter for consideration by the school Trustees and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) in the first instance.

Whilst I am aware that the Trustees and CCMS have been in discussion on the schools' future, no firm proposals have as yet been formulated and submitted to my Department for consideration.

New Technology in Education

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education if she is aware of the innovative use of technology in education that the Nerve Centre in Derry/Londonderry is developing; and what policy she will pursue in promoting the use of new technology in education, including the introduction of vocational qualifications into the school curriculum. (AQW 2705/08)

The Minister of Education: I am aware of the Nerve Centre's well-earned reputation for its work on promoting the moving image, music and innovative digital technologies and the creative opportunities it has provided for young people.

Ensuring that young people acquire the necessary skills to use ICT effectively and safely is a key priority for the Department of Education and this is reflected in the central role which ICT plays in the revised curriculum. Since 2000, the Department has made a significant investment in the ICT infrastructure in schools through Classroom 2000 (C2k). This includes the current renewal of primary schools' ICT equipment, offering enhanced functionality and flexibility, as well as the provision, during this school year, of 5,000 laptops to primary schools for computer-based pupil assessment and 20,000 laptops to all types of schools. The Department has also recently issued a circular to all schools which set out the actions necessary to further the development of ICT as a teaching and learning tool.

The emPowering Schools Strategy of 2003 set out a broad vision for enhancing teaching, learning and leadership in schools through the use of educational technology. The Department is about to embark on a review of the strategy to ensure that it remains appropriate to emerging educational needs and facilitates the use of the new technology in innovative and creative ways. This will include consideration of how best new technology can support the development of a new framework of 14-19 provision for our pupils, a key aspect of which will be a guarantee of access to a greater range of applied/vocational subjects.

Primary and Preparatory School: Transfer Test and Free School Meals

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to the answer to AQW 1845/08, to detail for each primary and preparatory school (i) the number and percentage of P7 pupils sitting 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 2725/08)

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. These data will be available in February 2008 and will be provided to you as soon as they become available for release.

Free school meal entitlement data for each primary and preparatory school are currently available for the 2007/08 academic year. These data have not been provided but as soon as the Transfer Test data become available, free school meal entitlement data will also be provided.

School Leavers

Mr F Cobain asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of school leavers who obtained 5 or more GCSE passes A* to C in (i) 2005; (ii) 2006; and (iii) 2007, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 2736/08)

The Minister of Education: The number and percentages of school leavers who obtained 5 or more GCSE passes A*-C in 2005 and 2006 are detailed in the following table. Data for 2007 are currently being collated and will be published in May 2008.

NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF SCHOOL LEAVERS ACHIEVING AT LEAST 5 GCSE'S GRADES A*-C (OR EQUIVALENT QUALIFICATIONS) BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY OF RESIDENCE 2005 TO 2006.

Parliamentary Constituency	2006		2005	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Belfast East	532	59.6	555	58.4
Belfast North	632	51.9	628	52.4
Belfast South	632	69.1	656	69.0
Belfast West	790	52.4	797	49.4
East Antrim	762	63.8	786	64.5
East Derry	787	59.7	790	60.0
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	993	69.2	955	66.3
Foyle	1147	64.0	1063	59.9
Lagan Valley	941	67.5	911	67.4
Mid Ulster	1032	66.7	989	63.3
Newry and Armagh	1145	66.1	1120	65.5
North Antrim	980	63.3	929	62.7
North Down	735	70.4	785	72.1
South Antrim	891	72.6	907	65.9
South Down	1227	66.6	1099	63.5
Strangford	903	66.3	866	64.5

Parliamentary Constituency	2006		2005	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Upper Bann	1057	64.1	1023	64.2
West Tyrone	964	65.8	829	72.3
Missing Postcodes	244	54.7	248	55.2
Total	16394	64.2	15936	63.0

Approximately 2% of pupils' residential postcodes were missing.

GCSE Passes

Mr F Cobain asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage of school leavers, entitled to free school meals, who obtained 5 or more GCSE passes A* to C in (i) 2005; (ii) 2006; and (iii) 2007.

(AQW 2738/08)

The Minister of Education: The percentage of school leavers entitled to free school meals who obtained at least 5 GCSE's A* to C (or equivalent) in 2005 was 35.6% and in 2006 was 37.6%. Data for 2007 are currently being collated and will be published in May 2008.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education whether or not her department has determined an effective method of post-primary transfer that will avoid (i) pupils simply transferring to the nearest school; (ii) a postcode lottery; and (iii) over-subscription to certain schools; and to provide details of this method.

(AQW 2748/08)

The Minister of Education: The process of area based planning will ensure that provision of sufficient scale and diversity is available to facilitate young people's preferred educational pathways. That may result in children transferring to their nearest school, but not necessarily so.

Under the proposed arrangements all children will transfer at age 11, with some children making a further transition at age 14, either because they have attended a 11-14 school, or because their preferred pathway can be better accommodated by an alternative educational institution.

Some popular schools will continue to be oversubscribed, but the detail of what admission criteria may be used, and in what way, has yet to be determined, although I have made clear that I favour community, family and geographical criteria.

11+ Transfer Test

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education what is her assessment of the savings to be made from the abolition of the 11+ transfer test; and to detail (i) the amount of anticipated savings; and (ii) where she will re-allocate these savings. (AQW 2749/08)

The Minister of Education: I would refer the member to the reply I gave to AQW 2642/08.

Compensation for Grammar Schools

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education to indicate what plans she has to provide financial compensation for grammar schools, during the transition period, for devising and implementing an alternative procedure to the current transfer test; and if she will set out the relevant details. (AQW 2756/08)

The Minister of Education: Any costs involved in developing and administering transitional arrangements for grammar schools, which I intend placing on a statutory basis through the making of admissions criteria regulations, will be met by the Department of Education. Any grammar schools that choose to operate outside arrangements governed by regulation will not be assisted with funding to develop or administer a common entrance examination or alternative form of academic selection.

Special Needs Assessment

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education to detail for each Education and Library Board (i) the number of pupils that are currently waiting for special needs assessment; and (ii) the waiting time for such assessments. (AQW 2773/08)

The Minister of Education: I would refer the Member to my reply to AQW 1308/08 and AQW 1314/08, submitted by the Member for Strangford, Michelle McIlveen, which were placed in Hansard as a written answer on 23 November 2007 and 9 November 2007 respectively.

Efficiency Savings

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) what reductions, due to efficiency savings, are being applied annually in each of the next 3 years to primary schools in the Strangford constituency; and (ii) the level of reductions allocated to each of these schools. (AQW 2788/08)

The Minister of Education: Budgets for schools have yet to be determined for 2008-09, and will be

subject to the outcome of the Final Budget process. Budgets for schools for the two subsequent years will be determined prior to each of those years.

Ministerial Statement

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the input that her departmental officials provided in the drafting of the statement she made to the Assembly on 4 December 2007. (AQW 2808/08)

The Minister of Education: The statement which I made on 4 December 2007 was prepared in a similar fashion to any other Ministerial statement: substantial content and drafting was provided by officials, working with myself and my Special Adviser.

Phoenix Integrated Primary School

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils that have attended Phoenix Integrated Primary School, Cookstown, since it opened. (AQW 2822/08)

The Minister of Education: The information requested is as follows:

Year	Enrolment
2004/05	18
2005/06	41
2006/07	54
2007/08	79

Source: NI school census.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Education what steps she is taking to ensure that her proposals for future post-primary transfer will (i) protect rural communities; and (ii) ensure that pupils do not travel excessive distances. (AQO 1311/08)

The Minister of Education: Children in rural areas are entitled to access a quality education just as much as those in urban areas. In planning future post-primary provision, we will certainly be taking account of the needs of different areas and different communities and seeking to ensure that pupils are not expected to travel excessive distances as this is neither environmentally nor educationally desirable.

Once children have chosen their post-primary school, we will also be ensuring that young people have access, through the Entitlement Framework, to a broad and balanced range of curriculum pathways. To

accommodate the needs of rural areas and smaller schools, there will be flexibility in how the Entitlement Framework will be delivered, including, for example, through co-operation between schools and with local further education colleges. The proposals will allow for different solutions for different areas. The educational interests within areas will be involved in developing local provision that best meets the needs of their children.

I am also committed to ensuring that the planning of provision is done in a way that promotes equality and good relations and has regard to the principles behind rural proofing.

Reading Recovery Scheme

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education to provide a guarantee that the Reading Recovery scheme will continue to receive funding, to at least the level it currently does, over the budgetary period 2008-2011. (AQO 1277/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department is currently finalising a review of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy and this review, alongside proposals for the way forward, will issue for consultation in the coming weeks.

The revised strategy will outline how we propose to support approaches such as Reading Recovery. However, until the strategy and the Department's budget for the period 2008-11 are finalised, I am unable to make any announcements surrounding long-term funding for the Reading Recovery programme.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Education to provide a breakdown of the percentage of pupils, in each Education and Library Board area, who were accepted into the grammar school of their choice in 2007. (AQO 1373/08)

The Minister of Education: The table below records the percentage of pupils by Board area (and denominational and non-denominational grammar schools) who expressed a first preference for a grammar school and were admitted to the grammar schools concerned in September 2007.

Board Area	Total 1st Preference Applications	Total 1st Preference Admitted	% 1st Preference Admitted
BELB	2518	2014	80%
WELB	1739	1468	84%
NEELB	2247	1921	85%

Board Area	Total 1st Preference Applications	Total 1st Preference Admitted	% 1st Preference Admitted
SEELB	1772	1427	81%
SELB	1410	1300	92%

Introduction of Modern Languages into Primary Education

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Education to outline her plans for the introduction of modern languages into primary education; and to detail (i) the resources to be allocated; (ii) the pedagogical model to be employed; (iii) the training to be provided, including at what level and by whom; and (iv) the teaching and learning materials to be used. (AQO 1310/08)

The Minister of Education: I believe that introducing children to a second language at an early stage can have huge benefits for them individually and longer term for the society and economy. In some parts of the world this is common practice and that is why I am putting a new programme in place to support those primary schools who wish to offer Spanish and Irish on an optional basis.

£330,000 has been made available for the programme in the 2007/08 school year. This will provide for the employment of a network of peripatetic tutors to work alongside teachers in delivering the programme in schools. The Partnership Management Board is setting up a regional group to provide programme support, training and resource materials for the tutors and participating teachers. The purpose of this approach is to develop skills and confidence within schools so after a period of time this will no longer be necessary.

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 an ongoing strategic approach to language teaching and learning, including modern languages in primary schools.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Education to provide details of the legislative programme and framework through which she intends to introduce the changes to the education system announced to the Assembly on 4 December 2007. (AQO 1394/08)

The Minister of Education: The details of the legislative programme entailed by my Assembly statements on 4 and 11 December will be finalised following completion of discussions with schools and key stakeholders on future transfer arrangements in which I

and my officials are currently engaged. I intend to be in a position soon to prepare draft admissions criteria regulations that will govern school admissions from September 2010 onward. These will be issued for appropriate consultation following which I will seek to place these draft regulations on a statutory footing.

Educational Needs in West Belfast and Greater Shankill

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Education to outline the levels of educational need in the area defined by the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Taskforce Report 2002. (AQO 1384/08)

The Minister of Education: The latest figures available for levels of educational need in areas defined in the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Taskforce report of 2002 are for 2005/06.

	Pupils resident in the area leaving with at least 5 or more GCSE's A* - C or equivalent	Percentage of Pupils leaving school with no GCSE's	Percentage of Pupils leaving with at least 2 or more A levels at Grade A-E (including equivalencies)
West Belfast	42.6%	8.6%	29.5%
Greater Shankill	43.0%	7.1%	25.8%
Average in the North	64.2%	4.5%	44.7%

Autism Centre of Excellence in Middletown

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Education to provide a timescale for the opening of the autism centre of excellence in Middletown; and to detail the age groups it will provide for. (AQO 1382/08)

The Minister of Education: I am pleased to report that the Middletown Centre for Autism is open. The operating company was formed in March of last year with the appointment of the Board of Directors. The Chief Executive and the three Heads of Division are all in post and the first training courses were held on site in December.

In August and September 2007 stakeholder consultations were held at the Centre to canvass opinion from statutory and voluntary agencies about the building and refurbishment project.

The Centre is currently consulting with all those involved with children and young people with autism across venues North and South regarding how the proposed services can best be delivered by the Centre.

The Centre will generally provide for children aged 4 - 19 years but may consider younger children if appropriate.

School Closures in the Coleraine Borough Council Area

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Education to outline her plans for school closures in the Coleraine Borough Council area, in the next five years.

(AQO 1392/08)

The Minister of Education: The planning of the controlled schools' estate in the Council area is the responsibility of the North Eastern Education and Library Board in the first instance. The Board have confirmed that they currently have no proposals for school closures in the Coleraine Borough Council area. In regard to the maintained sector, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools are considering the possible amalgamation of Crossroads Primary School and St. Columba's Primary School, Kilrea.

North/South Education Sector

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Education to detail the new projects she has initiated in the North-South education sector since the restoration of devolution. (AQO 1308/08)

The Minister of Education: Under the auspices of the North/South Ministerial Council there is existing education cooperation across a range of issues: education for children with special needs; educational underachievement; teacher qualifications and superannuation issues; school, youth and teacher exchanges.

I met with Mary Hanafin, TD Minister for Education and Science, in Dublin in November last year to review progress in these areas and to initiate further work on the full range of matters. We agreed to develop proposals to tackle educational underachievement, including ongoing work by the Literacy and Numeracy Working Group, and to undertake a formal review of co-operation on educational exchanges and supporting mechanisms, including the North South Exchange Consortium. Following the significant progress made so far to establish a Centre of Excellence for Autism at Middletown, we endorsed the plans to provide training, advisory and research services and education, learning and support services once building work is complete. Other joint projects are currently underway in the field of special education needs, such as the "Cross Border School and Parent Community Partnership Programme", and we plan to hold a joint Autistic Spectrum Disorder conference this year. Through the Teachers Qualifications

Working Group, progress is being made on improving teacher mobility.

In December 2007, Conor Lenihan TD, the Irish Minister for Integration and I jointly launched a Toolkit for Diversity in the Primary School sector. The Toolkit will develop cross-border collaboration to assist children whose language, culture and ethnicity are not Irish and to allow us all to benefit from this rich diversity.

As part of my desire to raise awareness of the important role science and technology in our schools, I have supported the all-Ireland BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibitions, attending the formal opening of the most recent event in Dublin last week.

I will be hosting the next North South Ministerial Council meeting in Education Sectoral format in the Spring and will report back to the Assembly on progress made on these and other issues in due course.

Priory Integrated College

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education when she plans to announce her decision in relation to the new build at Priory Integrated College, Holywood.

(AQO 1389/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department wrote to the South Eastern Education and Library Board concerning the viability of Priory and it has confirmed it considers the school viable. I am awaiting further information from the Board on how it will ensure that the school continues to be viable in the longer term. I can assure you that once that information is received and assessed, I will not delay my decision.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Education what measures she is taking to ensure that the post-primary transfer criteria of Community, Geographical and Family will be applied in a way that will avoid becoming a postcode lottery.

(AQO 1307/08)

The Minister of Education: The process of area based planning will ensure that provision of sufficient scale and diversity is available to facilitate young people's preferred educational pathways post-14. The people involved in local educational sectors are best placed to arrange provision at a local level.

Additionally, following the making of new admissions criteria regulations, the Department will issue statutory admissions guidance to schools, which they will have a legal obligation to have regard to, and this will cover the appropriate use of admissions criteria.

New Curriculum

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Education what is her assessment of the cost to parents of the introduction of the new curriculum and, in particular, the emphasis on independent living and developing life skills, for special needs children. (AQO 1391/08)

The Minister of Education: The revised curriculum is more flexible and inclusive than before so it will give teachers more scope to meet the individual needs of every young person in their classroom, including any additional support needs they may have. It does not follow, however, that there should be any additional costs for parents to bear beyond the time we all want to see parents giving to support and encourage their children throughout their education.

In support of the emphasis on independent living and developing life skills for children with special needs, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment has been working closely with teachers in the special education sector to develop teacher guidance for all areas of the curriculum.

Education and Library Boards provide Life Skills Training Programmes to young people with SEN to support them in self-help and independent living. Boards also have Education Transition Co-ordinators in post to support these young people and their parents.

Post-Primary School Enrolment Numbers

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the total number of post-primary schools; and (ii) the number of these schools with a present enrolment of less than 500 pupils. (AQO 1352/08)

The Minister of Education: There are 226 post-primary schools in 2007/08. Of these, 81 have an enrolment of less than 500 pupils.

In-Year Spending Review

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of money returned under the latest in-year spending review. (AQO 1275/08)

The Minister of Education: In the December 2007 in-year monitoring round, from a resource budget of £1,755.9 million, the Department surrendered £5.1 million or 0.3% of the resource budget to DFP for reallocation. In addition, from a capital budget of £221.9 million, the Department surrendered £28.6 million or 12.9% of the capital budget.

Scoil an Droichid, Belfast

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister of Education to outline what plans she has for the provision of a new build at Scoil an Droichid, Cooke Street, Belfast.
(AQO 1343/08)

The Minister of Education: Discussions are currently underway between the Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaíochta and my Department about the provision of a permanent new build for Scoil an Droichid. It is not yet at a stage where there are any firm development plans.

Stalemating

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to address the process of stalemating in relation to children with special educational needs, in order to provide more detailed guidance on the child's individual needs and therapy requirements.
(AQO 1388/08)

The Minister of Education: The Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs (DE, 1998) introduced detailed guidance for all professionals working with children with special educational needs (SEN). The Code of Practice sets out a 5-stage SEN framework for ELBs and schools to follow. A Statement of Special Educational Needs is provided at Stage 5 and it is at this stage that the ELB becomes responsible for ensuring that the child's SENs are met.

The Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 (SENDO) came into effect on 1st September 2005 and strengthened the rights of all children with SEN to a mainstream education. In 2005 the Department of Education issued, for schools and ELBs, a Supplement to the existing Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs, in order to support the new SEN provisions of the SENDO and to provide updated guidance.

The review of special educational needs and inclusion which commenced in April 2006 aims to address a range of issues associated with the current SEN framework, a key feature of which is the current statutory assessment process and statementing.

As recommendations about a child's therapy requirements are the responsibility of the health sector, ELBs take advice from local Health and Social Services Trusts about the level and type of therapeutic interventions required.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Higher Education Role Analysis Analytical Job Evaluation Scheme

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the amount; and (ii) the date, of any funding provided to (a) Queen's University, Belfast; and (b) the University of Ulster, in order to carry out the Higher Education Role Analysis Analytical Job Evaluation Scheme. (AQW 2659/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): My Department has not provided specific funding to the universities for the purpose of carrying out the Higher Education Role Analysis Analytical Job Evaluation Scheme.

The Department has however, with effect from 2001/02, provided funding to both universities under the Rewarding and Developing Staff Initiative for the implementation of human resource strategies. One of the priorities for the Initiative, which also applies to higher education providers in England, is that institutions should ensure equal pay for work of equal value using institution-wide systems of job evaluation. The universities are therefore free to use this funding towards meeting the costs arising from implementation of their human resource strategies, including those arising from job evaluations. The amount of funding provided to each university under the Rewarding and Developing Staff Initiative is provided in the table below;

Academic Year	2001/02 £000	2002/03 £000	2003/04 £000	2004/05 £000	2005/06 £000 (*)
QUB	1,211	1,817	2,574	788	1,844
UU	1,269	1,903	2,697	842	1,967
Total	2,480	3,720	5,271	1,630	3,811

* From 2006/07, Rewarding and Developing Staff funding was absorbed into core grant allocations.

New Deal for Musicians Programme

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail what pastoral care (i) is required in the criteria for the New Deal for Musicians Programme; and (ii) has been provided to students on this programme who are based in the North West region, in the last three years. (AQW 2742/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: There is no requirement within any of the New Deal programmes for contracted providers to provide pastoral care to participants.

New Deal for Musicians Programme

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the contractual basis for the provision of the New Deal for Musicians Programme, for people domiciled in the North West, by the South Eastern and Regional College. (AQW 2743/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The South Eastern Regional College currently hold the contract to deliver the New Deal for Musician programme throughout N. Ireland. Due to an ongoing review of contracts to deliver adult return to work provision, the contract has recently been extended to cover the period up to 31 August 2008.

Student Fees

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to confirm whether or not he was advised by Queen's University, Belfast, and the University of Ulster, in advance of the Assembly debate on the Student Fees (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 on 10 December 2007, that they may reduce student bursaries to make up reduced fees income, in the event that the regulations were annulled. (AQO 1318/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Department was aware that reducing student bursaries was a possibility and it would not have been unexpected for Universities to consider this, given that they pay more than the minimum bursary requirement. Higher Education Institutions charging variable fees must have an Access Agreement, approved by my Department. This requires them to pay a minimum bursary of £300 per annum to students on the maximum DEL maintenance grant. Both QUB and UU are paying access bursaries of up to £1,000 per annum. Bursaries are funded from fee income. The issue was first raised with the Department in the context of the Comprehensive Spending Review as it might affect Higher Education.

Budget Negotiations

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide an update on progress made in relation to budget negotiations to address (i) the provision of 300 PhD research posts for students by 2010; (ii) the participation by Northern Ireland Universities in the all-Ireland Science Foundation; (iii) the creation of additional adult apprenticeships and extra monies for ICT as a third essential skill; (iv) critical sector initiatives; and (v) essential skills, in response to the Leitch Review. (AQO 1320/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: All of these areas are important to the growth of a dynamic, innovative economy here in Northern Ireland and are key priorities for my Department. I am awaiting the outcome of the Budget for the three years from April 2008 which will be recommended by the Executive and debated by the Assembly in the near future.

Adult Apprenticeships

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give his assessment of the significance of the funding gap for adult apprenticeships, given the reduced allocation of funding in the draft Budget in comparison to the DEL bid for adult apprenticeships under the Comprehensive Spending Review; and to outline the impact this will have on indigenous and inward investment projects. (AQO 1322/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The current allocation in the draft budget will have an impact on the number of apprenticeships that can be provided. They are a key part of upskilling the indigenous workforce. Providing a skilled workforce is also crucial to attracting inward investors so any limit on the number is bound to have an impact on economic growth.

In the first year, the indicative budget would enable around 200 adults to be enrolled in apprenticeships in addition to the 104 already taking part in pilot programmes. The Department will target these places in priority skill areas.

Ards Campus of the South Eastern Regional College

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the future plans for the Ards campus of the South Eastern Regional College. (AQO 1304/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department has committed to provide a £5m capital grant to develop new facilities for construction, engineering and motor vehicle maintenance for the Ards campus. Other plans in relation to management issues are handled directly by the South Eastern Regional College.

Northern Ireland Students in Great Britain

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the percentage of Northern Ireland domiciled university students that have gone to

study in universities in Great Britain, in each of the last five years. (AQO 1410/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The percentages of Northern Ireland domiciled university students that have gone to study in universities in Great Britain for each of the last five years are:

2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
22%	21%	23%	22%	24%

Lifelong Learning

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what is his assessment of the future of lifelong learning, in relation to the proposed ending of funding for the Workers' Education Association, the Ulster People's College, and the Educational Guidance Service for Adults. (AQO 1405/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Department remains committed to Lifelong Learning and, through the Further Education colleges' main campuses and 876 Outreach Centres, will continue to meet the needs of learners throughout their lives. Each year some 240,000 people enrol on further education courses from Entry Level upwards.

The conclusion of the Department's present contractual arrangements with the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), the Ulster Peoples' College (UPC) and the Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA) will not affect this commitment.

North Down and Ards Institute

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to (i) provide a timescale for the proposed changes to courses and staff reductions in the North Down and Ards Institute branch of the South Eastern Regional College; and (ii) detail the consultation process in relation to this matter. (AQO 1349/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Following the merger of further education colleges in August 2007, the South Eastern Regional College, in keeping with other further education colleges in Northern Ireland, is organising its provision and structures to meet business needs. Any consequent changes to the provision of courses and the number of staff are matters for College management. The College is consulting with staff unions regarding possible redundancies, in accordance with the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996.

Essential Skills Courses

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of people that have registered an interest in Essential Skills courses for 2008. (AQO 1278/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Information regarding the number of people that have registered an interest in Essential Skills courses for 2008 is not available. Initial enrolments in Essential Skills courses for academic year 2007/08 are 11,531, as at 30th November 2007.

Teachers' Premature Retirement Compensation Scheme

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the implications of changes to the Teachers' Premature Retirement Compensation scheme for Further Education employers and employees. (AQO 1314/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The changes to the Teachers' Premature Retirement Compensation Scheme, from 1st April 2008, will make employers responsible for all costs associated with the enhancement of pensions under the Scheme. Any enhancement of pension is a discretionary element of the Scheme, and will be subject to affordability.

University Dropouts

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of first-year students at university who have dropped out in the last five years; and to outline what action he is taking to reduce the number of drop-outs. (AQO 1397/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The latest year that statistics are available is 2004/5. In the five years up to then, the number of first year, full-time, undergraduate students who dropped out was as follows:

2000/01	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05
585	740	850	1,020	955

Both Queen's University and the University of Ulster have in place a comprehensive range of measures which seek to ensure that all students optimise their potential and leave University with the best possible academic qualification.

At Queen's University the 'Supporting Student Attainment Working Group' takes active measures to promote greater retention and attainment rates.

Also at Queen's, in 2008-09, a new Employability and Skills Policy will be implemented, taking forward

active measures for portfolio planning, mentoring and personal tutoring for all undergraduate students.

Similarly, at the University of Ulster, a major study has just been completed on student retention, which will inform the University's revised Teaching and Learning Strategy.

Teachers' Premature Retirement Compensation Scheme

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the arrangements in place for employees in further education and higher education colleges who are seeking early retirement.
(AQO 1401/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Teachers' Premature Retirement Compensation Scheme is operated at the discretion of the employer. Through this scheme, employers can initiate the retirement of lecturers as a result of organisational or curricular changes, rationalisation or falling enrolments.

Skills Strategy and Development

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action he is taking in relation to the involvement of the Open University in skills strategy and development, as highlighted in the Programme for Government.
(AQO 1323/08)

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, for example, through its participation on a working group set up to provide advice to the Department on the development and delivery of Foundation Degrees in Northern Ireland. This working group informed the content of a consultation document "Review of Higher Education in Further Education policies, including Foundation Degrees" which the Department issued in November 2007.

Success through Skills is due for review in 2008. As part of this process, my 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.

PhD Places

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action he is taking to implement his commitment to provide 300 more PhD places, as outlined in the draft Programme for Government.
(AQO 1276/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: This issue is important to the growth of a dynamic, innovative economy here in Northern Ireland. I am awaiting the outcome of the Budget for the three years from April 2008 which will be recommended by the Executive and debated by the Assembly in the near future.

'Further Education Means Business'

Mr Neeson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what is his assessment of the future of lifelong learning under the strategy 'Further Education Means Business'.
(AQO 1406/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The future of lifelong learning is assured. Under "Further Education Means Business", the further education sector will continue to be at the heart of lifelong learning in order to strengthen economic and workforce development, to enhance social cohesion and to advance the individual's skills and learning.

Skills Development in the Hospitality and Tourism Sector

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to consider the model in the Republic of Ireland, where Failte Ireland is active in the skills development of staff working in the hospitality and tourism sector.
(AQO 1321/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The structures in place for skills training in Northern Ireland differs from those in Ireland. Here, People 1st is the Sector Skills Council that covers the hospitality and tourism sectors working with employers, stakeholders and providers. My Department has entered into a Sector Skills Agreement (SSA) with People 1st that has taken into account their views on the needs of the sectors and the education and training available. The SSA has been influenced by skills developments nationally in the UK and internationally, including Ireland.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Development of Businesses in Rural Areas

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he has met with, or plans to meet with, the Minister of the Environment with regard to the removal of planning hurdles that frustrate the development of businesses in rural areas.

(AQW 2701/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): I meet the Minister of the Environment regularly at the Executive's Subcommittee on Rural Planning Policy, which she chairs. This enables me to ensure that the interests of businesses are taken into account as rural planning policy is developed. The most recent meeting of the Sub committee was on 14 January 2008.

Northern Ireland Film Industry

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans are in place to encourage and further develop the Northern Ireland Film Industry, in light of the success of 'Closing the Ring'.

(AQW 2707/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In April 2007, the Northern Ireland Screen Commission (NISC) launched its second three year strategy integrating industrial, educational and cultural policies and actions to support the local industry.

Invest NI provided £10.7 million over four years (2003 – 2007) to support the Commission's first strategy. A further £12.4 million has been approved over three years (2007 – 2010) to support the current strategy. This represents a 54% increase in the average annual support to the commission from £2.7 million to £4.1 million a year.

Of the £12.4 million in support of the current strategy, £8.1 million is available to target inward investment. This would be in the form of high value productions, film, television and digital content, to shoot on location in Northern Ireland. 'Closing the Ring' is one such example.

In addition, £750,000 is available to support the marketing activities of the NISC where the majority of this expenditure is again targeted at attracting inward investment.

The success of the Commission's strategy is demonstrated not just by securing Lord Attenborough's 'Closing the Ring' but by securing a total of 20

productions to date including 'City of Ember'. 'City of Ember' is a \$50 million Hollywood feature film from the Tom Hank's owned production company Playtone. This film was shot in the Paint Hall in the Titanic Quarter of Belfast and is due for release in October 2008.

Hotel Development

Mr F McCann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide a breakdown, by parliamentary constituency, of public money allocated through his department to hotel development in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 2714/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: From 1 April 2002 to 31 March 2007, the breakdown by parliamentary constituency of public money allocated to hotel development in each of the last 5 years is detailed in the table over.

Financial Year Ending	Constituency	Assistance
31 March 2003	Belfast South	£47,329
	Belfast East	£79,800
	Fermanagh & South Tyrone	£803,000
	South Down	£13,990
	Strangford	£60,388
31 March 2004	Belfast South	£368,270
	Fermanagh & South Tyrone	£154,100
	Foyle	£29,168
	North Antrim	£6,067
	South Antrim	£668,324
	North Down	£25,411
	Strangford	£22,000
31 March 2005	Belfast South	£235,819
	Belfast North	£452,644
	Fermanagh & South Tyrone	£230,945
	Foyle	£48,734
	South Antrim	£13,428
	North Down	£9,167
	South Down	£200,000
	East Londonderry	£8,600
	West Tyrone	£15,200
	Lagan Valley	£43,983

Financial Year Ending	Constituency	Assistance
31 March 2006	Belfast North	£137,204
	Fermanagh & South Tyrone	£205,710
	Foyle	£38,700
	North Down	£38,642
	South Down	£2,540,000
	East Londonderry	£542,250
	West Tyrone	£9,000
	Strangford	£22,396
31 March 2007	Belfast South	£27,411
	Fermanagh & South Tyrone	£3,500,000
	Foyle	£17,930
	North Antrim	£1,717,551
	South Antrim	£28,364
	East Londonderry	£22,989
	Upper Bann	£475,000

1,000MW Capacity Applications

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to the answer to AQW 1715/08, to confirm whether the 1,000MW capacity applications, currently with the Planning Service, relate to the expected average output, or to the peak output of the proposed turbines. (AQW 2726/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The 1000MW relates to the peak output of the proposed turbines.

Foreign Direct Investment

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action he is taking to encourage foreign direct investment, following the publication of the Varney Report. (AQW 2745/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The publication of the Varney Report will not change how Invest NI's international sales and marketing team promotes Northern Ireland as an attractive and viable location for new inward investment opportunities. Not all location decisions are tax driven. Invest NI's sectoral efforts are concentrated on the innovation-based sectors of internationally traded services, particularly, software, business services, financial services and ICT. Many of the projects that Invest NI competes for and secures in these areas sectors

operate as cost centres to which Northern Ireland offers a near-shore solution. The taxation differential is often not a consideration for such projects and is usually significantly outweighed by NI's compelling investment proposition which is *cost competitive, culturally compatible* and *close to customers*.

Environment and Renewable Energy Fund

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether or not the Environment and Renewable Energy Fund will continue to be supported beyond its present completion date in 2008.

(AQW 2886/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Environment and Renewable Energy Fund (EREF) is a ring fenced fund running from 1 April 2006 – 31 March 2008, and is not available in its current form beyond that date. Departments currently receiving funding from the EREF are required to bid through the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) process for funding to cover any EREF activities that they wish to continue post March 2008. DETI has however secured a bid for £17million to allow offers made under the Reconnect scheme and the Energy from Waste programmes to run to completion beyond March 2008.

Hotel Accommodation

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is his assessment of the additional hotel accommodation that is required to be built in the next five years. (AQO 1342/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The average annual growth in hotel room sales achieved across Northern Ireland between 2003 and 2007 was 6.9%. If this was to continue for the next 5 years, with all factors remaining equal, an additional 3,300 hotel rooms would be required by 2013. This could equate to a further requirement of 66 hotels.

Since April 2005 Invest NI has provided more than £9 million in grant assistance towards the development of 9 significant tourism accommodation projects, with total project costs of £52 million. These have included Galgorm Manor in Ballymena; Slieve Donard in Newcastle and Castle Hume in Enniskillen.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board is currently aware of around 50 potential hotel projects for Northern Ireland. While many of these are expressions of interest at this stage I am very encouraged at the level of interest shown by the private sector in hotel development.

Productivity Gap Between Northern Ireland and Great Britain

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is his assessment of the productivity gap that exists between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. (AQO 1418/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Official Government statistics indicate that Northern Ireland's productivity gap with the UK was 15.3% in 2005, the largest of all the UK regions. The draft Programme for Government has specified a private sector productivity goal relative to the UK excluding the Greater South East of England, given the radically different economic structure to Northern Ireland. Set against this measure, Northern Ireland's private sector productivity gap was estimated to be 8.1% in 2005. Recent forecasts also indicate that there has been little change, with the gap estimated to be 8.5% in 2007.

Annual Loyal Order Demonstrations

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action he is taking to maximise the tourist potential of the various annual Loyal Order demonstrations. (AQO 1436/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Loyal Order and their demonstrations have long been an integral part of the fabric of NI Society. During the Troubles the enormous tourist potential was not realised

In recognition of their importance to tourism in Northern Ireland, I have asked the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to work with my Department to develop a cultural and heritage strategy which will include the Loyal Orders. This work is nearing completion.

Alongside this work, NITB and Tourism Ireland Limited met with the Grand Orange Lodge on three occasions in 2007, June, August and December, to discuss the tourism potential of the Twelfth celebrations.

NITB provided a trainer to undertake 'Welcome Host' training for the stewards attending the 2007 Enniskillen Parade, which had been identified as a flagship event for tourists.

Tourism Ireland has identified possible potential in relation to a Williamite Trail, the route taken by King William on his way through Ireland to victory at the Battle of the Boyne and production of promotional material for such a development. TIL have discussed these matters with the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland, who have invited TIL to present on its role and activities to representatives of 10 District Lodges regarding flagship parades in 2008.

I understand NITB and TIL are also to meet with members of the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland within the next month to discuss ways of developing the 'flagship' concept and to see whether future 'Welcome Host' training would be helpful.

Invest NI

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide an update on the performance of Invest NI in locating employment in the last 12 months within the area defined by the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Taskforce report 2002. (AQO 1328/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: During 2006/07 Invest NI worked intensively with its client companies within the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Taskforce area to identify and support development projects; projects that promote export-led growth and the prospect of improving productivity by becoming more internationally competitive. These projects will ultimately safeguard or lead to an increase in employment.

Although it is disappointing that no first time investors chose to invest in the area in the year, investment from Invest NI's existing client base was most encouraging. Invest NI offered almost £1million of grant aid in support of follow-on development projects. Among the clients supported were Icemos Technology and Andor Technology. Invest NI sold 3 serviced sites (covering an area of 3.5 acres), 50,000 square feet of factory sales, and 95,000 square feet of building leases from its property portfolio in the West Belfast and Greater Shankill area to client companies in support of development projects.

Invest NI also provided financial assistance in other forms that will directly and indirectly impact on employment. In the year 2006/2007, 114 offers under the Start a Business Programme were made to people wishing to start their own business. In addition, financial assistance was offered to the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Enterprise Council in support of its operating costs, the remit of which is to work with local business to identify barriers for entrepreneurial activity and business development.

It is important to note that in total during 2006/07, Invest NI offered £39 million of assistance to projects within the four Belfast Constituency areas. This included £20.7m of assistance towards 16 inward-investment projects by companies such as Mformation Technologies, Tech Mahindra, Firstsource Solutions and Citi. Although these inward investments were not located in the area defined by the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Taskforce report, they are in close

proximity and clearly offer employment opportunities to those living in these areas.

Economy Development

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what measures he is taking to develop a higher wage and higher productivity economy in order to address the economic disparity between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQO 1347/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In the context of developing the draft Programme for Government, I have made increasing private sector productivity my Department's top priority. We will therefore focus on attracting high quality inward investment, creating 6,500 jobs, 85% of which will offer salaries above the private sector median.

Overall we are aiming to secure wages and salaries of £345 million reflecting inward investment successes and locally owned companies.

We will also target investment to increase innovation and exports and improve energy and telecoms infrastructure. However, the productivity drivers also include skills and wider infrastructure.

The Department of Employment and Learning and the Department for Regional Development also have important roles in achieving a high productivity, high wage economy.

Biotech Industry

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the amount of investment by Invest NI in supporting the biotech industry in each of the last three years; and (ii) the number of jobs that existed in that sector in 2007. (AQO 1430/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Biotech Industry or Life Sciences sector has been identified as a priority sector by Invest NI in line with the Regional Innovation Strategy.

The sector in Northern Ireland is well placed to benefit from further strategic investment with a number of companies operating on a global basis, two leading universities undertaking cutting edge research and a highly skilled workforce.

There has been significant recent investment in the Life Sciences sector. In 2006/07 £7.2 million of assistance was offered; in 2005/06 the figure was £11.04 million and finally in 2004/05 £15.96 million was offered. Therefore in total in the last three years, Invest NI has

offered £34 million in support of life sciences projects, stimulating total investment of £110 million.

In addition, provisional figures for the nine month period to the end of December 2007, indicate Invest NI has offered £5m of assistance to companies in the sector towards total investment of £92.7 million. This support has resulted in world class projects, such as the recent Norbrook Laboratories project, which will create up to 293 new jobs through the development of a number of new veterinary products for the global export market.

The number of jobs in the sector within Northern Ireland at the end of December 2007 was approximately 4,100 with a few large firms such as the Almac Group, Randox Laboratories, Norbrook Laboratories and Perfecseal providing a major proportion of the total sector employment.

In addition to Invest NI's financial support, companies in the sector have also benefited from assistance to attend medical device and bio exhibitions and conferences based in the USA and mainland Europe. The agency also funded a review of the NI Life & Health Technologies Sector which reported its findings in November 2006 and these were used by DETI's Matrix Life & Health Sciences Panel as a basis for its discussions.

Natural Gas Network

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is his assessment of the energy policy implications for the potential development of the new natural gas network, arising from the proposed loss of funding for the Housing Executive Heating Replacement Programme. (AQO 1316/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: As the Draft Investment Strategy is still at the consultation stage and final budgets will not be known until later this month it is difficult to accurately assess what impact any potential decrease of funding for the Housing Executive's Heating Replacement Programme will have on the development of the natural gas network.

My Department will of course continue to support the ongoing work by the gas companies in the development of the natural gas network in Northern Ireland. Natural gas is the cleanest burning fossil fuel and contributes to reducing greenhouse gases as well as bringing economic benefits and lower carbon emissions.

Tourism

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is assessment of the value

of tourism to the Northern Ireland economy.
(AQO 1416/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I regard the Tourism Industry as vital to the Northern Ireland economy. Latest estimates demonstrate that the total income generated by tourism contributes around 3.5 per cent of Northern Ireland's total Gross Value Added and supports approximately 38,700 jobs, around 29,000 Full Time Equivalent jobs. In 2007, 2.05 million out-of-state visitors generated an estimated £366 million revenue, representing a growth of 29% in visitor revenue since 2003. Last year domestic tourism also generated an estimated £135 million revenue.

All-Island Energy Market

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is his assessment of the initial of the all-island Energy Market since its establishment.
(AQO 1432/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The successful introduction of the Single Electricity Market on 1 November 2007 has provided benefits, from the outset, in terms of increased security and diversity of electricity supplies in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. In addition, a number of generating companies are already developing plans for investment in the new competitive market.

It is too early to assess the economic benefits. These are expected to accrue to consumers, in the medium to longer term, from greater competition, efficiencies and economies of scale within the new market. It has always been recognised, however, that such benefits will need to be set against the recovery of market implementation costs in the early stages.

Business Start-Ups

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he has to encourage people to return to Northern Ireland to set up businesses.
(AQO 1341/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI recognises that further growth in employment, particularly in higher salaried jobs, in key sectors such as ICT and Financial Services is dependent on developing and maintaining a consistent skills pipeline to avoid potential skills shortages in years to come.

In order to address any potential skills gap, Invest NI is in the process of developing a campaign to attract talent into the region. This campaign will initially focus on those with the relevant skills wishing to locate, or

return to Northern Ireland and it is envisaged it will be launched by April 2008.

Whilst Invest NI does not currently have any programmes specifically designed to encourage people to return to Northern Ireland, it does currently provide a comprehensive range of advice and financial support which is available to all. This includes those returning entrepreneurs with attractive business proposals.

Business Start-Ups

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action he is taking to encourage people aged 50 and over to set up their own business.
(AQO 1326/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: PRIME, which has been active in England and Wales for a number of years, is the only national organisation promoting and supporting self-employment and enterprise amongst people aged over 50.

Invest NI is providing £250,000 of funding to the organisation.

PRIME commenced a two-year pilot programme in Northern Ireland in April 2007. It delivers Enterprise Awareness and Personal Mentoring programmes to people aged over 50 who do not consider enterprise as one of their options and who fail to engage with mainstream provision. The primary driver for the project is the low rate of enterprise and entrepreneurship exhibited in Northern Ireland, particularly amongst older people and within the Renewing Community areas.

Invest NI's Start a Business Programme is also available to the over 50's.

Invest NI

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the role played by Invest NI in supporting existing employment during the last 12 months, within the area defined by the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Taskforce Report 2002.
(AQO 1426/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI continues to play an important role in supporting existing employment within the area defined by the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Taskforce. Invest NI works intensively with its client-base to identify and support development projects; that is projects that promote export-led growth and the prospect of improving productivity by becoming more internationally competitive.

Invest NI offers access to a comprehensive range of programmes and practical business advice targeted at

every facet of business development, including business improvement training, trade promotion, an extensive suite of innovation and R&D programmes, and property solutions.

In the financial year 2006/07, the agency offered almost £1 million of grant aid in support of follow-on development projects from its existing client base. Among the clients supported were Icemos Technology and Andor Technology.

In addition, Invest NI sold 3 serviced sites, covering an area of 3.5 acres, 50,000 square feet of factory sales, and 95,000 square feet of building leases from its property portfolio in the West Belfast and Greater Shankill area to client companies in support of development projects.

Invest NI also provided financial assistance in other forms that will directly and indirectly impact on employment. In the year 2006/07, 114 offers under the Start a Business Programme were made to people wishing to start their own business. In addition, financial assistance was offered to the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Enterprise Council in support of its operating costs, the remit of which is to work with local business to identify barriers for entrepreneurial activity and business development.

It is important to note that Invest NI intervention is essentially demand-led and, therefore, ultimately dependent upon the decision of its clients to undertake investment projects.

Invest NI

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the criteria applied by Invest NI in advising potential investors, or existing clients, to locate within the area defined by the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Taskforce Report 2002. (AQO 1425/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI is committed to encouraging potential investors and existing clients to locate and invest in the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Taskforce area, although ultimately the investment decisions are of course taken solely by the individual clients.

Invest NI works closely with its clients to identify viable business solutions, including location options, which meet their particular requirements. The attractiveness and suitability of any location is generally determined by considering the appropriate suite of location-decision making criteria applicable to a particular project. Criteria include the availability of labour and skills, property provision, proximity to transportation linkages, access to amenities, and the financial incentives on offer.

The West Belfast and Greater Shankill Taskforce area offers a sound business proposition to many, if not all, clients. Its unique selling point is that it contains almost all of Invest NI's industrial land bank in the four Belfast parliamentary constituencies. The agency has 35 acres of available land in 5 industrial estates, all of which are now attracting an encouraging level of interest. In addition, like similar areas of economic disadvantage across Northern Ireland, investors in the area can attract a premium financial package.

The attractiveness of the area can be seen in recent investment successes. Investment from Invest NI's existing client base in 2006/07 was most encouraging. Invest NI offered almost £1million of grant aid in support of follow-on development projects. Among the clients supported were Icemos Technology and Andor Technology. In addition, Invest NI sold 3 serviced sites (3.5 acres), 50,000 square feet of factory sales, and 95,000 square feet of building leases from its property portfolio in the West Belfast and Greater Shankill area to client companies in support of development projects. It has every reason to believe that the remaining land bank will prove a major draw for future investment, given the paucity of affordable industrial land in the Greater Belfast area as a whole.

However, it should be said that there is increasing evidence that the larger tradeable service projects are choosing to locate in city centre locations.

Jobs Creation/Losses

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of jobs in the economy that have been (i) created; and (ii) lost, in the last 12 months. (AQO 1429/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: It is not possible to provide an exact measure of the number of jobs created and lost in the NI economy in the last 12 months. However, figures from the Quarterly Employment Survey (QES) can be used to estimate the net change in employee job levels during the last year.

Latest figures from the QES show that in September 2007 there were 720,210 employee jobs in NI. This represents an increase of 12,010 (1.7%) from the September 2006 figure of 708,200.

United States of America/Northern Ireland Investment Conference

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide an update on his plans for the forthcoming United States of America/Northern Ireland investment conference. (AQO 1355/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: On 14 January 2008 the First Minister and Deputy First

Minister wrote to CEOs and senior executives of leading US corporations inviting them to the conference.

In addition, a number of senior business leaders have been invited by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to speak at the conference.

A comprehensive follow-up campaign has been initiated to contact all who have received an invitation to encourage as many of them as possible to participate in the conference.

ENVIRONMENT

Climate Change

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the contribution made by her department towards the formulation of the United Kingdom's input at the United Nations conference on climate change, held in Bali. (AQW 2690/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): The government at Westminster takes responsibility for international negotiations on climate change at events such as the recent UN conference in Bali. No specific input was sought or given by any of the devolved administrations to the formulation of the United Kingdom's input to the Bali conference.

Planning Applications

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister of the Environment if permission for a planning application has ever been withdrawn subsequent to approval having been granted. (AQW 2692/08)

The Minister of the Environment: There are occasions when an extant planning permission may be revoked by the Department. Under Article 38 of the Planning (NI) Order 1991, an order may be made revoking or modifying a planning permission which may give rise to a claim for compensation under the Lands Development Values (Compensation) Act (NI) 1965. This provision is only used in exceptional circumstances and my Department must be able to fully justify any changes in views or policy where there is a liability to pay compensation.

Since 2001, there has only been one case when this has been used. In 2001/02, the Department revoked a planning permission for peat extraction at Ballynahone Bog, Maghera.

However, under Article 3 of the 1978 Planning Amendment Order there is a further provision which may be used with Article 38 to facilitate the substitution

of one planning permission for another without a compensation liability. In practice most of these requests are initiated by an applicant to facilitate the issue of a substitute permission. In such cases, the owner must agree to the revocation of one permission in exchange for the grant of an alternative planning permission. In the current business year 11 such permissions were revoked, all without compensation being paid.

Planning Officers

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what steps she is taking to reduce the time lapse between successful interview and placement of new planning officers. (AQW 2708/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Before a successful interview candidate can be appointed to a post in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, a range of pre-employment checks to verify a candidate's identity, nationality and criminal record must be undertaken which involves HR Connect, the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) and the Criminal Records Office.

My Department has no discretion to alter these checks. However, it is in regular contact with Security Branch in DFP to ensure that the process for recruiting planning officers is kept to a minimum.

It is anticipated that offers will be made to potential new planning officers during February 2008.

Private Hire Taxis

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of people who are licensed to drive private hire taxis. (AQW 2757/08)

The Minister of the Environment: There were 19,268 licensed taxi drivers in Northern Ireland at 31 December 2007, all of whom are licensed to drive private hire taxi vehicles.

Private Hire Taxi Licences

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of applications for new private hire taxi licenses, that were approved in each of the last 12 months, broken down by postcode. (AQW 2758/08)

The Minister of the Environment: A taxi driver's licence entitles the holder to drive all forms of taxi vehicle, either public or private hire.

The information requested is set out in the following table.

FIRST TIME LICENCES APPROVED 1.1.07 - 31.12.07

Postcode	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Grand Total
BT1		1											1
BT10	6	2	1	3	1	1	2			5	5	4	30
BT11	17	13	9	13	13	6	6	5	9	9	10	14	124
BT12	6	14	16	8	9	9	10	3	10	10	7	7	109
BT13	10	10	6	4	2	4	4	7	8	11	5	8	79
BT14	3	7	8	9	11	6	8	8	6	11	6	11	94
BT15	2	1	4	2	3	1	5	6	2	4	8	2	40
BT16	6	5	3	2		2	1	1	1	2	5	3	31
BT17	13	11	10	13	13	9	11	8	9	9	18	17	141
BT18		2				1	1	1	1				6
BT19	1	5	2	1	1	2		1	3	4	5	4	29
BT20	2	2	3		1	2	1	2	1	3	1	4	22
BT21	1	1		1		2					1		6
BT22	3	4	4		2	1	1	2			1	1	19
BT23	12	4	6	4	4	4	5	2	8	3	9	3	64
BT24	3	1		1		2		2	3	4	2	4	22
BT25	2		5	2	1	3	2			3	3		21
BT26			2	2				1				1	6
BT27	5	4	1	1	2	2	2	2	1	4	3	2	29
BT28	8	6	6	5	4	3	3	2	6	4	5	3	55
BT29	3	3	2	2	7	3		3	4	7	7	4	45
BT30	3	2	8	8	1	4		7	4	3	3	4	47
BT31	2		2		3	1		3	1	2	1	1	16
BT32	2	5	1	5	5	5	3	2	2	3	5	1	39
BT33	1	3	4	1	3	1		2		1		2	18
BT34	9	5	8	7	13	6	5	4	5	7	13	8	90
BT35	9	4	5	5	6	6	5	2	5	4	5	10	66
BT36	11	16	17	11	7	11	3	10	13	16	13	6	134
BT37	2	8	8	4	2	3	2	2	1	5	5	5	47
BT38	9	6	6	2	5	1	2	3	2	2	6	4	48
BT39	6		1	2	1	1	1	2	1	3	5	2	25
BT4	3	4	2	4	3	1	3	3	2	2	3	1	31
BT40	1	5	2	3	5	3	4	2	2	2	1	4	34
BT41	11	6	8	4	9	3	3	5	5	4	9	6	73
BT42	6	2	2	1	1	5	3	1		5	4	4	34
BT43	2	3	2		3	1	2	1	1	4	4	2	25
BT44	3	1	2				2	3	3	2	3	1	20

Postcode	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Grand Total
BT45		1	4	1	3	1	1	2			5	1	19
BT46	1		1				1		1		1		5
BT47	16	13	12	3	5	8	6	8	7	14	10	7	109
BT48	18	21	15	20	23	15	9	16	11	26	22	22	218
BT49	2	2	3		1	2	2	3	2	4	5	2	28
BT5	11	12	6	2	11	5	2	3	3	3	3	5	66
BT51	1	1	5	1		3	2	3	3	2	1	3	25
BT52	3	3	1		1	1	1		2	3		2	17
BT53	1		5	2	3	1	3	1		3	4	1	24
BT54	1	1	1	1				2	1			2	9
BT55		3	1	1	1			2		1	1		10
BT56		4	1	1	1			1	2	1	2	1	14
BT57								1		1			2
BT6	3	5	5	4	4	3	4	2	2	5	3	4	44
BT60	3	4	5	3	7	7	7	3	4	3	5	8	59
BT61	3	2	4	1	1	3		3	2	2	2	1	24
BT62	1	4	2	7	9	4	3	7	7	9	3	5	61
BT63	2	1	2	2	2	4	2	2	1	2	2		22
BT64								1				1	2
BT65			2		3	1		1	2			8	17
BT66	8	6	1	2		3	1	1	3	3	5	4	37
BT67	3	2	1	3	7	1	2	4	3	5	2	2	35
BT68							1						1
BT69		1							1	1	1	1	5
BT7	2	3	2		1	1	2		2	2	1		16
BT70		2	1	1		1	2			1	1	1	10
BT71	4		4	5	7	6	3	1	2	4	1	7	44
BT74	3	2	2	2	1		1	4	1	2	3	3	24
BT75	1					1							2
BT76								1					1
BT77										1			1
BT78	1	2		1	3	3	4	2	1	2	3	6	28
BT79	3		3	3	4	2	2	1		1	5	5	29
BT8	2	2	5	3	2	1	1	2	2	5	5	1	31
BT80	7	2	2	1	1	2	4	3	1	1	1	6	31
BT81		2	1			2				1		1	7
BT82	2	3	5	6	2	3	2	3	1	1	7	2	37
BT9		1	3	1		1			1	4	2	1	14
BT92	1	2	1	2	2	1	1	1	1		2	1	15

Postcode	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Grand Total
BT93		1	1	1		1	1	4		2	1		12
BT94		1	3						2	1	3	1	11
Grand Total	286	275	276	210	246	202	170	196	190	274	293	268	2886

Private Hire Taxi Licences

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the number of private taxi licenses that were revoked or withdrawn in each of the last 12 months, broken down by postcode; and (ii) the reasons for each of these withdrawals. (AQW 2759/08)

The Minister of the Environment: 184 taxi driver licences were revoked by the Department in the last 12 months to 31 December 2007: 165 were on health grounds and 19 for failure to meet the Department's repute criteria. There were 399 applications withdrawn during the same period. It is not possible to ascertain the numerous reasons for individuals withdrawing their applications, but we are aware that some applicants find alternative employment, or fail to submit medical or repute information. A breakdown of

the figures by postcode is not readily available and could only be compiled at disproportionate costs.

Private Hire Taxi Licences

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of applications, for new private hire taxi licenses, that were received in each of the last 12 months, broken down by postcode. (AQW 2776/08)

The Minister of the Environment: A taxi driver licence issued by the Department, be it renewal or first time application, enables the licensee to drive all forms of taxi vehicle, either public or private hire. The detail of the number of applicants is set out in the attached table.

Postcode	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Grand Total
BT1										1		1	2
BT10	1	5		1	2	1	2		6	4	4	2	28
BT11	14	16	14	11	7	7	9	7	9	10	14	8	126
BT12	16	9	9	11	8	9	7	8	9	11	8	6	111
BT13	8	8	2	1	4	8	9	6	8	6	16	6	82
BT14	12	10	12	2	11	8	6	9	11	8	11	8	108
BT15	1	5	4	3	5	8	2	4	2	5	5		44
BT16	5	5	2		2	1		4	2	3	3	1	28
BT17	9	12	16	10	7	11	12	9	13	22	13	3	137
BT18	2	1	3	1		1			1			3	12
BT19	1	2	1	2	2		1	5	3	7	8	3	35
BT20	1	4	1	3	2	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	23
BT21		1		1	1					1	1		5
BT22	6	3	1	2		1	1		1	3	3		21
BT23	9	6	5	4	6	4	8	7	3	8	3	5	68
BT24	1	1	2			2	3	3	2	4	1	2	21
BT25	3	6	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	1		1	21
BT26	1	3	1				1			1			7
BT27	3	2	4	2	3	1		6	4	2	3	3	33
BT28	10	3	2	8	1	5	6	6	3	6	4	8	62

Postcode	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Grand Total
BT29	4	3	5	1	3	4	5	4	8	4	1	1	43
BT30	4	9	2	2	7	2	5	3	3	5	1	2	45
BT31		1	2	2		1	5			2		1	14
BT32	4	6	8	1	2	2	3	3	5	5	2	9	50
BT33	4	1	3	2	1	1		1	1		3		17
BT34	10	7	11	5	7	4	9	7	5	13	8	4	90
BT35	6	6	9	7	2	5	5	5	8	9	6	8	76
BT36	11	17	12	6	9	4	14	18	8	12	13	8	132
BT37	8	7	4	1	2	3		5	3	3	8	5	49
BT38	8	8	3	4	1	3	2	3	2	7	3	3	47
BT39		2		1	2	3	2	1	3	7	1	2	24
BT4	5	4	4	1	1	3	3	1	4	2	1	1	30
BT40	4	3	6	1	5	3	2	2	3		3	1	33
BT41	7	10	7	5	2	7	5	8	3	10	6	9	79
BT42		2	4		3	4	1	4	4	2	3	3	30
BT43	1	3		3	3	1	1	3	5	4	5	1	30
BT44	2		1	1		3	2	3	1	2	1	1	17
BT45		5	2	1	1	2		1	2	5	1	1	21
BT46	1				1		1			2			5
BT47	16	8	6	6	10	6	9	13	13	12	10	4	113
BT48	29	18	19	17	18	11	14	27	23	20	23	22	241
BT49	2	2	2		2	1	4	4	7	2	7	1	34
BT5	6	4	8	1	9	1	4	4	4	2	7	1	51
BT51	1	4	2		3	5	3	2		1	4	1	26
BT52	2	1	1	1	1	1	2	2		2	2		15
BT53	5	4	2		1	3	1	1	3	4	2	2	28
BT54	2			1		1	1	1		1	1	1	9
BT55	2	2		2	1				1	1			9
BT56	2	1		2	1		1	1	1	2		1	12
BT57						1			1				2
BT6	4	6	4	4	1	5	3	6	1	2	1	6	43
BT60	4	5	3	11	7	3	3	12	2	9	4	4	67
BT61	3	3	5	1	3	2	3	3	2	2	2	1	30
BT62	2	10	9	3	4	5	6	7	3	4	9	4	66
BT63	1	4		3	5	1	2	3	1		3	2	25
BT64							1		1				2
BT65	1	1	2	1	2	1		3	3	3	4		21
BT66	2	2	1	4	1		4	3	2	5	3	1	28
BT67	2	1	7	4		5	3	4	1	3	1	1	32

Postcode	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Grand Total
BT68			1										1
BT69	1						2	1	1		1		6
BT7	3	1	2	2		2	1	1		1	1	3	17
BT70	3		2	1	1	1	1		2	2		2	15
BT71	3	6	11	5	2	4	1	2	4	4	5	2	49
BT74	1	4	1	1	2	2	4	2	2	2	4	1	26
BT75				1									1
BT76							1	1					2
BT77									1				1
BT78	1	2	4	5	1	4	3	3	5		6	1	35
BT79	1	4	3	4	2		2	2	3	4	5	4	34
BT8	4	5	4	2	1	1	1	3	4	3	3	2	33
BT80	2	1	1	4	5	4	1	3			5	2	28
BT81	2	2	1						1		2		8
BT82	3	12	1	2	5	3	2	2	2	8	4	1	45
BT9	1	2	1		1		1	2	3	2	1	1	15
BT92		1	2	1	1	2	1		2	1	1	1	13
BT93	1	2			2	3	1	1	1	1			12
BT94	1	1						5		4	1	1	13
IP4 5YD									1				1
SR8 2QJ				4									4
Grand Total	295	315	268	200	206	202	222	273	250	306	287	195	3019

Clean Neighbourhoods Agenda

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on the Clean Neighbourhoods Agenda. (AQW 2825/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Clean Neighbourhoods Agenda deals with a wide range of environmental problems, for example, litter, dog-fouling, graffiti, fly-posting, nuisance (including for example noise nuisance and nuisance caused by artificial light and insects), abandoned/nuisance vehicles and problem alleyways, which affect the quality of life in local neighbourhoods and public spaces in Northern Ireland. My officials have been considering how the powers of district councils could be strengthened and extended to enable them to deal more effectively with such problems. Primary legislation, preceded by appropriate consultation exercises with key interests, will be required to implement any stronger legislative provisions for district councils. 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.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Rates Capping

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of properties that would benefit from the capping of rates at a capital value of £400,000 instead of £500,000 (i) throughout Northern Ireland; (ii) in the North Down constituency; and what would be the impact on the rates raised in the North Down constituency. (AQW 2711/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): The number of properties in Northern Ireland that would benefit from a reduction in the maximum capital value limit from £500,000 to

£400,000 is approximately 5,300. Figures are not available at a constituency level. However, the number of properties that would benefit from this reduction in the North Down Borough Council area is 1,200. Based on current poundages, this reduction in maximum capital value would reduce the total amount of rates raised in this council area by £533,000, of which £204,000 would be district rate revenue.

Rates

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what impact will the reduction of the maximum capital value from £500,000 to £400,000 have on the amount of rates collected, based on the 2008 poundages. (AQW 2712/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The reduction in the maximum capital value from £500,000 to £400,000 reduces the amount of rate revenue that could be collected by £2.33m, based on 2007/08 poundages.

Enterprise Zones

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what discussions he has had with HM Treasury in relation to the creation of enterprise zones as an alternative to a reduction in corporation tax. (AQO 1286/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have had a number of discussions with the Chief Secretary on tax instruments over the recent months. These discussions have been in the context of the Varney Review which recently concluded. Enterprise zones were not specifically raised because assessments of earlier schemes indicated that they did not represent good value for money.

Rathgael House

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make a statement on the future of Rathgael House as a location for Civil Service accommodation. (AQW 2843/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: On 14 January 2008 the Department of Finance and Personnel invited the two remaining bidders for the Workplace 2010 contract to submit their best and final offers. In doing so the bidders have been asked to price the contract on the assumption that the Department of Finance and Personnel staff will return to the Stormont Estate. However the Department of Education will remain in Rathgael for the foreseeable future on the basis that the old Tower Block will be

demolished and the new building will be refurbished and extended for their use. This will be good news for the people of North Down and I have written separately to the Mayor on the matter.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Staff Costs

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total staff costs in the Health Service in terms of (i) the resources allocated; and (ii) as a percentage of the total expenditure of the Health Service, in each of the last five years. (AQW 2636/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Table 1 below shows staff costs and Table 2 shows staff costs as a percentage of total costs. Board expenditure includes the costs of Family Practitioner Services.

TABLE 1 TOTAL STAFF COSTS

Year	Trusts £m	Boards £m	Central Services Agency £m	Total £m
2001/02	1,016.4	21.2	11.4	1,049.0
2002/03	1,112.9	22.2	12.0	1,147.1
2003/04	1,247.4	25.4	13.1	1,285.9
2004/05	1,398.5	29.7	14.7	1,442.9
2005/06	1,518.5	31.0	16.0	1,565.5

TABLE 2 TOTAL EXPENDITURE

Year	Trusts %	Boards %	Central Services Agency %	Total %
2001/02	60.3	Not Available	21.7	Not Available
2002/03	60.0	4.0	18.9	46.3
2003/04	59.5	4.0	18.6	46.0
2004/05	60.9	4.3	19.7	47.2
2005/06	61.7	4.4	20.5	48.3

Efficiency Savings

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the efficiency

savings he intends to make over the next four years.
(AQW 2660/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department plans to achieve its efficiencies on the basis and timetable assigned by the Executive which is as follows:

Financial Year	Amount (expressed cumulatively)
2008/09	£118m
2009/10	£233m
2010/11	£344m

When we include the £146m achieved in the last three years, this represents challenging savings of almost half a billion pounds over a six year period.

No further savings for the 2011/12 financial year have been planned as yet as this period is outside the scope of the comprehensive spending review process currently under way across government.

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not a discrepancy has occurred over long-service retirement pension pay-outs in relation to the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service; and to detail (a) the nature of the discrepancy; (b) the period of time during which this discrepancy occurred; and (c) how much this discrepancy has cost the department. (AQW 2675/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There have been significant changes to Firefighters' Pensions Legislation in recent years and Northern Ireland legislation has been aligned with that in the rest of the UK. Unfortunately due to a misinterpretation of the regulations, 16 Firefighters over the period 2000 to 2007 had their long service retirement pensions miscalculated in that the correct limitations were not applied to the amount of pension entitlement these firefighters could commute for a higher lump sum and a consequent lower pension.

Legislation stipulates that in the case of an ordinary pension unless

- (a) when the person retires he is entitled to reckon at least 30 years' pensionable service, or
- (b) he retires at normal pension age

the commuted portion must not be such that the lump sum exceeds two and a quarter times the full amount of the pension. This provision was not applied in these cases. The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service became aware of the discrepancy as a result of the introduction and testing of new Pensions Software.

In respect of the 16 cases, annual pensions have been reduced by £32K per annum and this equates to a total commuted lump sum figure of some £467K. It is not possible to determine if any actual loss has been incurred in the misinterpretation of the commutation regulations. This is because commutation calculations are based on tables of life expectancy provided by the Governments Actuarial Department (GAD). Costs will therefore depend on the actual life span of each of the individuals affected.

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service have put in place further stringent checks on pension calculations as a result and I can confirm that there are no outstanding cases affected by this misinterpretation.

Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to the answer to AQW 2597/08, to give his assessment of (i) the lack of prosecutions taken against establishments and individuals in relation to serious issues arising from 'failure to comply' notices; and (ii) the actions of the Improvement and Regulatory Authority in enforcing its statutory powers in relation to prosecutions.
(AQW 2686/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) is an independent agency responsible for the regulation of establishments and agencies delivering health and social care.

The question of prosecution is a matter for the RQIA; it has the legal authority to carry out inspections as often as it considers necessary and at any time. These visits can be unannounced.

In addition to the significant sanction of prosecution, the RQIA can apply restrictions on further admissions to the establishment or agency until improvements are carried out. Ultimately registration may be withdrawn and the home closed.

The RQIA has provided assurance that all those establishments and agencies which have been issued with failure to comply notices (with one exception, where the establishment has closed) are either now complying with the legislative requirements or are taking action to achieve compliance, and this is being monitored by the RQIA.

I assure you that I am committed to high quality and safe services for all who access care, including those in residential and nursing homes.

Alcohol Related Injuries

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number and; (ii) percentage of presentations to the Accident and Emergency, and Minor Injury departments, in each of the hospitals in Northern Ireland, where the injury/condition is alcohol related. (AQW 2713/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information is not available centrally on the number of people who have presented at Accident and Emergency, and Minor Injury Departments with alcohol-related conditions. However the number of emergency admissions to hospital for alcohol-related conditions is available.

The number of emergency admissions and percentage of total emergency admissions to hospitals in Northern Ireland where there was a diagnosis of an alcohol related illness/condition, is presented in the table below:

HSC Provider	Total Alcohol Related Emergency Admissions	% of Total Emergency Admissions that were alcohol related
Belfast HSC Provider	2,705	6.98%
South Eastern HSC Provider	981	4.21%
Northern HSC Provider	1,328	4.58%
Southern HSC Provider	1,362	4.90%
Western HSC Provider	1,208	4.51%
Total	7,584	5.21%

Source: Hospital Inpatient System

Notes: This table includes those patients who presented at an Accident and Emergency Department and were consequently admitted to hospital with an alcohol related illness.

¹ Discharges and Deaths are used as an approximation to admissions. It is possible that any individual could be admitted to hospital more than once in any year and will thus be counted more than once as an admission.

Daisy Hill Hospital

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (i) the progress made to date on the refurbishment of Daisy Hill Hospital; (ii) any outstanding issues still to be dealt with; and (iii) the timescale involved. (AQW 2741/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department received a business case in August 2006 from the former Newry & Mourne Trust which proposed a Redevelopment of the Daisy Hill Hospital site. This business case was assessed and returned to the Trust in December 2006

indicating that substantially more work was needed to justify options before approval could be considered. Rebuilds and refurbishment were among the options identified.

As a consequence of RPA, the new Southern Health and Social Care Trust, established in April 2007, took on responsibility for this business case and has been reviewing its investment requirements for future hospital services across the whole Trust area. The Trust aims to develop a strategic plan as a result of this review at which point it is expected that an updated business case for Daisy Hill will be submitted to the Department for consideration and approval.

It is only after scrutiny and approval of a business case can availability of funding and timing of any new project delivery be confirmed.

Masters Degree in Social Work

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to provide funding to those wishing to study for a Masters degree in social work, at universities in Great Britain. (AQO 1404/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This Department administers a student incentive scheme to support students domiciled in Northern Ireland to study for the Honours Degree in Social Work here. There is no provision and no plans to provide funding for students from Northern Ireland who chose to study for a Masters in Social Work at universities in Great Britain.

Home-Start Scheme

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the inescapable funding that has been allocated to the Home-Start scheme in (i) Ards; (ii) Comber; and (iii) the Peninsula areas of the Strangford constituency, in each of the next 3 years. (AQW 2789/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Some funding has been identified to support Children's Fund-type activity after March 2008. However, it will not be possible to make firm decisions about individual projects until responses received during the recent consultation on the draft Budget have been considered fully, and final decisions have been taken.

Ambulance Provision

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of

ambulances and associated staff that are stationed in (i) North Antrim; and (ii) East Antrim; and whether or not this level of provision will be increased or maintained in the short, medium or long term. (AQW 2798/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below shows details of Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) ambulances and staff currently at stations in North and East Antrim.

Area	Station	Ambulances		Staff		
		A&E	Patient Care Service	Emergency Medical Technician	Paramedic	Patient Care Service
North Antrim	Ballycastle	2	-	5	5	-
	Ballymena	4	3	11	10	9
	Ballymoney	3	1	6	5	1
East Antrim	Carrickfergus	3	-	6	5	1
	Larne	4	2	10	11	2
	Whiteabbey	4	8	6	7	11

Whilst NIAS has no plans currently to increase ambulance provision in these areas, resourcing is under continual review and may be subject to change.

Ambulance Response

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the percentage of life threatening calls that were responded to within 8 minutes by the Ambulance Service, in the Northern Health and Social Services Board area, in (i) 2004-05; (ii) 2005-06; and (iii) 2006-07. (AQW 2799/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is as follows :

	2005/06	2006/07
% Life- threatening (Category A) calls within 8 minute response	42.5%	43.9%

Note: 2004/05 Category A call data are not available as the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service's call prioritisation system was not rolled out in the Northern Health and Social Services Board until 2005/06.

Satellite Navigation

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether or not satellite navigation and automatic vehicle locating systems have been introduced to ambulances; and what plans he has to introduce this equipment to the entire Ambulance Service fleet. (AQW 2800/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) is currently in the process of introducing a mobile data solution incorporating satellite navigation and automatic vehicle location

systems to its Control facilities and ambulance fleet. The new systems are scheduled to be installed in A&E ambulances by 31 March 2008 and in non-emergency vehicles by summer 2008.

Out-of-Hours Service

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether or not he will review his decision to leave the west bank of Derry/Londonderry without an out-of-hours service, due to the withdrawal of current services; and to detail whether or not an equality impact assessment was carried out in relation to the decision. (AQW 2830/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The decision by the Western Health and Social Services Board to transfer the provision of out of hours primary medical services from Great James Street Health Centre to co-locate with secondary care services, such as Accident and Emergency, on the Altnagelvin Hospital site after Easter 2008 was taken after an extensive consultation exercise when responsibility for out-of-hours services transferred from GPs to the Health and Social Services Boards in 2005. The Board decided that an equality impact assessment was not needed following the results of the consultation exercise.

There will be no reduction in services for patients within the Londonderry area, and they will continue to receive high quality GP out-of-hours services with the additional benefit of access to a broader range of services such as x-ray and diagnostic services at the Altnagelvin site.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A6 Derry/Londonderry to Dungiven Bypass

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans for the A6 Derry/Londonderry to Dungiven bypass dual carriageway; and to detail the (i) indicative budget; (ii) timescale; and (iii) activity currently undertaken, for this project. (AQW 2650/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): In July 2007, I announced the next stage of the upgrade of the A6 from Derry to Dungiven, including the Dungiven bypass, with the appointment of civil engineering consultants to examine options to enable the selection of a preferred route.

Public Information events were subsequently held in Drumahoe and Dungiven during September 2007, to outline the preferred corridor for the new route to the public and elected representatives.

The consultants are currently examining a variety of different route options within this corridor and plan to consult on these options before the summer. Following further detailed appraisal, it is planned to announce the 'preferred route' for the new dual carriageway in the spring of 2009. My Department's Roads Service would then be in a position to carry out more detailed work on the selected route and bring forward the Direction Order, Environmental Statement and draft Vesting Order. Subject to the successful completion of the statutory orders, it is proposed that the scheme, which will reduce journey times on this important route, will be delivered within the lifetime of the proposed Investment Strategy 2008-2018.

The preliminary cost estimate for the scheme was £250 million, at 2005 prices. This will be reviewed as the scheme is developed.

Derry/Londonderry to Coleraine Rail Track

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm whether or not the recent announcement about investment in the rail track between Derry/Londonderry and Coleraine is binding on his department. (AQW 2661/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The planned investment in the railway line between Derry and Coleraine will comprise a relay of the line, the introduction of a new signalling system and the provision of a passing loop to facilitate an increase in the frequency of services. Following my announcement on the lifting of investment restrictions on the former 'lesser used lines', Translink is planning this project with a view to work commencing on site

in 2011/12 and funding for the line is included in the draft Investment Strategy from 2011 onward.

However, the investment will only be binding when the contract for the work has been signed. Despite this, I am happy to again go on record and to clearly state that, subject to the confirmation of the necessary budget provision, both I and my Department are fully committed to the delivery of this important project.

Rail Link Between Derry/Londonderry and Coleraine

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development, further to his recent announcement in relation to the building of the rail link between Derry/Londonderry and Coleraine, to provide an outline of the business processes involved with this project; and to detail, in relation to these processes, (a) the key stages and milestones; (b) the anticipated duration of each process; and (c) the dependencies that will affect the sequencing of the processes. (AQW 2662/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: For a typical project of this size and complexity there are 6 main stages:

Stage 1, Inception involves the production of the Project Identification Document (PID). This document sets out the scope of the project, the constraints, the assumptions and any unknowns that need to be resolved. It identifies the stakeholders and initial risks and will include the preliminary estimate of the programme, costs and delivery strategy. The PID for this project has not yet been finalised but will be drawn up over the next 3 months.

Stage 2, Feasibility/ Economic Appraisal (EA) involves looking at the possible engineering solutions to the project and then producing an EA to assess the most economically advantageous solution.

This stage also allows for the formal approval by Translink, DRD & DFP of the EA. For this particular project there are a number of engineering issues that need to be resolved e.g. new signalling solution, track layout for future timetable, safety of crossings, condition of existing structures, environmental concerns and the future location for Derry Station. Again, for such a complex project and large value EA, this may well take up to 18 months to complete and gain approval.

Stages 3, 4, 5, & 6 involve the Design, Procurement, and Implementation/Handover of the project. The sequencing of these stages will depend on the procurement strategy that is developed for this project. The main options to consider will be the traditional route of client design and separate construction, compared to letting a design/build package to a single contracting entity. For such a large multi-discipline

project these 3 stages combined could take up to 4 years to complete. This period allows for going through the EU procurement processes that are required for a project of this scale and obtaining the necessary approvals for the letting of high value contracts. At this stage it is envisaged that it will take 2 years to undertake the actual construction and commissioning of the new line; the remaining time is allowed for design, tendering and approvals.

The sequencing is dependant on each stage of the process being fully complete. For example, Translink under the Treasury's Green Book guidelines cannot commence the tendering process until stage 2 is fully complete and formal approval of the project from the Department has been given.

As outlined, each of these steps can take considerable time but it is expected that work on site will commence by 2011. Translink is at pains to emphasise that it is at an early stage of planning this project and timings could therefore change.

Compensation Claims

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of claims for compensation made to his department for damage to vehicles and personal injury, which occurred due to poor road surfaces, in each of the past three years; and to detail (a) the number of claims which were successful; (b) the number of claims which are outstanding; and (c) the amount of money spent by his department in providing compensation. (AQW 2663/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Departmental claims database does not record the cause of claims in the way requested, but the following details relate to compensation claims lodged against my Department in the last three calendar years arising from potholes in the road. Some of the outstanding personal injury claims included in the figures below are the subject of legal proceedings.

	2007		2006		2005	
	Vehicle Damage	Personal Injury	Vehicle Damage	Personal Injury	Vehicle Damage	Personal Injury
No. of Pothole Claims Received Each Year	846	88	722	135	705	138
	934		857		843	
No. of the above Claims Resulting in Compensation Being Paid	442	3	412	13	450	19
	445		425		469	
No. of the Above Claims Still Outstanding	105	31	3	23	0	22
	136		26		22	
Total Amount of Compensation Paid to Date Resulting from the Above Claims	£68,767.95	£4,250.00	£62,515.88	£38,500.00	£93,277.15	£62,145.14
	£73,017.95		£101,015.88		£155,422.29	

Crumlin Area Projects

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any work being carried out by Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water in Crumlin, and the surrounding areas, during January 2008. (AQW 2664/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service is proposing to complete works, started before Christmas, on a traffic calming scheme on Main Street, Crumlin and on the Glenavy Road. Work is continuing on the Glenavy Road to provide new warning signage for schools.

Roads Service also plan to commence resurfacing work on the Crumlin Road, Antrim between the Nutts Corner Road and Largy Road junctions. This will involve resurfacing approximately 750 metres of carriageway and 200 metres of associated footway.

Northern Ireland Water has advised that work to clear a blocked sewer at 66 Cider Court Road was completed on 8 January 2008, but that no major work is planned in the Crumlin area during January.

Public Toilets in Railway Stations

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to increase the number of railway stations that have public toilets. (AQW 2667/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: There are no plans at present to increase the number of railway stations that have public toilets. Currently Northern Ireland Railways (NIR) have toilet facilities available at 18 of their 22 stations. There are no toilets at unmanned halts. Of the four stations without toilets,

two are only manned part-time (Greenisland and Bangor West), one only has a signalman on duty (Castlerock) and the final one, Botanic, does not have room for further facilities at present. Under the Station and Disability Discrimination Act project, NIR will be upgrading toilet facilities at the 18 stations accessible by people with disabilities.

Airport Car-Parking Charges

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment has been undertaken by his department of car-parking charges at Northern Ireland airports, compared to other United Kingdom airports; and what plans he has to address any disparity. (AQW 2668/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Airport parking charges are a commercial matter for the airport operator or the companies which provide the parking facilities. My department has no statutory role in the regulation of such charges.

The Office of Fair Trading, however, is able to investigate if it suspects that a feature or a combination of features of the market in which airport services are supplied by an airport operator prevents, restricts or distorts competition.

Rail Links to Belfast International Airport

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to extend rail links to Belfast International airport. (AQW 2669/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: There are no plans at present to extend rail links to Belfast International airport. A study of the likely costs of providing a rail service to the airport was carried out in 2006 and concluded that it would not be economically viable. It is estimated that passenger numbers at the airport would have to double from their current level for this position to change.

Fully Enclosed Shelters at Railway Stations

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to increase the number of fully enclosed shelters at railway stations. (AQW 2670/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Over 50 new shelters are being installed as part of the Station and Halt Disability Discrimination Act and New Rail Vision projects. They are not fully enclosed, but have openings at the ends rather than doors as door arcs take up internal room and also make it more difficult for disabled passengers to manoeuvre into the shelters.

Ballycastle to Rathlin Ferry Service

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the reasons why applications for the Ballycastle to Rathlin ferry service were not economically advantageous. (AQW 2679/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Public release of the information requested would be likely to prejudice the commercial interests of DRD in conducting the tendering process for the ferry service. However, all the bidders involved have been informed why their proposals were not accepted. A revised invitation to tender was issued on 7 January 2008.

Ballycastle to Rathlin Ferry Service

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to state when he will announce a successful tender for the Ballycastle to Rathlin ferry route. (AQW 2680/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: A revised invitation to tender for the Rathlin ferry service was issued on 7 January 2008. I hope to announce the successful bidder before the current contract expires at the end of March 2008.

To ensure continuity of service, should there be any delay in negotiating the new contract, the current provider has agreed an option to continue operations for up to three months.

Charlemont/Moy Bypass

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on progress on the proposed Charlemont/Moy bypass. (AQW 2681/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: You will be aware that the draft Budget 2008 and draft Investment Strategy 2008-2018 (ISNI) were announced for consultation on 25 October 2007.

The draft ISNI proposes in excess of £3.0 billion for roads over the 10-year period. The majority of the ISNI investment is assigned for Strategic Road Improvements (SRI's) on key transport corridors in accordance with the principles set out in the Regional Development Strategy and the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan.

In addition a consultation exercise on a £400 million package of schemes to be added to the SRI Programme was undertaken during 2006. A bypass of Charlemont/Moy was not listed within my Departments proposed package of schemes, however one request for the bypass was received.

I regret that until the outcome of the draft Budget and draft ISNI are known I am not in a position to confirm the status of Moy bypass.

Belfast/Dublin Airport Bus Service

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to ensure that the Belfast/Dublin airport bus service will make a stop at the new Lisburn City bus station, on its completion.
(AQW 2684/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink has informed me that there are no plans to divert the Belfast/Dublin Express Service Number 200 via Lisburn City bus station. Service 200, which is intended to offer a fast and direct link between Belfast and Dublin Airport/Dublin City, follows the quickest and most direct route. I am advised that the service calls at Sprucefield Shopping Centre on every journey to facilitate connections with bus services from Lisburn City Centre.

Street Lighting

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to the answer to AQW 2372/08, to outline when the next review of energy conservation plans will be conducted in relation to street lighting.
(AQW 2685/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service will next review the street Lighting energy conservation plans during the 2009-2010 financial year.

Craigtlet Roundabout, Belfast

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to improve the traffic flow, and to reduce the number of accidents, at the Craigtlet roundabout.
(AQW 2710/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Having previously investigated the feasibility of a number of options for Craigtlet crossroads, my Department's Roads Service is currently developing an improvement scheme at that location, which would involve the construction of roundabouts at each of the following junctions:

- Craigtlet Road/Whinney Hill Road/Dunlady Road/Hollywood Road
- Whinney Hill/Ballymiscaw Road

This double roundabout proposal is designed to improve road safety and reduce traffic delays at both junctions, during peak times.

Following the detailed design, scheme implementation would then be subject to the necessary land acquisition process and the availability of funding. It is unlikely that the scheme would be implemented before 2010/11.

Junction of the Ardan Road and the Culmore Road in Derry/Londonderry

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development what action the Roads Service will take at the junction of the Ardan Road and the Culmore Road in Derry/Londonderry, in light of the planning application being approved for 31 dwellings at this junction.
(AQW 2716/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service advises that officials are currently considering a planning application for the erection of 41 dwelling units on the site adjacent to the junction of Culmore Road/Ardan Road in Derry. As part of the assessment of this application a detailed analysis of the junction has been requested along with any necessary improvement proposals. To date Roads Service has not received this information.

Rail Line Between Ballymena and Ballymoney

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development what action is being taken to set up a bypass on the rail line between Ballymena and Ballymoney, to avoid closing the main line when essential maintenance work is carried out next year.
(AQW 2717/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: No action is being taken to set up a bypass when work on the rail line between Ballymena and Ballymoney is being completed. Translink advise that it would be impracticable and cost prohibitive to install a second line ("bypass").

The majority of the works on the Ballymena to Derry Track Life Extension Project will be carried out at night to avoid disrupting rail services. However, Translink also advise that for the major element of the work, a closure of the line is unavoidable. This is currently planned for the spring of 2009 and is likely to last for 14 weeks. During this period bus substitution will be put in place as required and every effort will be made to minimise inconvenience to passengers. In addition, during the closure period, Translink intend to operate trains between Coleraine and Derry.

Culmore Road, Derry/Londonderry

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development what is his assessment of (i) the volume of traffic on the Culmore Road, Derry/Londonderry; (ii) the capacity of the road to deal with the volume; and to detail (i) what plans and budget the Roads Service has for establishing a bypass in Culmore; and (ii) what action he is taking to implement traffic calming and road safety measures, particularly around schools. (AQW 2728/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The traffic flow on Culmore Road at Culmore village is up to 13,500 vehicles per day, and it is the view of my Department's Roads Service that Culmore Road has sufficient capacity to deal with the current traffic flows. Roads Service has no plans to provide a bypass at Culmore within the current programme and consequently there is no budget allocation for such a scheme.

A number of road safety measures have been introduced along Culmore Road in recent years, including the provision of a pelican crossing and the provision of Safer Routes to School signage at Culmore Primary School. Roads Service is currently considering if other measures can be introduced along the road to further enhance safety.

Review of Public Administration

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his reasons for not including local roads under her plans to transfer functions to local government under the Review of Public Administration. (AQO 1467/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: As local roads are a matter for the Department for Regional Development, your question has been passed to me, as Minister responsible, for answer.

The Emerging Findings Paper was published on 19 October 2007 by the Department of the Environment. This Paper carried a set of initial proposals, which were agreed by Ministers in the Executive Sub Committee looking at the review of local government aspects of the Review of Public Administration (RPA), and indeed the overall Executive.

As required by its terms of reference, the Executive Sub Committee took into account the existence of a fully functioning Assembly and Executive, and efficiency and effectiveness considerations. The Committee also reviewed the 3 options for roads and the main features of each, as described in the earlier March 2005 consultation document on RPA.

Taking all relevant factors into account, the Sub Committee agreed that the retention of a unitary road

authority in central government, with a stronger influencing role for new Councils and local roads public realm functions transferring, offered the best approach in terms of the benefits offered and the appropriate balance between the RPA aims of strong and effective local government and efficiency and effectiveness.

Railway Line Between Ballymena and Ballymoney

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to avoid closing the main railway line between Ballymena and Ballymoney, given that essential works are scheduled to be carried out in 2008. (AQW 2761/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The majority of the works on the Ballymena to Derry Track Life Extension Project will be carried out at night to avoid disrupting rail services. However, where extensive re-lay works are planned just south of Ballymoney, line closure will be required. This is expected to last for 14 weeks during the Spring of 2009. During this period bus substitution will be put in place around that part of the line which is closed and every effort will be made to minimise inconvenience to passengers. In addition, during the closure period, Translink intend to operate trains between Coleraine and Derry.

Bus Punctuality

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the punctuality of Metro buses; (ii) how this compares with target times; and (iii) how this figure has changed over the last five years. (AQW 2779/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Passenger's Charter measures punctuality twice a year in the spring and autumn.

The following table provides information on Metro/Citybus punctuality for the last 5 years against the target set in the Passenger's Charter.

	Percentage of Metro buses arriving no more than 7 minutes late.	Target %
Spring 2007	98	95
Autumn 2006	91	95
Spring 2006	89	95
Autumn 2005	89	95
Spring 2005	98	95

	Percentage of Metro buses arriving no more than 7 minutes late.	Target %
Autumn 2004	90	95
Spring 2004	92	95
Autumn 2003	91	95
Spring 2003	96	95
Autumn 2002	92	95
Spring 2002	93	95
Autumn 2001	90	95

Bus Punctuality

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the punctuality of Ulsterbus buses; (ii) how this compares with target times; and (iii) how this figure has changed over the last five years. (AQW 2780/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Passenger's Charter measures punctuality twice a year in the spring and autumn.

The following table provides information on Ulsterbus punctuality for the last 5 years against the target set in the Passenger's Charter.

	Percentage of Ulsterbus buses arriving no more than 7 minutes late.	Target %
Spring 2007	97	95

	Percentage of Ulsterbus buses arriving no more than 7 minutes late.	Target %
Autumn 2006	96	95
Spring 2006	93	95
Autumn 2005	88	95
Spring 2005	93	95
Autumn 2004	93	95
Spring 2004	98	95
Autumn 2003	98	95
Spring 2003	99	95
Autumn 2002	98	95
Spring 2002	97	95
Autumn 2001	96	95

Train Punctuality

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the punctuality of Northern Ireland Railways trains; (ii) how this compares with target times; and (iii) how this figure has changed over the last five years. (AQW 2782/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Passenger's Charter sets NIR two targets for punctuality and monitors performance against these targets twice a year, in the spring and autumn.

The following table provides information on NIR punctuality for the last 5 years against the targets set in the Passenger's Charter.

	Percentage of trains on the Bangor, Portadown and Larne lines arriving no more than 5 minutes late	Target %	Percentage of trains on the Londonderry and Dublin lines arriving no more than 10 minutes late	Target %
Spring 2007	97	95	97	90
Autumn 2006	96	95	94	90
Spring 2006	95	95	100	90
Autumn 2005	83	95	89	90
Spring 2005	96	95	94	90
Autumn 2004	88	95	94	90
Spring 2004	95	95	90	90
Autumn 2003	90	95	94	90
Spring 2003	96	95	97	90
Autumn 2002	96	95	95	90
Spring 2002	94	95	95	90

	Percentage of trains on the Bangor, Portadown and Larne lines arriving no more than 5 minutes late	Target %	Percentage of trains on the Londonderry and Dublin lines arriving no more than 10 minutes late	Target %
Autumn 2001	91	95	85	90

New National Stadium

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the money allocated in his budget to fund road infrastructure to service a new National Stadium; and (ii) the costings that have been undertaken in relation to surveys and preparation plans for transport links. (AQW 2790/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The regeneration of the Maze/Long Kesh site is an OFMDFM-led initiative. OFMDFM is aware that, in accordance with Planning Policy Statement 3 'Access Movement and Parking' and Planning Policy Statement 13 'Transportation and Land Use', the cost of infrastructure necessary to facilitate the initiative must be borne by the developer, whether public sector or private sector. My Department's Roads Service has, therefore, not allocated any funds for this purpose.

I can further advise that any planning application for a Multi Sports Stadium, or any other development, within the Maze /Long Kesh site will have to be accompanied by a robust and credible Transport Assessment (TA) that analyses the potential impact of the development and identifies infrastructure improvements required to mitigate this impact. This TA must complement a transportation master plan for the redevelopment of the whole site by providing specific detail on the particular development that is proposed. Responsibility for providing this rests with OFMDFM. I understand that OFMDFM have appointed consultants to undertake a master plan for the whole site, including a review of transportation infrastructure requirements.

In relation to alternative routes, traffic will be diverted via fully signposted diversionary routes along Mallusk Road, Scullions Road, Sandyknowes Roundabout and Antrim Road.

In addition, on 7 January 2008, I announced a package of measures to accommodate the travelling public during the bridge closure. These measures included:

- provision of a base for Ambulance Service vehicles at Sandyknowes;
- maintaining pedestrian access across the bridge during reconstruction;
- provision of traffic signals at the Scullions Road/Sandyknowes junction;
- provision of a traffic monitoring camera on Scullions Road;
- provision of additional buses for the Hightown and Mayfield areas
- provision of an emergency breakdown vehicle recovery service for Sandyknowes Roundabout and Scullions Road;
- ongoing management of the timings of traffic signals on the diversion route to minimise congestion and delays; and
- ongoing liaison with emergency services regarding access arrangements to the Hightown and Mayfield Areas.

Roads Service officials will, of course, consider any additional suggestions made by local representatives that will assist in the reduction of traffic congestion during the period of the bridge closure.

Closure of Hightown Bridge

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail when works on the bridge in Hightown will be completed; and what steps he has taken to ensure that alternative routes are appropriately sign-posted to ensure that drivers and local residents are aware of these arrangements. (AQW 2873/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The closure of the Hightown Bridge is planned for 27 January 2008 and the work is expected to take up to a year. However, following commitments to accelerate the works, the contractor, HMC, is targeting the re-opening of the road before Christmas 2008.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Public Realm Projects in Derry/Londonderry City Centre

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development to provide (a) projected timings; and (b) confirmed timings, for the various key developments in the public realm projects in Derry/Londonderry city centre. (AQW 2653/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): The projected and confirmed timings for the

£8m Derry City Centre Public Realm Scheme for Waterloo Place/Guildhall Square are as follows:

- Stage C Design Concepts were signed off by the Project Board on 5 December 2007.
- Proposals were unanimously endorsed by city centre traders on 8 January 2008.
- Proposals will be presented to Derry City Council Party Leaders on 15 January 2008.
- Proposals will be presented to full Council on 30 January 2008.
- Planning Application will be lodged in February 2008.
- Contractor will be appointed in March 2008.
- Construction work will commence in July 2008.

Draft Houses of Multiple Occupancy Plan

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development detail the consultation process that the Department for Social Development and the Department of the Environment are currently involved in, regarding the

draft Houses of Multiple Occupancy plan.

(AQW 2691/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The draft Houses In Multiple Occupation Subject Plan for Belfast was published by the Department of the Environment on 27 June 2006. The only involvement my Department has had in the consultation process was as a consultee.

Translation Services

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail her department's expenditure on translation services in the last financial year.

(AQW 2696/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Expenditure on translation services (including interpreting) incurred by the Department for Social Development for the financial year 2006/07 amounted to £262,630.97. This expenditure includes my Department, its Agencies and associated Non-Departmental Public Bodies. A breakdown of the expenditure is as follows:

Business Area	Irish £	Ethnic Minority £	Sign £	Braille £	Total £
Social Security Agency	0.00	225,754.03	0.00	0.00	225,754.03
Core Department	1,932.88	1,066.08	990.95	1,782.81	5,772.72
Child Support Agency	0.00	662.23	0.00	0.00	662.23
Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NDPB)	0.00	30,441.99	0.00	0.00	30,441.99
Total	1,932.88	257,924.33	990.95	1,782.81	262,630.97

Community Investment Fund

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Social Development to provide a list of successful applicants to the Community Investment Fund. (AQW 2697/08)

The Minister for Social Development: A list of successful applicants who are funded by the Community Investment Fund is set out in the table below. One further organisation is currently undergoing economic appraisal.

	Organisation
1	Altnaveigh House, Newry
2	Ards Development Bureau and Community Network
3	Ashton Community Trust, Belfast
4	Atlas Women's Centre, Lisburn
5	Ballybeen Women's Centre
6	Ballymoney Community Resource Centre

	Organisation
7	Ballynaveigh Community Development Association
8	Carrickfergus Community Forum
9	Chrysalis Women's Centre, Craigavon
10	Coleraine Rural & Urban Network
11	Community Network Craigavon
12	Confederation of Community Groups Newry & Mourne
13	Creggan Neighbourhood Partnership
14	East Belfast Community Development Agency
15	Falls Community Council
16	The Fermanagh Trust
17	First Steps Women's Group
18	FOCUS
19	Footprints Women's Centre
20	Foyle Women's Information Network

	Organisation
21	Greater Shantallow Area Partnership
22	Greenway Womens Group
23	Hollywood Family Trust
24	Larne Community Development Project
25	Magherafelt Women's Group Ltd
26	North Down Community Network
27	North West Community Network
28	Randalstown Arches Association Ltd
29	S.T.E.P (South Tyrone Empowerment Partnership)
30	Strathfoyle Womens Activity Group Ltd
31	Upper Andersonstown Community Forum
32	Waterside Womens Group
33	Windsor Womens Centre, Belfast
34	The Womens Centre, Derry

Neighbourhood Renewal Funding

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Social Development to explain why community groups in Omagh are experiencing delays and excessive bureaucracy in securing the release of Neighbourhood Renewal funding. (AQW 2700/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Applications for funding from Community Groups in Omagh got off to a slow start and in order to overcome this Omagh District Council undertook to bring forward composite applications on their behalf. These applications greatly exceed the available funds and DSD officials are working with Council and Community Groups to gather the necessary information to allow them to be prioritised. This process will include ensuring that they address the causes of deprivation, complement rather than duplicate existing services, offer value for money and that there are no other more appropriate funding sources available. It is anticipated that community based projects for each estate within the Omagh Neighbourhood Renewal Area will be progressed to approval stage within three months.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people in receipt of Disability Living Allowance, in each of the last 3 years, broken down by district council area. (AQW 2720/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out in the table below. The figures show the number of claims where an amount of Disability Living Allowance was in payment at the date of extract.

DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE CLAIMANTS BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA AT OCTOBER 2005, 2006 AND 2007

District Council Area	2005	2006	2007
Antrim	3982	4061	4182
Ards	5675	5859	6030
Armagh	5079	5187	5298
Ballymena	3784	3872	3999
Ballymoney	2399	2465	2542
Banbridge	3842	3977	4092
Belfast	34929	35165	35409
Carrickfergus	2927	3031	3152
Castlereagh	4958	5042	5136
Coleraine	3774	3860	3973
Cookstown	3934	3928	4012
Craigavon	9050	9191	9343
Derry	13465	13471	13671
Down	6344	6505	6623
Dungannon	5561	5609	5682
Fermanagh	4900	5019	4953
Larne	2204	2255	2349
Limavady	2969	3007	3094
Lisburn	9569	9804	9949
Magherafelt	3095	3166	3256
Moyle	1327	1375	1387
Newry & Mourne	9894	10018	10079
Newtownabbey	6433	6537	6707
North Down	4576	4739	4865
Omagh	6136	6257	6311
Strabane	5461	5488	5528
Unallocated Postcode*	642	629	1178
Total	166909	169517	172800

* In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to Electoral Wards and Council areas on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated to a Ward or a Council using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people in receipt

of Job Seekers Allowance, in each of the last 3 years, broken down by district council area. (AQW 2721/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out in the table below. The figures show the number of claims where an amount of Jobseekers Allowance was in payment at the date of extract.

JOBSEEKERS ALLOWANCE CLAIMANTS BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA AT OCTOBER 2005, 2006 AND 2007

District Council Area	2005	2006	2007
Antrim	555	532	423
Ards	1,070	995	759
Armagh	642	600	536
Ballymena	827	738	615
Ballymoney	380	362	313
Banbridge	410	396	322
Belfast	7,589	7,293	6,023
Carrickfergus	599	507	355
Castlereagh	583	528	419
Coleraine	1,087	941	761
Cookstown	405	371	312
Craigavon	1,046	1,023	922
Derry	3,842	3,578	2,866
Down	1,041	954	755
Dungannon	505	450	414
Fermanagh	1,013	958	723
Larne	477	396	337
Limavady	691	638	549
Lisburn	1,561	1,519	1,205
Magherafelt	400	337	269
Moyle	315	313	274
Newry & Mourne	1,601	1,303	1,174
Newtownabbey	1,098	983	863
North Down	988	882	753
Omagh	931	740	629
Strabane	1,305	1,248	1,010
Unallocated Postcode*	142	160	228
Total	31,103	28,745	23,809

* In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to Electoral Wards and Council areas on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated to a Ward or Council using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.

Incapacity Benefit

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people in receipt of Incapacity Benefit, in each of the last 3 years, broken down by district council area. (AQW 2722/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out in the table below. The figures show the number of claims where an amount of Incapacity Benefit was in payment at the date of extract.

INCAPACITY BENEFIT CLAIMANTS BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA AT OCTOBER 2005, 2006 AND 2007

District Council Area	2005	2006	2007
Antrim	1,760	1,726	1,722
Ards	2,852	2,826	2,759
Armagh	2,472	2,408	2,240
Ballymena	2,094	2,025	2,062
Ballymoney	1,230	1,246	1,230
Banbridge	1,955	1,942	1,916
Belfast	12,342	12,121	11,800
Carrickfergus	1,479	1,486	1,416
Castlereagh	2,284	2,204	2,147
Coleraine	1,975	2,006	1,936
Cookstown	1,692	1,673	1,653
Craigavon	4,398	4,261	4,125
Derry	5,420	5,388	5,256
Down	2,576	2,575	2,520
Dungannon	2,256	2,219	2,132
Fermanagh	1,959	1,924	1,830
Larne	1,167	1,153	1,136
Limavady	1,474	1,443	1,428
Lisburn	3,746	3,752	3,719
Magherafelt	1,679	1,658	1,646
Moyle	663	641	615
Newry & Mourne	3,903	3,821	3,682
Newtownabbey	2,979	2,866	2,822
North Down	2,193	2,153	2,102
Omagh	2,420	2,373	2,277
Strabane	2,289	2,265	2,170
Unallocated Postcode*	449	434	580
Total	71,706	70,589	68,921

* In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to Electoral Wards and Council areas on the basis of their postcode. Not

all records can be correctly allocated to a Ward or Council using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.

Attendance Allowance

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people in receipt of Attendance Allowance, in each of the last 3 years, broken down by district council area. (AQW 2723/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out in the table below. The figures show the number of claims where an amount of Attendance Allowance was in payment at the date of extract.

ATTENDANCE ALLOWANCE CLAIMANTS BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA AT OCTOBER 2005, 2006 AND 2007

District Council Area	2005	2006	2007
Antrim	1,290	1,314	1,323
Ards	2,706	2,749	2,647
Armagh	2,106	2,066	2,057
Ballymena	2,052	2,061	2,077
Ballymoney	1,057	1,055	1,081
Banbridge	1,574	1,580	1,599
Belfast	11,641	11,277	10,843
Carrickfergus	1,285	1,294	1,294
Castlereagh	2,490	2,523	2,485
Coleraine	2,126	2,120	2,108
Cookstown	1,364	1,309	1,295
Craigavon	2,931	2,886	2,856
Derry	2,751	2,724	2,689
Down	2,392	2,83	2,337
Dungannon	2,001	1,925	1,875
Fermanagh	2,567	2,518	2,310
Larne	1,107	1,111	1,105
Limavady	1,048	1,028	1,017
Lisburn	3,405	3,415	3,341
Magherafelt	1,515	1,519	1,487
Moyle	723	704	688
Newry & Mourne	3,433	3,371	3,291
Newtownabbey	2,817	2,848	2,828
North Down	3,056	3,067	3,036
Omagh	1,878	1,815	1,736
Strabane	1,433	1,422	1,360
Unallocated Postcode*	402	389	642

District Council Area	2005	2006	2007
Total	63,150	62,473	61,407

* In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to Electoral Wards and Council areas on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated to a Ward or a Council using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.

Co-Ownership Scheme

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of homes purchased under the co-ownership scheme, in each of the last 5 years, broken down by district council area.

(AQW 2724/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The table below details the number of homes purchased under the co-ownership scheme in each of the last 5 financial years, broken down by district council area. The final column shows figures from 1 April 2007 to 31 December 2007.

	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007*
Londonderry	29	9	10	21	30	54
Limavady	7	3	6	1	3	3
Coleraine	23	20	19	16	10	15
Ballymoney	11	11	4	9	3	6
Moyle	1	1	0	1	0	0
Larne	15	5	12	8	7	20
Ballymena	21	15	12	11	11	21
Magherafelt	3	5	2	5	0	11
Cookstown	14	9	2	2	2	2
Strabane	1	3	5	3	0	7
Omagh	5	4	0	0	2	4
Fermanagh	3	7	7	6	2	5
Dungannon	2	0	3	4	1	3
Craigavon	20	11	19	30	5	30
Armagh	7	3	6	7	0	1
Newry/Mourne	4	3	4	3	0	8
Banbridge	28	13	20	16	5	20
Downpatrick	19	18	16	14	2	15
Lisburn	85	35	50	31	27	46
Antrim	27	11	9	12	7	22
Newtownabbey	77	46	53	50	38	67
Carrickfergus	33	16	34	27	22	41

	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007*
North Down	90	52	64	79	47	78
Newtownards	71	61	58	54	42	61
Castlereagh	36	21	10	16	12	22
Belfast	169	81	77	78	47	109
Total	801	463	502	504	325	671

* 1 April to 31 December 2007

Domestic Water Tanks

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Social Development, in light of the recent death of a baby in England, due to a faulty water tank, to detail what action she is taking to ensure that the necessary safety measures are put in place by housing providers, in both the social and private sectors, to avoid a similar occurrence. (AQW 2740/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The type of plumbing arrangement that allowed this incident to happen is not common in Northern Ireland. Normally the expansion pipe from the hot water cylinder is taken out through the roof structure and should a fault occur the hot water would discharge on to the roof tiles/slates. Since 2004, all immersion heater thermostats installed across all housing tenures have, in accordance with legislation, both a temperature control and a high limit cut out fitted.

I have asked my officials to issue advice to all social landlords. This advice will also be made available through the press to make all households aware of the issue. In the meantime, if any Housing Executive, Housing Association or private tenant has any concerns about the issue, or if they consider that there is a fault with the immersion heater in their home, they should contact their landlord.

Public Housing Units

Mr F Cobain asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of public housing units built in (i) 2005; (ii) 2006; and (iii) 2007, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 2781/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The number of social housing units started in the financial years 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07, for each parliamentary constituency in Northern Ireland, is as follows:

Parliamentary Constituency	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
East Antrim	33	26	5
North Antrim	12	11	0
South Antrim	19	62	41
Upper Bann	21	38	4
East Belfast	60	155	100
North Belfast	270	343	146
South Belfast	44	145	114
West Belfast	349	391	114
North Down	29	9	103
South Down	30	22	13
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	47	4	67
Foyle	148	60	146
Lagan Valley	131	101	72
East Londonderry	1	46	3
Mid Ulster	3	5	0
Newry & Armagh	75	27	45
Strangford	19	67	50
West Tyrone	26	7	9
Total Starts	1,317	1,519	1,032

Interdepartmental Affordability Review Implementation Group

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an update on the work of the Interdepartmental Affordability Review Implementation Group. (AQW 2805/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Interdepartmental Affordability Review Implementation Group and the Advisory Panel of Experts led by Professor Adair have now concluded their assessment of Sir John Semple's recommendations and submitted reports to me.

I also commissioned a review of the funding capacity, planning policy and delivery structures for social housing in Northern Ireland from Baroness Ford and this work has now been completed and a report delivered to me.

I am now carefully considering each of these reports and will make a statement to Members in due course.

Neighbourhood Renewal Funding

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development what action she is taking to ensure that a

decision in relation to Neighbourhood Renewal funding is advised to the relevant communities as soon as possible, particularly in relation to those workers whose jobs may be affected. (AQW 2872/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I am giving this issue careful consideration currently so that decisions about the future use of the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund can be taken within the next few weeks. Some contracts for funding between my Department and community organisations are approaching the end of their term and this undoubtedly presents planning challenges for these groups into the future. I hope to finalise funding decisions in the near future. My priority is to ensure that the limited Neighbourhood Renewal funding is used to tackle disadvantage in our most deprived communities by addressing the priority needs of local neighbourhoods.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 25 January 2008

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Foreign Nationals

Mrs I Robinson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the responsibility it has in relation to monitoring the number of foreign nationals residing in Northern Ireland. (AQW 2310/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley and Mr M McGuinness): Immigration and related issues are excepted matters [under the Northern Ireland Act 1998] and responsibility rests with the Home Office. OFMDFM has no formal responsibility for monitoring the numbers of foreign nationals that reside here.

The Office recognises, however, the importance of figures for the number of people coming to live and work here for planning and policy making. Accordingly the Office works closely with the DE, DEL, DHSSPS, DETI and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (and the Home Office among others) to ensure that we consider all of the relevant statistical information available.

Backlog of Planning Appeals

Mr Boylan asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans it has to deal with the backlog of planning appeals. (AQW 2856/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Planning appeals are decided by the Planning Appeals Commission, a Non Departmental Public Body which is sponsored by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Your question has therefore been re-directed from Department of Environment to OFMDFM for response. Given the independent tribunal status of the Planning Appeals Commission, it is

appropriate for its Chief Commissioner to provide a response directly to you, and we understand she has written to you in the following terms:

"The Commission deals with the backlog of appeals on an ongoing basis. At 31 December 2007 the backlog was 3,208 and our projected output for the current financial year is 1,117. Future clearance rates will depend on Commissioner complement and the level of referred work from Planning Service, particularly in relation to Area Plans. The above figures do not make allowances for the future intake of appeals, which is approximately 140 per month.

The Commission made a bid for additional resources in December 2006 and provision has been made in the Draft Budget 2008-2011 for extra funding. Once confirmed the Commission aims to be in a position to secure additional Commissioner resources to further address the backlog.

I would be happy to provide any further information you require arising out of this response or to meet with you to discuss the matter if that would be more suitable."

OFMDFM is fully committed to providing the Commission with the resources required to address the appeals backlog. The additional funding allocations for PAC in the Draft Budget 2008-2011 will provide the Chief Commissioner with the funding certainty to enable her to recruit additional commissioners. This additional funding has the potential to fund a significant number of additional commissioners, although the actual number to be appointed will be for the Chief Commissioner to determine, taking account of the Commission's capacity to manage a greatly increased complement and also subject to the availability of suitable people from within a limited and specialised market. Arrangements are already under way to deliver a competition for commissioners.

We have recently made a number of appointments to the Commission

Bill of Rights

Mr McNarry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to clarify its position on a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights. (AQO 1294/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Human Rights Commission will report directly to the Secretary of State in the development of proposals on a Bill of Rights. We look forward to considering these proposals once they become known.

Investment Conference

Mr Storey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm whether or not

areas such as Ballymoney, Ballymena and Ballycastle will benefit economically, following the recent visit to the United States of America, and as a result of the proposed investment conference in May 2008.

(AQO 1447/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

One of the key aims of this Executive is to promote and facilitate economic growth, across all areas, including of course Ballymoney, Ballymena and Ballycastle. In particular, we are determined that the investment in our networks and roads infrastructure will increase the attractiveness of the wider region as a destination for business investment and will enhance the competitiveness of businesses based outside the Greater Belfast area. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will also take the lead in encouraging economic growth through a range of policies supported by other Ministers.

Our visit to the US at the invitation of President Bush before Christmas received a very positive reaction. As well as an extensive range of meetings with politicians and the media, we met with over 150 Chief Executives of companies in the financial services, information technology and manufacturing sectors. They were all very supportive of our new message that we are open for business and good for business. We made many new friends and potential business partners during the visit and we look forward to them visiting us and investing with us, for the benefit of all our constituencies.

Further follow up with a targeted group of US companies is now taking place with a view to confirming their attendance at the Investment Conference planned for May.

Central Consultation Register

Mr P Ramsey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what monitoring measures are in place to ensure that all consultations by Northern Ireland departments are listed on the central consultation register.

(AQO 1448/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The original purpose of the Central Consultation website was to create a central register for the public to access consultations carried out by public authorities. The reality is that NICS departments use their own web-sites to convey such information, and the register is rarely used by other public authorities outside the departmental network. Consequently, we intend to cease the use of the database with effect from 1 April 2008.

Our Department will develop a consultation zone as part of our website to ensure that the public is aware of proposed OFMDFM consultations. This is in line with the arrangements other departments have put in place.

Victims' Commissioner

Mr A Maginness asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the recruitment of a Victims' Commissioner.

(AQO 1378/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The appointments process is now reaching completion and we hope to make an announcement shortly.

Budget and Administration of the Children's Fund

Mr Burns asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline how the budget for the Children's Fund will proceed; and to detail how the Fund will be administered post 8 May 2008.

(AQO 1451/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

As we have stated in our earlier answers to the questions from Ms Hanna and Mrs Bradley, all allocations in respect of the Priority Funding Packages initiated by Direct Rule Ministers and other ring-fenced items have been removed from departmental baselines.

This was on the basis that if the individual projects supported are considered to be of significant value then the funding stream should be in the departments' programmes, rather than continuing to be managed through central funds.

The Children and Young People's Funding Package was announced in March 2006 and was for a period of 2 years. This package therefore no longer exists beyond March 2008.

Over the last number of months the Junior Ministers have been undertaking a series of meetings to make the case for significant funding for children's services in pre-budget discussions and have succeeded in securing an allocation of £26 million to the departments of Education, Health, Social Services and Public Safety and Culture, Arts and Leisure 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.

Junior Ministers will continue to urge ministerial colleagues to mainstream and protect funding for children and young people within their departmental budgets.

Community Confidence Building Measures Pre-Devolution

Mr Burnside asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans it has to provide community confidence building measures, prior to the devolution of justice and policing powers.

(AQO 1264/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: It will be a matter for the political parties to decide when the circumstances exist for the Assembly to request the devolution of justice and policing.

Programme for Government

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the outcomes and baselines to be used to measure the effectiveness of the programme to improve societal relations, as mentioned in PSA 7, Objective 5 in Annex 1 to the draft Programme for Government 2008-11.

(AQO 1445/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: A robust monitoring tool – the Good Relations Indicators Baseline Report published in January 2007 – provides the core measurements against a range of indicators to assess the impact of work being undertaken at central and local level to improve societal relations. The indicators referred to above will support monitoring progress against targets and outcomes and this process will be an integral part of detailed proposals for a programme of cohesion and integration which will be brought forward by OFMDFM shortly.

Gender Equality Unit

Ms J McCann asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps it will take to ensure that the Gender Equality Unit will be appropriately resourced and financed in order to carry out its aims and objectives.

(AQO 1446/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: This Unit is part of the Equality, Rights and Social Need Division of OFMDFM. In November 2007 the capacity of the Unit was increased at middle management level to specifically address Gender Equality issues. OFMDFM are committed to ensuring sufficient resources to work towards our agreed aim of eliminating remaining gender inequalities.

Victims' Commissioner

Mr Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans it has to make a

statement on the appointment of a Victims' Commissioner. (AQO 1357/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We hope to make an announcement shortly.

Commissioner for Older People

Mr Brady asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the terms of reference and employment criteria for the new Commissioner for Older People; and to provide a timetable for this appointment.

(AQO 1454/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: On 18th December 2007 we announced our intention in principle to establish an Office of a Commissioner for Older People in Northern Ireland. The terms of reference and employment criteria have not yet been finalised.

The establishment of an Older People's Commissioner will require appropriate legislation to specify the powers and duties of the office. We intend to consult further before bringing forward such legislation.

Only after the legislation is in place can we proceed to make an appointment with criteria which will reflect the agreed statutory remit.

The appointment is a key priority for OFMDFM. The legislative process will take some time to complete and we are currently looking at proposals for an interim arrangement.

Commissioner for Older People

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the timetable for the appointment of an Older People's Commissioner.

(AQO 1293/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: On 18th December 2007 we announced our intention to establish an Office of a Commissioner for Older People in Northern Ireland.

The establishment of an Older Peoples Commissioner will require appropriate legislation to specify the powers and duties of the office. We intend to consult further before bringing forward such legislation.

Only after the legislation is in place can we proceed to make an appointment with criteria which will reflect the agreed statutory remit.

The appointment is a key priority for OFMDFM. The legislative process will take some time to complete and we are currently looking at proposals for an interim arrangement.

Programme for Government

Ms Lo asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the methodology behind the production of the draft Programme for Government. (AQO 1442/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

On 25 May the Executive agreed the focus and overall approach to the development of the Programme for Government for 2008-2011. The Executive decided that the PfG should be a more strategically focused document, identifying the key high level priorities for the Executive and supported by a framework of cross-cutting, rather than departmental, Public Service Agreements (PSAs). To further ensure a strategic focus and a clear direction, the Executive agreed that the PfG should operate on a three-year timeframe to be reviewed annually, with closer integration across the PfG, Budget and Investment Strategy.

In line with the Executive's decision, officials in OFMDFM and DFP engaged with departments over the summer to clarify thinking on priorities and identify areas where associated Public Service Agreements might be appropriately developed.

Informed by that work, on 6 September, Executive Ministers met to discuss and agree the key strategic priorities and actions for inclusion in the Programme for Government. Work was then taken forward, as agreed by all Executive Ministers, to develop a draft Programme for Government and Public Service Agreement Framework for formal consideration by the Executive.

On 27 September, the Executive considered a draft text of the Programme for Government which had been developed in consultation with departments. On 8 October, the Executive also considered the draft Public Service Agreement Framework, which had been developed following extensive engagement with departments.

Both documents were subsequently refined and developed in consultation with departments and Ministers. On 23 October, the Executive unanimously agreed the final text of the draft Programme for Government and the associated Public Service Agreement Framework, which forms an Annex to it, for publication. The draft Programme for Government was subsequently launched on 25 October in conjunction with the draft Budget and draft Investment Strategy.

Creation of a Shared Future

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what its assessment is of the creation of a shared future in relation to the draft Public Service Agreements of the draft Programme for Government. (AQO 1441/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The draft Programme for Government states that we must continue to address the divisions within our society and has been developed with a focus on addressing the key challenges and seizing the opportunities to deliver a shared and better future. Progress has been made but sectarianism, racism and intolerance are still too evident. They mar our reputation, blight our economic prospects and have a corrosive effect on our society.

As stated previously we are currently working on detailed proposals for a programme of cohesion and integration to promote the interests of the whole community towards the goal of a shared and better future and a prosperous, peaceful and settled society. It is a key priority of the Executive to dramatically increase budgets to resource work to achieve these objectives.

We will bring forward these proposals for consideration to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in the immediate future. Key objectives, actions and targets will be developed in the context of these proposals.

Endorsement of Shared Future Policy

Mr Dallat asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm whether or not it endorses the Shared Future policy. (AQO 1453/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: A Shared Future policy and strategic framework for good relations for Northern Ireland is an inherited policy from the previous administration. However, as stated previously, we are fully committed to promoting the interests of the whole community towards the goal of a shared and better future and a prosperous, peaceful and settled society.

Therefore, it is a key priority of the Executive to dramatically increase budgets in order to resource these objectives. Having considered progress made, we are currently working on detailed proposals for a programme of cohesion and integration, which we will bring forward to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister for consideration. Key objectives, actions and targets will be developed in the context of these proposals.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Rural Development Fund

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide the figures, in

percentage terms, of the financial input to the Rural Development Fund by (i) the Treasury; (ii) the European Union; and (iii) the Northern Ireland farming industry. (AQW 2693/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): The expected financial input to the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 is as follows:

Northern Ireland Executive (Treasury)	52.3%
European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EU)	11.5%
Compulsory and Voluntary Modulation (NI Farming Industry)	36.2%

Financial input is subject to the finalisation of the Comprehensive Spending Review and exchange rate fluctuations.

Rural Development Fund 2007-2013

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the level of funding that will be made available, under the Rural Development Fund 2007-2013, to assist the development of rural businesses. (AQW 2695/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 contains several measures intended to target rural business. Axis 1 of the programme is aimed at improving the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry through support for restructuring, development and innovation, while Axis 3 is designed to improve the quality of life in rural areas and encourage diversification in economic activity.

There are four measures in Axis 1 to assist the development of the rural business sector. Their main target groups are the farmer and farm family together with micro-, small, medium and intermediate enterprises. The total budget for the four measures in Axis 1 is £45.7 million. The measures are: vocational training and information actions; adding value to agricultural and forestry products; the modernisation of agricultural holdings; and the supply chain development programme.

Axis 3 of the programme includes measures to promote diversification into non-agricultural activities, and support for business creation and development. The former aims to help farm households diversify into non-agricultural activities and, as a consequence, maintain or increase their income and create employment opportunities, while the latter is designed to create employment opportunities through promoting entrepreneurship and developing economic infrastructure in rural areas by providing support to existing micro-enterprises or to persons wishing to set up a new micro-enterprise in a non-agricultural sector.

A further relevant measure focuses on the encouragement of tourism activities in rural areas, including tourism-related businesses.

A financial overview of the measures is contained in the appended table. In the case of the Axis 3 funding, the exact breakdown will be decided by the local action groups constituted to deliver the programme, and the figures are estimates.

Measure	Title	Available funds in millions of pounds
1.1	Vocational Training and Information Actions	8.4
1.2	Adding Value to Agricultural and Forestry Products and Improving Marketing Capability	23.6
1.3	Modernisation of Agricultural Holdings	10.9
1.4	Supply Chain Development Programme	2.8
3.1	Diversification into Non-agricultural Activities	20
3.2	Support for Business Creation and Development	20
3.3	Encouragement of Tourism Activities	12
Total		97.7

Removal of Hedges

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of applications that have been (a) received ; and (b) approved, in relation to the removal of hedges under the cross-compliance regulations. (AQW 2729/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Since January 2005 Countryside Management Branch, DARD have carried out 728 farm visits to assess field boundaries as required as part of Cross Compliance.

982 field boundaries (predominately hedges but also stone walls, rows of trees and open sheughs) have been assessed.

743 field boundary removal approvals have been issued.

Use of Battery Cages for Hens

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her plans to phase out the use of battery cages for hens. (AQW 2731/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Under the Welfare of Farmed Animals (NI) Regulations 2002, 'unenriched' or 'battery' cages will be banned from 2012. From January 2003, it has been illegal for producers to bring such cage systems into use for the first time.

All poultry keepers should be acquainted with the DARD Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Laying Hens, which sets out that hens should not be kept in such cages from 1 January 2012. The Code was sent to all flock keepers in 2005 and is available on the DARD internet site. Further publicity is planned.

I welcome the recent publication of the EU Commission's long-awaited Report on the welfare of laying hens, which recommends that this deadline should be maintained. I am committed to meeting this deadline, which has received significant public support and will clearly improve animal welfare.

I have asked my officials to give careful consideration to the EU Report, and its likely impact on local egg industry. My Department will of course, work closely with industry to ensure compliance of the legislation.

Dangerous Dogs Legislation

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to her review of the dangerous dogs legislation, whether or not she has requested and secured a meeting with the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2754/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: In my statement to the Assembly on 20 November, I announced a review of dangerous dogs and dog fighting legislation.

As enforcement of the legislation is crucial to this review and many of the issues that have been raised to date are about public safety, there have been calls for the PSNI to have a greater role in enforcement of dog control legislation.

I therefore wrote to the Chief Constable on 31 October 2007 to request a meeting to discuss the role of the PSNI in enforcement of dog control and dangerous dogs legislation. As a result, I met senior PSNI representatives on Tuesday 22 January. I will now take time to consider the outcome of this meeting as part of my wide-ranging review.

Biodiversity Action Plan 2010

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether or not her department will meet the targets of the Biodiversity Action Plan

2010 in relation to (i) maintaining the extent of 8380 hectares of native woodland; (ii) the restoration of 180 hectares of planted ancient woodland; and (iii) the expansion of woodland by 460 hectares.

(AQW 2801/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The targets to which you refer correspond to targets in Habitat Action Plans (HAP) for Upland Oakwoods, Mixed Ashwoods and Wet Woodland published by the Department of Environment in 2003. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has shared responsibility for delivering HAP targets in conjunction with other Government Departments under the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy. Significant contributions to targets in relation to woodland biodiversity are delivered by DARD through the activities of Countryside Management Branch and the Forest Service agency.

The target to maintain 8380 hectares of native woodland was reported at UK level as having been achieved in 2005, based on a partial survey by the Environment and Heritage Service of the Department of Environment. Results of the current Northern Ireland Countryside Survey will assist in providing an estimate of the extent to which the target will be achieved in 2010. However I am confident that this target will be achieved.

The target to restore 180 hectares of planted ancient woodland by 2010 is likely to be met through the Forest Service's Plantations on Ancient Woodland Sites Restoration Strategy. By 2006, restoration had commenced on a number of sites with a total area of 146 hectares. The strategy has identified a number of candidate restoration areas and it is likely that the target of 180 hectares will be achieved by 2010.

The target to expand the area of native woodland by 460 hectares has already been exceeded. Since the launch of the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Strategy in September 2002, up to 2006, Forest Service has contributed to an estimated increase in the area of native woodland of 755 hectares, through Forest Service planting and by supporting private landowners to plant native woodland under the Woodland Grant Scheme.

Knock-Na-Moe Bungalows Area of Killyclogher

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm that she is giving immediate priority to major drainage improvement works in the Knock-Na-Moe bungalows area of Killyclogher, Co. Tyrone in order to avoid future flooding of property at this site.

(AQW 2804/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The culverted section of the watercourse known as the Killyclogher Burn Branch B affecting the Knock-Na-Moe Bungalows is to be surveyed to determine the extent of any defects. The survey is expected to be complete by mid February 2008. Any remedial works identified from the survey will be assessed and prioritised in the Rivers Agency works programme.

Tuberculosis; Brucellosis and Johnes's Disease in Cattle

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of cases of (i) tuberculosis; (ii) brucellosis; and (iii) Johnes's Disease in cattle, by parliamentary constituency, in each of the last 4 years. (AQW 2819/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department does not hold this information on the basis of parliamentary constituency but on the basis of Divisional Veterinary Office (DVO) areas. This information can be found below.

Division	Number of cases 2004		
	Brucellosis	TB	Johnes
Armagh	17	186	5
Ballymena	1	143	3
Coleraine	1	339	2
Dungannon	6	296	1
Enniskillen	49	319	1
Larne	8	113	4
Londonderry	1	36	0
Newry	18	285	6
Newtownards	10	270	2
Omagh	14	337	0
	125	2324	24

Division	Number of cases 2005		
	Brucellosis	TB	Johnes
Armagh	6	155	2
Ballymena	3	105	3
Coleraine	5	258	2
Dungannon	7	256	2
Enniskillen	28	217	4
Larne	6	83	2
Londonderry	2	53	0

Division	Number of cases 2005		
	Brucellosis	TB	Johnes
Newry	18	241	5
Newtownards	3	205	7
Omagh	10	219	0
	88	1792	31**

Division	Number of cases 2006		
	Brucellosis	TB	Johnes
Armagh	44	164	5
Ballymena	1	82	1
Coleraine	8	172	6
Dungannon	3	172	3
Enniskillen	19	199	2
Larne	4	76	3
Londonderry	0	60	0
Newry	26	244	7
Newtownards	8	189	5
Omagh	5	155	2
	118	1513	38**

Division	Number of cases 2007 (*to end November)		
	Brucellosis*	TB*	Johnes
Armagh	39	128	4
Ballymena	3	65	1
Coleraine	7	123	4
Dungannon	9	138	6
Enniskillen	15	152	4
Larne	7	39	1
Londonderry	2	28	5
Newry	36	191	8
Newtownards	5	147	3
Omagh	4	129	14
	127	1140	56**

** in the Johnes total indicates that there are cases where the information submitted is not sufficient to be certain that they have been allocated to the correct DVO.

For Tuberculosis and Brucellosis the number of cases reflects the number of herds that have had at least one reactor (animal) in an official test and no other reactors in the previous 12 months. The number of Johnes cases is based on the number confirmed laboratory submissions.

Single Farm Payments

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether or not the movement from Single Farm Payments to area payments will take place before 2013, following the proposals regarding the Common Agricultural Policy 'Health Check'.

(AQW 2858/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Health Check process is at a very early stage. The EU Commission's communication document of 20 November 2007 contains a suggestion that Member States may be allowed to move towards a flatter rate of SFP during the period 2009-2013. I would stress that this is simply an option that is being mooted and is not being proposed as a requirement.

If such an option was provided in the final agreement on the CAP Health Check, which is not anticipated until late 2008, I would need to consult widely with stakeholders thereafter before making any decision.

Closure of Local Departmental Offices

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of the proposals to close 23 of the existing 33 local Departmental offices, (i) to confirm the locations of the 23 offices that are being considered for closure; (ii) to detail her reasons for considering such proposals.

(AQW 2863/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Currently no decisions have been taken on the location of DARD Direct offices and which local Departmental offices will close. My officials have recently completed a pre-consultation exercise with key stakeholders and section 75 groups. They are currently preparing a report on the outcome for the Agriculture Committee. Following this, a full EQIA/public consultation on the DARD Direct roll out proposals will be undertaken. It is only when this process has been completed that I will be in a position to confirm the location of DARD Direct offices and which local Departmental offices will then close. The only exception to this is Inishkeen House, Enniskillen, as it has already been modified to test the new DARD Direct service delivery model, and the Lisnaskea and Irvinestown sub offices have already closed.

The reasons for considering such proposals follow the successful piloting and positive evaluation of DARD Direct. Independent feedback on the Inishkeen House pilot was very good with farmers welcoming the new approach to customer service. DARD Direct is a new way of working that aims to provide a 'one stop shop' service to our customers and it is designed

to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our services. It also aims to provide more choice in how, when and where customers access our services and it will provide a better service to our customers.

'Chicken Litter' Power Plant in Glenavy

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail any discussions her department has had with (i) Rose Energy; (ii) Moy Park; and (iii) O'Kane's Poultry, in relation to the proposed 'Chicken Litter' power plant in Glenavy.

(AQW 3066/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: An Expert Group on Alternative Uses of Manures (EGAUM) was established by DARD in March 2005 to examine alternatives to landspreading of manures. The Northern Ireland Poultry Federation was represented on this group.

In March 2006 the Group concluded its work and made recommendations to the DARD Minister. In respect of the poultry industry, the group reviewed and endorsed the technical approach proposed by Rose Energy to develop a single poultry-litter fired generator.

In November 2007, DARD officials attended a meeting with a delegation from Rose Energy hosted by Ministers Dodds and Foster. Officials from DETI, InvestNI, DOE, DARD, EHS and Planning Service also attended. Representatives from Rose Energy outlined their project proposal and progress to date.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

National Sports Stadium

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give a timescale within which he will make public his recommendations on the venue for the new National Sports Stadium.

(AQW 2826/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): My Department is currently reviewing the Outline Business Case (OBC) for the proposed Multi-Sports Stadium. I expect this to be completed within the next week, after which the OBC will be passed to the Department of Finance and Personnel for the normal scrutiny and approval process. I would expect to bring the OBC to the CAL Committee when my colleague, Minister Robinson has had an opportunity to review it.

Gaelicising the Names of Members

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether or not the practice by Sinn Féin of gaelicising the names of Members from a Unionist background, during exchanges in the Assembly, contributed to his conclusion that an Irish Language Act could prove divisive. (AQW 2857/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Gaelicising the names of members from a unionist background during exchanges in the Assembly did not influence my approach to handling the issue of an Irish Language Act. This is a matter for the Speaker and Standing Orders. However such incidents do not assist in developing the language in a depoliticised manner.

Public Money Paid to the Ulster Branch of the IRFU

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to the answer to AQW 2483/08, to detail (i) the amount of public money paid to the Ulster Branch of the Irish Rugby Football Union for building projects at Ravenhill; (ii) the date each project was undertaken; (iii) the companies involved, and the amount of money each received; and (iv) any conditions that were attached to these projects, for the financial years (a) 2000-2001; and (b) 2001-2002. (AQW 2928/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding. The table below details the public money provided to the Ulster Branch of the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) for building projects at Ravenhill over the financial years 1999/00, 2000/01 and 2002/02, and the main contractors in each case:

Year	Amount	Date of SNI Offer	Main Contractor
1999/00	£100,784 Lottery funding	9/7/99	HJ O'Boyle Ltd
2000/01	£25,000 Exchequer funding	27/11/00	Pulse AV & Design & Construction
2001/02	-		

All of these projects were required to satisfy accountability and value for money requirements of public funding.

Motocross Events

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2651/08,

to confirm (i) the date of the Board meeting at which the decision was taken to go to contract for the Motocross events; (ii) if the minutes of the Board's discussion of this decision are available; (iii) the date on which the acting CEO signed the contract with Youthstream; (iv) the date on which the acting CEO finalised contracts with Guiseppe Luongo of Motocross; and (v) if his department was aware that the Northern Ireland Events Company was entering into these contracts. (AQW 2947/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I have been informed by the Northern Ireland Events Company that the decision to go to contract for the Motocross events was not put to a Board meeting, but that a Paper was circulated to Board Members for verbal comment.

I have further been informed by the Company that its Acting Chief Executive signed the contracts with Youthstream on 12 September 2007 and that Youthstream then signed the contracts on 28 October 2007.

The Department was not aware that the Northern Ireland Events Company had entered into these contracts, but was aware that the Company had been negotiating to bring the Motocross of Nations to Northern Ireland.

Internal governance and control arrangements with the Company and between the Company and the Department is subject to review, as are a number of related matters surrounding the deficit accumulated by the Northern Ireland Events Company.

In my statement to the Assembly on 26 November 2007 I said that I would report back to the House at the earliest opportunity on the findings of this review. It would be inappropriate for me to comment further in detail until his review is completed.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the number of suppliers of the Northern Ireland Events Company that are currently taking legal action against the company over unpaid debts; (ii) the number of debtors that have not been paid since he announced that all outstanding monies would be covered by his department; and (iii) the total sum of money owed by the Northern Ireland Events Company. (AQW 2948/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I have been informed by the Northern Ireland Events Company that one supplier is currently taking legal action against the Company over unpaid debts.

In my statement to the Assembly on 26 November 2007, I said that I was commissioning an independent review of all the circumstances surrounding the deficit

accumulated by the Northern Ireland Events Company and that I would report back to the House at the earliest opportunity on the findings of this review. This review will include an assessment of the number of creditors and the amount of money owed by the Company.

I am sure the Member will agree that it would be inappropriate for me to comment further in detail until this review is complete.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm whether or not his department received monthly accounts from the Northern Ireland Events Company, on the date they were due, for (i) September 2006; (ii) October 2006; (iii) November 2006; (iv) December 2006; and (v) January 2007; and, if they were not received by the due dates, what action did his department take to obtain the relevant accounts. (AQW 2949/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department did not receive monthly accounts from the Northern Ireland Events Company.

Accountability arrangements between the Department and the Northern Ireland Events Company is one of the subjects being considered in the independent review of all the circumstances surrounding the deficit accumulated by the Northern Ireland Events Company.

In my statement to the Assembly on 26 November 2007 I said that I would report back to the House at the earliest opportunity on the findings of this review. I am sure the Member will agree that it would be inappropriate for me to comment further in detail until this review is complete

Tennis Legends Event

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2411/08, to (i) detail the amount of money the Northern Ireland Events Company invested in the Tennis Legends event, which was contracted into after 20 September 2007; (ii) confirm whether or not his department was aware of this contract; and (iii) confirm whether or not his department gave approval to the event. (AQW 3055/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Northern Ireland Events Company (NIEC) invested up to £40,000 in the Tennis Legends event under the NIEC Branding scheme. NIEC had issued a letter of offer to Tennis Legends on 20th June 2007 which was accepted. NIEC sought approval from the Department in October 2007 to officially sign the contract. This approval was given on the basis that there was a legal

obligation on NIEC to honour its agreement with Tennis Legends. The Department reiterated to NIEC that no further funding commitments should be undertaken without prior Departmental approval.

EDUCATION

Special Schools

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Education to provide a list of special schools that cater for the needs of children who have severe and profound hearing impairment. (AQW 2768/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Special schools that currently cater for the needs of children who have severe and profound hearing impairment are as follows:

Belfast Education and Library Board

Fleming Fulton

Glenveagh

Greenwood House

Harberton

Mitchell House

Oakwood

North Eastern Education and Library Board

Jordanstown

Kilronan

Riverside

Roddensvale

Rosstulla

Sandelford

Hillcroft

Castle Tower

South Eastern Education and Library Board

Clifton

Knockevin

Parkview

Tor Bank

Southern Education and Library Board

Rathore

Southern Education and Library Board
Ceara
Donard
Lisanally
Sperrinview

Western Education and Library Board
Foyleview
Arvalee
Elmbrook

Public-Private Partnership in Schools

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education to detail the (i) names; and (ii) locations, of all schools, where a Public Private Partnership is being considered. (AQW 2777/08)

The Minister of Education: Details of schools which were announced in previous years to be taken forward through a Public Private Partnership and are currently at a PPP procurement stage are shown in the following table.

Schools	Location
St Mary's College	Derry
St Cecilia's College	Derry
Lagan College	Castlereagh
Tor Bank Special School	Dundonald
St Patrick's Grammar School	Downpatrick
Our Lady and St Patrick's College	Knock, Belfast
St Mary's Primary School	Portglenone
St Joseph's Primary School	Carryduff
Ashfield Girls' High School	Belfast
Belfast Boys' Model School	Belfast
Belfast Model School for Girls	Belfast
Grosvenor Grammar School	Belfast
Orangefield Primary School	Belfast
Ballymoney High School	Ballymoney
Rainey Endowed School	Magherafelt
Holy Trinity College	Cookstown
Loreto Grammar	Omagh

Coleraine College had also been announced previously to be taken forward through a PPP project though the scheme was put on hold last year pending a further assessment of the project.

Details of schools which have been built and operated under Public Private Partnerships or are currently in the construction phase are shown in the table below.

Schools	Locations
Balmoral High School	Belfast
Wellington College	Belfast
Drumglass High School	Dungannon
St Genevieve's High School	Belfast
Holy Cross College (estimated completion autumn 2008)	Strabane
Bangor Academy and Sixth Form College (estimated completion spring 2008)	Bangor
Nendrum College (estimated completion date spring 2008)	Comber

Schools Built and Operated Under PPP

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education to detail the (i) names; and (ii) locations, of all schools built and operated under Public Private Partnerships. (AQW 2778/08)

The Minister of Education: Details of schools which were announced in previous years to be taken forward through a Public Private Partnership and are currently at a PPP procurement stage are shown in the following table.

Schools	Location
St Mary's College	Derry
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Our Lady and St Patrick's College	Knock, Belfast
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Grosvenor Grammar School	Belfast
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Ballymoney High School	Ballymoney
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Cost of Restructuring the School System

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of restructuring the school system to accommodate transfer at 14 years, in terms of (i) capital investment; (ii) staff retraining and transfers; and (iii) transport and other ancillary costs; and whether or not she intends to publish these figures. (AQW 2784/08)

The Minister of Education: Implementation of the vision for new post-primary arrangements outlined on 4 December 2007 will require a certain amount of structural change, though the exact nature, and therefore cost, of that change can not be accurately predicted until area planning mechanisms are operational. The important point is that structural reform is required in any case due to the number of surplus places that exist across the schools' estate, and it makes sense to design flexible new transfer arrangements that make full use of spare capacity in the first instance, and which are in harmony with curriculum reform and delivery of the Entitlement Framework.

Strategic Plan for Transfer at Age 14

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education whether or not she will immediately publish her detailed strategic plan for transfer at age 14. (AQW 2785/08)

The Minister of Education: Further detail on my proposals for new transfer arrangements will be made available once discussions with key education stakeholders are completed, and I have engaged with the Executive Committee and Education Committee.

Schools in Strangford that are Under Threat of Closure

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education to list the schools in the Strangford constituency that are under threat of closure. (AQW 2794/08)

The Minister of Education: There are currently no proposals with my Department for the closure of a school in the Strangford constituency.

Irish-Medium Schools

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of Irish medium schools that are (i) to open; and (ii) under consideration for opening, in the Strangford constituency. (AQW 2796/08)

The Minister of Education: There are no grant-aided Irish-medium schools opening, or proposals for new Irish-medium schools under consideration for opening, in the Strangford constituency.

Strangford Schools Applying for Integrated Status

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education to list the schools in the Strangford constituency that are currently applying for integrated status. (AQW 2797/08)

The Minister of Education: There are currently no proposals either to establish a new grant-maintained integrated school, or for transformation of an existing grant-aided school to integrated status, in the Strangford constituency.

Drugs and Alcohol Awareness in Schools

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education to detail the resources she is directing towards drugs and alcohol awareness in schools and youth clubs. (AQW 2837/08)

The Minister of Education: Education and Library Boards receive funding as part of their overall block grant to enable them to employ drugs and alcohol education officers to provide training and support to teachers in delivering drugs and alcohol education as part of the Personal Development strand of the revised curriculum in schools. Additional funds have been provided to support the curriculum roll out which includes teacher training and guidance materials for the delivery of drugs and alcohol education. Funding is also provided to each of the five Education and Library Boards and the Youth Council to support

youth provision which includes addressing drugs and alcohol awareness sessions for young people.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education whether or not she has met with her counterpart in the Scottish Executive; and to detail what issues were discussed. (AQW 2865/08)

The Minister of Education: I travelled to Edinburgh on 12 December and met with Fiona Hyslop, the Education Minister for Scotland. We discussed the following issues –

- OECD Peer Review;
- Family Resilience/Disadvantage;
- Teacher Recruitment and Induction including funding for this;
- Gaelic Medium Education; and
- Parental Involvement in Education

Procurement of Local Produce

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Education to detail the outcome of her meeting with Ministerial colleagues in relation to the issue of procurement of local produce. (AQW 2892/08)

The Minister of Education: I had a useful meeting with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to discuss the possibility of increased procurement of local foods. Although Education and Library Boards already procure much of their requirements locally, especially fresh produce, we acknowledged the benefits to be gained from sourcing more food locally. It was agreed that officials would continue working together to progress this issue.

Neo-Natal Hearing Screening Programme

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to prioritise inter-departmental and inter-agency work to provide wraparound services, for children assessed as deaf through the Neo-Natal Hearing Screening Programme. (AQW 2899/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education (DE) has continued involvement with the Newborn Hearing Screening Programme (NHSP) Steering Group. Under the auspices of this group DE commissioned an Audit of existing provision in relation to the impact of the NHSP on Educational Services for the Hearing Impaired. Some of the key findings of the DE Audit, which was completed in

March 2006, indicate that existing Education and Library Boards Hearing Impaired Services can cope with an increased demand and are already dealing with young children and their families. Extensive networks of multi-disciplinary contacts and working arrangements are in place and existing response times to new referrals are extremely rapid.

In addition, DE provided funding to the Education and Library Boards to enable a training package to be delivered, in December 2007, to enhance the skills of the peripatetic teachers of the deaf so that they will be better prepared to contribute to the Newborn Hearing Screening Programme.

The December Monitoring Round

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the reasons why £0.6m for school projects was returned to the Department of Finance and Personnel, in the December monitoring round. (AQW 2912/08)

The Minister of Education: In accordance with DFP guidance all reduced requirements above £500k must be returned to DFP for reallocation. This reduced requirement from the Children and Young People Funding Package was made up of 3 components:

An in-year delay in the independent counselling service operating to full capacity in post-primary schools across the North of Ireland; a lower than anticipated claim for substitute teaching costs to allow designated teachers to attend child protection training; and falling pupil enrolment numbers resulting in reduced costs in the Extended Schools project.

Underspend

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the reasons why £16.7m of the Education and Library Boards' capital funding was returned in the December monitoring round; and to provide a breakdown of the amount returned by each Education and Library Board. (AQW 2913/08)

The Minister of Education: An examination of progress on major capital schemes in 2007-08 identified where progress on schemes had slipped. As a result, the schemes' funding needs were recalculated and £16.7m was declared as a reduced requirement in the December monitoring round as this funding could not be spent in the 2007-08 financial year. However, this funding will be available in future years as the schemes progress and this has been taken account of in finalising the Investment Strategy.

The breakdown for each Education and Library Board is as follows:

Breakdown for each Education and Library Board	
Belfast Education and Library Board	£3.3m
North-Eastern Education and Library Board	£3.0m
South-Eastern Education and Library Board	£9.9m
Southern Education and Library Board	£0.1m
Western Education and Library Board	£0.4m
Total	£16.7m

Priorities for Money Returned

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail her priorities for the money allocated to her department as a result of the December monitoring round.

(AQW 2914/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education was allocated £15.3m resource and £1.3m capital in the December monitoring round. The capital allocation of £1.3m is to correctly align the Department's capital profile in the schools sector. This was offset by a corresponding transfer of £1.3m from the youth sector.

The £15.3m resource received will be utilised in the following ways:

£12.0m – This will be allocated to Education and Library Boards to enable them to meet the in-year pressure arising from the resolution of the Classroom Assistants Job Evaluation dispute.

£0.8m – This will be allocated to Education and Library Boards to enable them to meet the increased non-teaching staff redundancy costs associated with the rationalisation of the schools estate.

£0.5m – This also will be allocated to Education and Library Boards to allow them to continue the work they commenced last year to further develop potential rationalisations, amalgamations and identification of surplus accommodation.

£2.0m – This will be used to meet the costs of implementing teacher redundancies as a result of rationalisation measures to address declining pupil numbers. From this allocation, £1.2m will be allocated to Education and Library Boards, with the balance of £0.8m being allocated to and Voluntary Grammar Schools.

Meetings in Scotland and Republic of Ireland

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 2549/08, to detail the meetings that she has attended in (i) Scotland; and (ii) the Republic of Ireland, since assuming office.

(AQW 2920/08)

The Minister of Education: Since assuming office, I have attended one meeting in Scotland and three meetings in the South of Ireland.

Specialised School for Children with Autism

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education to detail whether or not she has any plans to build a specialised school that will cater exclusively for children with autism.

(AQW 2937/08)

The Minister of Education: It is for the Education and Library Boards or the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools to consider the special educational needs of children in their area and develop an infrastructure that will meet those needs. The Department will then consider any proposals submitted by Education and Library Boards in accordance with the normal Development Proposal process. At present no Development Proposal with regard to a school catering exclusively for children with autism has been submitted to the Department.

Literacy and Numeracy Strategy at Key Stage 3

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to confirm (i) whether or not one-to-one intervention will be part of the revised literacy and numeracy strategy at Key Stage 3; and (ii) if this intervention will be in the form of reading recovery.

(AQW 2951/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department is in the process of finalising the review of the literacy and numeracy strategy which will be designed to ensure that, long before Key Stage 3, children will have developed their reading, writing and number skills to the appropriate levels. When completed the strategy will outline how we propose to support a number of approaches, including in post-primary schools and the role of interventions such as Reading Recovery and the teaching of reading through phonics. It will also highlight the particular role that teachers of English and Mathematics can play in post-primary schools as champions of literacy and numeracy. We do need, of course, to recognise that teachers will continue to need flexibility in determining which approaches best meet the needs of their pupils and the strategy will not therefore prescribe particular approaches but will rather give teachers more scope to use their own professional judgement. It is intended that this review and proposals for the way forward will issue for consultation very shortly.

Schools in West Tyrone

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Education to list the funding allocation to each primary and post-primary school in West Tyrone, in each of the last three years. (AQW 2988/08)

The Minister of Education: The funding allocation delegated to each primary and post primary school in West Tyrone in each of the last three financial years is set out in the following table:

School Type	School Name	Delegated Funding Allocation 2004/05 £	Delegated Funding Allocation 2005/06 £	Delegated Funding Allocation 2006/07 £
Nursery	Ballycolman	£113,899	£123,908	£167,831
Nursery	Academy	£151,027	£173,726	£204,010
Nursery	Omagh North	£134,373	£162,377	£175,517
Primary	Ardstraw	£173,832	£192,974	£208,530
Primary	Artigarvan	£373,128	£405,585	£445,945
Primary	Bready	£238,016	£237,815	£251,437
Primary	Bridgehill	£163,437	£174,310	£197,001
Primary	Denamona	£199,545	£221,010	£252,177
Primary	Donemana	£261,024	£281,645	£321,427
Primary	Dromore	£169,669	£186,281	£176,834
Primary	Drumlegagh	£161,797	£161,610	£163,560
Primary	Dunmullan	£143,880	£181,320	£203,031
Primary	Edwards	£464,440	£515,604	£595,317
Primary	Erganagh	£187,816	£203,890	£208,406
Primary	Gibson	£842,369	£888,780	£886,901
Primary	Gillygooley	£174,472	£187,791	£185,348
Primary	Gortin	£199,206	£196,972	£193,220
Primary	Killen	£222,268	£260,733	£296,848
Primary	Langfield	£142,019	£145,302	£154,204
Primary	McClintock	£238,222	£275,165	£292,444
Primary	Newtownstewart Model	£213,847	£221,059	£249,231
Primary	Omagh County	£842,658	£903,176	£940,934
Primary	Queen Elizabeth II	£112,429	£110,294	£133,901
Primary	Sion Mills	£604,640	£677,689	£709,159
Primary	Strabane	£451,580	£488,102	£571,134
Primary	Trillick	£105,655	£122,223	£124,599
Primary	Cooley	N/A	£379,586	£396,340
Primary	All Saints, Tattysallagh	£152,226	£132,593	£147,875
Primary	Altishane	£134,109	£137,263	£152,170
Primary	Barrack Street Boys', Strabane	£491,279	£575,788	£606,737
Primary	Christ The King	£413,879	£460,227	£485,263
Primary	Drumduff	£179,627	£196,962	£214,752

School Type	School Name	Delegated Funding Allocation 2004/05 £	Delegated Funding Allocation 2005/06 £	Delegated Funding Allocation 2006/07 £
Primary	Drumlish	£135,341	£155,224	£176,943
Primary	Drumnabey	£160,334	£169,322	£196,792
Primary	Envagh	£102,828	£116,219	£118,013
Primary	Evish	£160,286	£186,628	£207,178
Primary	St Joseph's, Glenmornan	£126,043	£127,541	£138,048
Primary	Gortnagarn	£168,178	£196,613	£202,521
Primary	St Mary's, Killyclogher	£816,347	£895,641	£913,642
Primary	Magheralough PS, Kilskeery	£111,700	£116,588	£129,263
Primary	Knocknagor	£146,074	£163,481	£181,401
Primary	Loughash	£110,581	£116,919	£133,049
Primary	Loreto Convent	£476,200	£552,759	£570,545
Primary	Our Lady of Lourdes	£271,433	£296,185	£313,051
Primary	Recarson	£304,194	£326,461	£321,569
Primary	Roscavey	£140,773	£133,186	£135,966
Primary	Sacred Heart, Tattyreagh	£181,580	£212,612	£222,861
Primary	St Davog's, Castlederg	£87,620	£109,160	£108,648
Primary	St Anne's Strabane	£625,417	£676,374	£705,215
Primary	St Brigid's, Altamuskin	£195,546	£228,078	£224,230
Primary	St Brigid's, Cranagh	£124,374	£133,344	£147,499
Primary	St Brigid's, Mountfield	£144,202	£135,518	£145,109
Primary	St Caireall's, Castlederg	£254,966	£286,625	£299,869
Primary	St Colmcille's, Omagh	£473,333	£469,700	£521,117
Primary	St Columba's, Clady	£230,877	£281,153	£319,250
Primary	St Columba's, Dromore	£110,705	£115,300	£100,053
Primary	St Columbkille's Carrickmore	£630,631	£691,406	£722,291
Primary	St Conor's, Omagh	£879,108	£990,085	£1,024,245
Primary	St Dympna's, Dromore,	£226,883	£232,115	£245,539
Primary	St Eugene's, Tyrcur	£122,914	£143,209	£145,557
Primary	St Eugene's, Victoria Bridge	£142,529	£159,376	£165,196
Primary	St Joseph's, Drumquin	£233,661	£239,486	£278,508
Primary	St Lawrence's, Fintona	£550,913	£612,008	£656,535
Primary	St Macartan's, Dromore	£119,059	£118,111	£137,706
Primary	St Mary's Boys', Strabane	£941,383	£976,949	£1,011,167
Primary	St Mary's Girls', Strabane	£890,878	£948,847	£914,045
Primary	St Mary's, Cloughcor	£390,100	£433,782	£490,193
Primary	St Mary's, Laught	£99,170	£72,603	Closed August 2005
Primary	St Matthew's, Garvaghey	£106,858	£117,660	£124,816

School Type	School Name	Delegated Funding Allocation 2004/05 £	Delegated Funding Allocation 2005/06 £	Delegated Funding Allocation 2006/07 £
Primary	St Oliver Plunkett, Beragh	£312,284	£337,196	£330,172
Primary	St Patrick's, Creggan	£142,883	£130,866	£124,196
Primary	St Patrick's, Castlederg	£523,793	£567,860	£599,687
Primary	St Patrick's, Donemana	£168,818	£177,859	£196,757
Primary	St Patrick's, Eskra	£188,958	£197,998	£209,602
Primary	St Patrick's, Gortin	£276,990	£302,697	£343,055
Primary	St Patrick's, Newtownstewart	£348,661	£372,776	£431,569
Primary	St Patrick's, Seskinore	£109,153	£121,700	£95,196
Primary	St Peter's, Plumbridge	£245,486	£259,459	£282,771
Primary	St Scire's, Trillick	£193,667	£221,046	£260,649
Primary	St Teresa', Loughmacrory	£269,056	£308,991	£323,627
Primary	St Theresa's, Glebe	£337,884	£358,454	£440,624
Primary	Tummery	£177,858	£199,452	£212,606
Primary	Gaelscoil Ui Dhochartaigh	£254,434	£305,128	£333,589
Primary	Gaelscoil na gCrann	N/A	N/A	£82,826
Primary	Omagh Integrated	£553,886	£635,147	£720,843
Secondary	Castlederg High School	£1,304,190	£1,470,079	£1,639,820
Secondary	Omagh High School	£1,332,204	£1,535,949	£1,761,815
Secondary	Strabane High School	£1,042,275	£1,106,581	£1,113,513
Secondary	Dean Brian Maguire College	£1,513,586	£1,657,690	£1,693,687
Secondary	Our Lady Of Mercy High School	£1,323,552	£554,378	Closed August 2005
Secondary	St Colman's High School	£2,827,860	£1,179,468	Closed August 2005
Secondary	St Eugene's High School	£683,514	£710,875	£754,699
Secondary	St. John's Business & Enterprise College	£879,799	£885,559	£862,990
Secondary	St Joseph's High Plumbridge	£743,649	£747,369	£741,209
Secondary	Sacred Heart College	£3,005,596	£3,347,454	£3,620,339
Secondary	Holy Cross	N/A	£3,426,769	£5,712,425
Secondary	Drumragh Integrated College	£2,124,284	£2,160,459	£2,129,750
Grammar	Omagh Academy	£2,096,972	£2,329,829	£2,379,684
Grammar	Strabane Grammar	£1,307,130	£1,438,577	£1,599,761
Grammar	Christian Brothers' Grammar Omagh	£3,422,417	£3,641,315	£3,648,538
Grammar	Loreto Grammar Omagh	£3,426,453	£3,600,426	£3,643,310

Notes: N/A = school opened after this financial year

IT Support to Pupils with Dyslexia

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether or not she will provide additional funding to the 5 Education and Library Boards, to help them provide increased specialised IT support to pupils with dyslexia. (AQW 3004/08)

The Minister of Education: In September 2007, the Department advised the 5 Education and Library Boards (ELBs) that additional funding for initiatives involving children with dyslexia had been secured. The Department invited them to submit business cases outlining their priorities for how best to utilise this additional funding to support pupils with dyslexia.

Following receipt of all the business cases and subsequent consideration by the Department approval to expenditure of an additional £89,000 per ELB, in the 2007/08 financial year, was issued in December 2007. The Belfast, Southern and Western Education and Library Boards' business cases identified the provision of specialised IT support for dyslexic pupils as a priority and the North Eastern Education and Library Board business case referred to the provision of "appropriate resources" for dyslexic pupils, which may include specialised IT support. The South Eastern Education and Library Board's business case made no specific reference to IT support.

Youth Service Provision in the Colin Area

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Education to detail what measures her Department is taking to maintain and develop youth service provision in the Colin area of West Belfast. (AQW 3048/08)

The Minister of Education: The South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) has responsibility for securing the provision of adequate youth service activities in the Colin area of West Belfast.

In 2007/08, the SEELB allocated some £400,000 from a budget of nearly £4 million for youth services in the greater Colin area. I have been advised by the Chief Executive of the SEELB that this funding was spent on maintaining existing youth centre provision and running youth projects targeting identified needs in partnership with the voluntary/community sector and other statutory bodies. The funding was also used to develop non-centre-based provision through detached outreach work, targeting the more hard to reach young people; to deliver summer intervention programmes; and fund small voluntary/community groups.

To ensure its resources were effectively targeted in the area, the South Eastern Board developed a Colin Area Strategy for 2007 to 2010 which aims to improve the range, quality and accessibility of youth provision in the area. This strategy was informed by a body of

research into need and deprivation in the area. The Board worked with a range of fora and agencies to identify and assess need, including the Colin Neighbourhood Partnership, the Colin Youth Worker's Council, the South Eastern Board Practitioners Forum and the Colin Youth Forum. To address the identified needs, youth services are delivered in a number of ways—through direct Board delivery mechanisms, through service level agreements with the voluntary/community sectors; and through partnerships between the voluntary, community and statutory sectors. To ensure effective monitoring of youth activities, quality assurance and/or self assessment arrangements have been put in place to assess performance, and to inform and drive forward further development.

The Department has commenced a review of youth services, and will be developing 'Priorities for Youth' over the next year. Key stakeholders including those in the Greater Colin area will be given an opportunity to engage with policy makers in the development of these priorities.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

New Deal for Musicians Programme

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether or not students on the New Deal for Musicians Programme, domiciled in the North West region, are required to travel to North Down to undertake 'Pro-tools' training as part of their course. (AQW 2744/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The South Eastern Regional College, who currently deliver the New Deal for Musicians programme throughout Northern Ireland, offers participants the opportunity to undertake a voluntary 40 hour Electronic Music Production course. This was previously known as PRO-tools training, which is delivered in the Bangor college campus.

I am advised that the course will be delivered twice yearly dependent on participant uptake, with the time and delivery model for the programme tailored to accommodate participants preferred model of attendance i.e. evenings, day release or block delivery. Assistance towards the cost of travel/lodgings expenses will be paid to all participants who attend this course.

Job Losses in the Building Trade

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of job losses in the

building trade over the last 6 months; and to outline what support he is providing to those who have lost their jobs in finding new employment. (AQW 2836/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: It is not possible to provide an exact measure of the number of jobs lost in the building trade in the last 6 months. Figures from the Quarterly Employment Survey (QES) can, however, be used to estimate the net change in employee job levels in Construction during this period. Latest figures from the QES show that in September 2007 there were 45,090 employee jobs in Construction in NI. This represents an increase of 1,820 (4.2%) from the March 2007 figure of 43,270. All figures have been seasonally adjusted. Updated figures will be available in March 2008.

Through its network of thirty-five offices the Department provides information, advice and guidance on employment, education and training opportunities to assist individuals gain employment.

Staff Illness

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to the answer to AQW 2328/08, to outline what measures he has put in place to prevent staff becoming ill; and to provide an analysis of their effectiveness. (AQW 2851/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department for Employment and Learning has utilised a range of programmes aimed at promoting health and well-being for all staff, for example the Health Works programme; the Employee Assistance Programme; the Condition Management Programme; Pre-maternity seminars; Managing Attendance, Relationships and Stress courses, pilot- Fast Track physiotherapy, as well as the Occupational Health Service and a dedicated Welfare Officer. In addition to these programmes and services, flexible working arrangements and special leave arrangements are also available to promote work-life balance. It is difficult to measure the specific impact of these programmes and services because of the varied range of determining factors involved in an individual's health and well-being. However, the Health Works interventions are evaluated on a regular basis to measure their impact on health and lifestyle choices. High level and regular reports, as appropriate, are also drawn up to provide information on the take-up levels of other programmes and services. This information is used to influence the development and implementation of policies and initiatives on an ongoing basis.

Student Places at Magee Campus

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to confirm whether or not it remains a strategic intention of the University of Ulster to increase the number of student places at Magee campus to 10,000. (AQW 3020/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am advised by the University that this remains a key objective for the institution. However, you will be aware that the number of full-time undergraduate places in each institution in Northern Ireland is subject to a cap as a means of controlling the cost to Government of higher education. This cap is known as the Maximum Student Number (MaSN).

My Department will continue to engage with the University on options such as targeted expansion in areas of strategic importance to the future growth of the local economy, within the context of the Comprehensive Spending Review.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Christian Heritage of North Down

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the decision by Tourism Ireland not to include the Christian heritage of North Down in its marketing campaign. (AQW 2746/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): Tourism Ireland includes Christian Heritage, including that of North Down, in many of its publications and websites, which are available to potential visitors from overseas. North Down Christian Heritage sights are detailed on Tourism Ireland's website in the "Co. Down highlights", "Places to go" and East Border Region highlights sections, among others. Bangor Abbey and Grey Abbey are also sites featured.

Tourism Ireland's 2008 Market Book publication, which is distributed across all markets, highlights Christian Heritage in particular in the Northern Ireland section where it mentions St Patrick and his legacy in counties Armagh and Down.

In 2008, Tourism Ireland is producing a new Car Touring Guide for use by overseas visitors which will feature a tour on the Christian Heritage theme including several sites in Northern Ireland.

Christian Heritage is also well represented in Tourism Ireland's suite of 36 websites in 15 languages where it

is referenced in various sections (Northern Ireland; Places to Go; Things to do and see; The Story of St Patrick etc), while information is also available through links to the Armagh Down website (armaghanddown.com)

Broadband Access

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the percentage of homes and businesses in Northern Ireland that are able to access broadband internet via their telephone line.
(AQW 2818/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Over 99% of broadband services in Northern Ireland are delivered by telephone wires. 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 household and every business in Northern Ireland and is delivered via telephone lines, wireless or satellite services. Less than 1% of broadband services are delivered by wireless systems including satellite. Customers can often choose from more than one provider.

Lough Neagh

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action he is taking to promote Lough Neagh as a tourist destination for the Irish, British and international markets.
(AQW 2835/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) has responsibility for marketing within Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. NITB employs websites, publications and targeted campaigns to promote tourism growth in Northern Ireland. Lough Neagh and its attractions are included in these marketing strategies.

Lough Neagh's main strengths are recognised in activity products and these are comprehensively included in a number of related activity websites that form part of NITB's activity marketing campaigns.

It is the remit of Tourism Ireland Ltd (TIL) to promote the Northern Ireland tourism product within Great Britain and internationally. In conjunction with TIL, NITB will be conducting two major campaigns in Great Britain and the Irish Republic focusing on all there is to see and do on a break in Northern Ireland. The first of these campaigns launched in January 2008.

TIL features information on Lough Neagh and its hinterland in its suite of publications, and websites, which are available to potential visitors throughout the world.

The area features in a number of sections of TIL's 36 international websites as a centre for watersports, coarse and game fishing, birdwatching, equestrian activities, golf and cycling as well as for more general leisure pursuits such as walking on loughshore trails, boating and cruising and for accommodation, restaurants and things to do and see.

The TIL Coarse Angling guide, produced in cooperation with the NITB, shows the fishery at Portglenone on its cover. The guide is currently being updated, with assistance from the Loughs Agency, and will feature fisheries around Lough Neagh. It is published in four language versions for overseas distribution.

Lough Neagh also features in TIL's Walking and Cycling Guides.

Lough Neagh features in TIL's Food Guide which was launched by Paul Rankin at the recent BBC Good Food Show at the NEC in Birmingham. Lough Neagh eels are among the highlights included in the guide.

Power Stations

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what financial support has been made available to power stations in (i) 2004; (ii) 2005; and (iii) 2006.
(AQW 2844/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: There has been no financial support provided by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to power stations in Northern Ireland during 2004, 2005 and 2006.

Promotion Renewable Energy and Alternative Land Use

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail his Department's role in promoting renewable energy and alternative land use; and to detail what joint working measures there are with other Government Departments, in relation to this matter.
(AQW 2845/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department has the lead responsibility for promoting renewable energy generally and this involves regular contact with a number of other Departments where there are cross-cutting issues.

"Renewable energy and alternative land use" is a key area for DARD and is the subject of an inquiry commissioned by the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee. It is also one aspect of the broader bioenergy sector.

In taking forward this particular aspect of renewable energy, DETI established a Bioenergy Interdepartmental

Group (IDG) last year to coordinate a more integrated and strategic approach to the development of bioenergy in Northern Ireland. The IDG comprises representatives from DARD, DOE, Invest NI, DRD and DFP. This co-ordinated approach will enable Northern Ireland to optimise potential benefits of bioenergy across energy, agriculture, enterprise, transport and environmental sectors and contribute to renewable energy and greenhouse gas emissions targets.

On behalf of the IDG, DETI has appointed consultants to assess the potential for the sustainable development of the bioenergy sector in Northern Ireland. The results of this study are intended to inform the development in 2008-9 of a cross-departmental strategy for the sector.

The outcome of the current Agriculture and Rural Development Committee's inquiry will also be considered by the Bioenergy IDG.

Hotel Accommodation

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of hotel beds in the Moyle District Council area. (AQW 2933/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The certification process by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board does not record hotel bed stock. Instead the certification process records information on the number of rooms and bed spaces.

There are currently four hotels in Moyle District Council with an associated 103 bedrooms and 260 bed-spaces. Given that one double bed is counted as two bed-spaces this would equate to 130 double beds.

The breakdown of bed spaces in four hotels in the Moyle District Council is as follows:

HOTELS WITHIN MOYLE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Hotel Name:	Grade:	Number of Bedrooms:	Number of Bed spaces:
Bushmills Inn Hotel	3 Star	32	64
Causeway Hotel	2 Star	28	79
Marine Hotel	3 Star	31	87
The Glens Hotel	1 Star	12	30

Irish Language Promotion

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail how the Irish language is promoted by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. (AQW 2934/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) is

responsible for the promotion and marketing of Northern Ireland in the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland. Tourism Ireland is responsible for the promotion and marketing of Northern Ireland in Great Britain and overseas.

NITB continues to work with the government appointed agencies, Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster Scots Agency, where there is an appropriate opportunity to do so regarding cultural tourism in Northern Ireland.

Cultural Tourism in the Glens

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he has to promote and develop cultural tourism in the Glens of Antrim. (AQW 2935/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) is acutely aware of the opportunities that cultural tourism presents to Northern Ireland as a whole and is working in partnership with many organisations to ensure that these benefits are capitalised upon. The development and promotion of the Causeway Coastal Route is one of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's five Signature Projects and is strategically and geographically relevant to the Glens of Antrim. It offers an exceptional opportunity to develop cultural tourism in this region.

Causeway Coast & Antrim Glens Regional Tourism Partnership, in partnership with NITB, are progressing a major visitor site and tourism infrastructure development study of the top visitor attractions along the Causeway Coastal Route, including sites in the Glens of Antrim, in order to develop a world class visitor experience.

NITB is also progressing a major interpretation study of several visitor sites along the Causeway Coastal Route, including sites in the Glens of Antrim. The study aims to identify interpretation and cultural animation requirements of these visitor sites and cultural offerings, again to ensure the development of a world class visitor experience.

Tourist Numbers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of tourists that visited Northern Ireland in the last 12 months. (AQW 2995/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Final figures are not yet available for 2007. However the preliminary estimates are that 2,051,000 visitors came to Northern Ireland in 2007 an increase of 4% (+72,000) on the previous year.

Whilst there was a 1% decline in visitors from Great Britain, visitors from overseas increased by 16% and visitors from The Irish Republic increased by 9%. The number of holiday/leisure/recreation visitors increased by 25% to 480,000.

Final visitor figures for 2007 will not be available until May 2008.

EU's Seventh Framework Programme

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what actions were taken by his Department to promote the EU's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) among academia and industry.
(AQW 3000/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The seven-year, 7th Framework Programme (launched by the European Commission on 1 January 2007) is principally promoted by Invest NI's specialist European Directorate. This work, a continuation from FP6, commenced in May 2006 and has included leading or assisting in:

- 26 seminars/workshops to Northern Ireland companies, academe and organizations;
- Distribution of 22 editions of its electronic "Focus on 7" newsletter, each to circa 600 recipients;
- Distribution of 43 specialist electronic bulletins to a selected group of circa 280 interested individual researchers based in industry and academia;
- 58 one-to-one meetings with industry/academe; and,
- 5 all-island Information Days in partnership with Enterprise Ireland (recognising the land border with a fellow Member State and the potential advantages of collaboration between organizations in the two jurisdictions joining / forming European research consortia).

Social Economy Enterprises

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps he is taking to ensure that Social Economy Enterprises are seen as a priority, and included in Invest NI's Draft Corporate Plan 2008-2011, and his Department's Draft Corporate Plan 2008-2011.
(AQW 3002/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Government remains committed to developing the Social Economy and Social Economy/Community Enterprises.

DETI's draft Corporate Plan includes references to the Department's role in the development and implementation of Social Economy policy in Northern Ireland.

The draft will be enhanced to ensure we reflect the priority attached to this work within DETI.

The Invest NI draft Corporate Plan 2008/11 also includes reference to its commitment to assist in the growth of the Social Economy through a new Enterprise Strategy. The strategy will see a continuance of Invest NI's Social Entrepreneurship Programme, which offers a range of assistance to help new and existing social enterprises to develop and grow into sustainable and viable businesses. The programme has been used to assist 65 new social enterprises since its launch in September 2006.

At this early stage in the planning process, Invest NI is minded to set aside an indicative budget allocation of £400,000 per annum in each of the next three years to continue to fund the programme

Industrial Properties in Limavady

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail how much (i) Seagate Technology; and (ii) Huco Lightronic (NI) Ltd, paid annually for the leaseholds of their industrial properties in Limavady.
(AQW 3003/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI property is sold by means of a 999 Year Lease for a single premium. Under the terms of the lease, Invest NI has the right to demand a nominal ground rent. Both Seagate Technologies Ltd and Huco Lightronic (NI) Ltd premises are held by way of 999 year Leases. Invest NI retains the freehold interest to both properties which ensures that the property is preserved for industrial / commercial use only

Chicken Litter Power Plant in Glenavy

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail any discussions his Department has had with (i) Rose Energy; (ii) Moy Park; and (iii) O'Kane's Poultry, in relation to the proposed 'Chicken Litter' power plant in Glenavy.
(AQW 3065/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: During the last two years a number of meetings with my Department and Invest Northern Ireland, have taken place with Rose Energy representatives, including O'Kane Poultry, and Moypark in relation to the proposed "Chicken Litter" power plant at Glenavy. On three occasions, at their request, Rose Energy has presented their outline proposals for a chicken litter power plant to both my Department and also at a joint Ministerial meeting with the Department of the Environment. Meetings have taken place between representatives of Rose Energy and Invest NI to discuss the technical and financial detail of the project.

ENVIRONMENT

Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of (i) planning appeal hearings; (ii) public inquiries; and (iii) other similar events, in which the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside has been officially represented, in each of the last five years. (AQW 2687/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): The Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside has not been officially represented at any planning appeal hearings, public inquiries or other similar events in the last five years.

Areas of Special Scientific Interest

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of Areas of Special Scientific Interest declared during 2007. (AQW 2689/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Twenty-three Areas of Special Scientific Interest were declared during 2007.

Christmas Anti-Drink/Drug Driving Campaign

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of the Environment to (i) comment on the success of the anti-drink/drug driving campaign over the Christmas period; and (ii) outline her strategy in relation to reinforcing the anti-drink/drug driving message throughout 2008. (AQW 2732/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Christmas anti drink driving campaign was 'on air' from 20 November 2007 until 12 January 2008 and the anti drug driving campaign from 1 December 2007 until 13 January 2008. In addition to television advertisements, the campaign involved washroom posters in pubs, clubs and restaurants and advertisements on radio and on the electronic messaging system on motorways.

Independent research into the effectiveness of both campaigns is currently being carried out, but the

results will not be available until the end of February 2008.

Throughout 2008 road safety advertising will be used to reinforce both the anti drink driving and anti drug driving messages, concentrating on the summer holiday months and the Christmas/ New Year period. Research indicates that there are increased dangers resulting from drink and drug driving at these times. The key messages will also be reinforced throughout key bank and public holidays starting with Mother's Day, St Patrick's Day and the Easter weekend.

Planning Service in West Belfast 2007

Mr F McCann asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the activities of the Planning Service in West Belfast during 2007. (AQW 2739/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Planning Service activities in West Belfast focus on the determination of planning applications submitted within the area and enforcement – both processed mostly through the Belfast Divisional Planning Office – as well as development plan functions carried out as part of the draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (dBMAP).

While in 2007, some 1,300 applications for a variety of proposals were submitted for the combined north, west and central Belfast, no information is available for applications submitted for West Belfast only. With regard to dBMAP, activities in 2007 focussed mainly on the on-going Public Inquiry.

Private Hire Taxi Licences

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of applications for renewals of private hire taxi licenses, in each of the last 12 months, broken down by postcode. (AQW 2760/08)

The Minister of the Environment: A taxi driver licence issued by the Department, be it renewal or first time application, entitles the licensee to drive all forms of taxi vehicle, either public or private hire. The detail of the number of applicants is set out in the attached table.

Postcode	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Grand Total
BT10	1	2	1	1		3			6		1		15
BT11	10	5	6	8	4	7	3	7	4	11	2		67
BT12	6	3	2	2	4	4	2	5	4	2	2	2	38
BT13	5	7	2	5	3	4	4	3	4	5	5	4	51
BT13										1			1
BT14	3	4	11	9		4	6	3	8	4	9	2	63
BT14										1			1
BT15	6	5	1		2	2	2	2	2	2	5	1	30
BT15					1								1
BT16	1	1	3	1	1				1	3	3	2	16
BT17	7	7	11	7	4	4	7	7	9	3	2	3	71
BT18	1	2	1				1		1		1	1	8
BT19	6	2	1	3	4		5	4	3				28
BT20			3	1	1	3			2	3	1	2	16
BT21	2					1			1	1	2		7
BT22	2	3		1	2		3		1	2	1		15
BT23	7	4	4	1	3	2	2	6	2	6	2	4	43
BT24	1			2			1		1	1	2		8
BT25				1	1	1			1		1	1	6
BT26			1	2			1	2	1	1			8
BT27	3	1	1	2	1			2	1	1	2		14
BT28	4	3		3	4	2	4	1	5	3	1		30
BT29	1	4	1		2		2	2	3	6	2		23
BT30	1	5	2	2	4	7	2		3	2	1		29
BT31	2							1			1		4
BT32	4	3	2	1	2	3	2	4	6	7	2		36
BT33	1	1	1	2	1				1				7
BT34	10	4	5	5	6	4	2	3	7	6	7	1	60
BT35	5	6	3	2	6	4	5	7	8	2	4		52
BT36	5	6	6	8	3	2	9	4	5	5	4		57
BT36				1									1
BT37	6	3	4	4	5	1	1	6	4	5	4		43
BT38	3	5	2	2	3	5	3	4	3	4	5	4	43
BT39	2	1	1	1	1		1	2	2	1			12
BT4	3	3	3	6	2	1	1	1	1		1		22
BT40	2	2	1			1	1	1	3	1	2		14
BT41	6	5	2	5	5	4	5	3	3	5	3	1	47
BT42	2	1	3	1	1				3	1	2		14
BT43		1		2	1		1	1	1	1	1		9
BT44	1	1	1	2	2					1	1	1	10
BT45	3		1	1	1	1	1	3	1	2	2	1	17

Postcode	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Grand Total
BT46				1	1		1				1		4
BT47	5	4	5	3	2	4	8	8	8	6	8	1	62
BT48	9	11	10	11	16	9	10	13	11	20	10	6	136
BT49	3	2	6	1	1	2	1	3	1	1	1	1	23
BT5	4	1	6	6	6	1	3	4	4	3	2	4	44
BT51	3	1	3	2	3		2	1	3	1			19
BT52	1	1	4	1			3	5	1	3	2		21
BT53		1			3					1			5
BT54	3		1	1			2		1	2	1		11
BT55							1	1				1	3
BT56			1		1	1		1				2	6
BT57							1						1
BT58				1									1
BT6	3	1	1	2	3	1	1	1	3	2	4	3	25
BT60	1	4		2	1	1	2	1	1				13
BT61		4			2	1		2		2	1		12
BT62		5	5	1	2	3	2		1	2	2	1	24
BT63			1		3	2		1	1		2		10
BT64					1	1							2
BT65	4	3	2	1		1		2	1		1	1	16
BT66	3	1	2	3		1	1	1	4		3	1	20
BT67	1	1		3			2	2		2		1	12
BT69			1		1								2
BT7	1	2	1	2		1	2	2		2			13
BT70	1	1	1	3	4	3	1	1		1			16
BT71	2	2	4	2	2	1		1		3	3	1	21
BT74	1	2	1	1	2		1		2		3		13
BT76								1		1			2
BT77	1	1											2
BT78	4	1	1	1	1	1	1		1	1	2	4	18
BT79	2	2				1	2		1	2	1	3	14
BT8	4		1		1		1	1	1	2	2		13
BT80	1				1			2				2	6
BT81								1		1	1		3
BT82	5	4	1	3	4	2	1		4	3	1	2	30
BT9		1	1	2			1		2	1			8
BT92			1	2	2	2	1	2	1	2	3		16
BT93	1		2						1				4
BT94	2		1	2		3			1	1			10
Grand Total	187	156	149	151	143	112	128	141	165	164	138	64	1698

Sustainable Development in the Countryside

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment what provision will be given to businesses in rural areas in the amended Policy Planning Statement 14: Sustainable Development in the Countryside. (AQW 2771/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My aim is to develop a policy based on sustainable development principles that protect the countryside from unnecessary development and support rural communities, allowing them to flourish, socially and economically. That is why the Executive Sub Committee includes Ministers with a policy interest in the rural economy. These are the Ministers for agriculture, economic development and regional development. It is still early in the process to provide details on the new draft PPS 14.

Redevelopment of Maze Site

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions she has had with potential developers of the Maze site. (AQW 2795/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I have not had any discussions with potential developers of the Maze site

Delays in Planning Applications

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of the Environment what steps she is taking to address the delays in planning applications; and to detail the number of additional staff that will be employed to reduce these delays. (AQW 2868/08)

The Minister of the Environment: On the 29th November 2007, I announced my intention to bring forward proposals for a wide ranging reform of the planning system in the form of a White Paper, to be published in Summer 2008. This reform will include proposals to provide a more effective development control system, improved efficiency of processing and greater certainty about timescales. In the interim I, with my officials, have already taken action to address delays in the planning process.

My officials are currently working on the implementation of a short-term change programme, through a series of projects and pilots relating to work areas within the responsibility of the Planning Service, which will have an immediate impact on handling planning applications. This includes a streamlined consultation arrangement with the City Council in Londonderry which was introduced last December. Formal guidance on pre-application discussions for Strategic Projects and Major Housing, Commercial, Industrial and Public Sector Proposals was also launched in December.

Other steps my Department has taken in relation to reducing the delays in dealing with applications include the re-deployment of 10 additional staff to a Divisional Support Team currently based in Craigavon Divisional Planning Office. I also intend to strengthen the Strategic Project Team at Planning Service Headquarters to help with processing applications which have significant economic benefits to Northern Ireland.

Foreign Nationals

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what responsibility her Department has in relation to monitoring the number of foreign nationals residing in Northern Ireland. (AQW 2888/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department of the Environment has no responsibility for foreign nationals residing in Northern Ireland.

Illegal Waste

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on her negotiations with Dublin City Council in relation to the removal of illegal waste from Northern Ireland that originated in the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 2918/08)

The Minister of the Environment: On 7 August and 31 August 2007, EHS issued Dublin City Council with two requests to repatriate waste from 2 sites, (one in Slattinagh, Co Fermanagh and one in Trillick, Co Tyrone respectively) intending that these should be used as precedents for how others are dealt with.

Dublin City Council has not yet agreed to repatriate the waste from these sites. EHS has written again to the Dublin City Council on 19 December 2007 and is currently awaiting a response.

Cavan-Tyrone Electricity Interconnector

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to raise public concerns in relation to the Cavan-Tyrone electricity interconnector at the North/South Ministerial Council. (AQO 1461/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I have no plans to raise the issue at the NSMC. As yet no planning application for this proposal has been received, but we are informed by Northern Ireland Electricity that a submission will be made in March of this year. The application will be advertised in the normal way and appropriate neighbourhood notification will be carried out. If, as seems likely, the application is dealt with under Article 31 of the 1991 Planning (Northern Ireland) Order, then the facility to call a public inquiry will

also be available. I consider that the planning process provides the appropriate forum for addressing public concerns in relation to the proposed interconnector.

Giant's Causeway Planning Applications

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm that no planning application for development at the Giant's Causeway will be approved that could threaten the UNESCO 'world heritage' status of the site. (AQO 1472/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I am well aware of the importance of the World Heritage Site status of the Giant's Causeway and the possible implications for this status of development in the vicinity.

In consideration of the only application for the visitor centre, currently in the system I asked Planning Service to further investigate a number of major concerns that I had about the proposal, one of which was its impact on the World Heritage Site.

I can assure you that, as I have stated before, I am committed to retaining the World Heritage Site status for the Giant's Causeway.

Environmental Protection Agency

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment what action she is taking in relation to the possible creation of an independent Environmental Protection Agency. (AQO 1455/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Report of the Review of Environmental Governance was commissioned, and largely completed, under direct rule and presented to me in June. That report made 38 cross cutting recommendations on a range of issues relating to Environmental Governance, including for an independent Environmental Protection Agency.

I am carefully considering my approach to environmental governance, including whether or not there should be an independent Environmental Protection Agency. In so doing I am considering the recommendations in the report of the Review of Environmental Governance, the recent Criminal Justice Inspectorate Report of resource and wider policy considerations.

I am also taking full account of the mixed views of which have been expressed by stakeholders in the business, agricultural and Environmental sectors.

I will make a public statement on the way forward following discussion with my colleagues on the Executive.

Planning Policy Statement 12

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment to detail when she will issue Policy Planning Statement 12: Local Development Frameworks for consultation. (AQO 1468/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Responsibility for Planning Policy Statement 12 (entitled 'Housing in Settlements') transferred from the Department for Regional Development to my Department on January 15. The Affordable/Social Housing element in this PPS is under review; this is associated with cross-Departmental work on affordable housing lead by the Minister for Social Development to which my Department already contributes. Having assumed responsibility for PPS 12 I will carefully consider this policy, including the need for any revision and the prospective timescale for this work, taking full account of the ongoing cross-Departmental work on affordable housing and other priorities such as the review of draft PPS14.

Promotion of Ulster-Scots Heritage

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of events held by the Environment and Heritage Service in order to promote Ulster-Scots heritage, in the last three years. (AQO 1334/08)

The Minister of the Environment: One of the aims of the Environment and Heritage Service is to protect and promote the historic heritage of Northern Ireland; this is done primarily through the protection and promotion of our historic buildings and monuments.

The Agency's sites and facilities are also used, often by outside bodies, to celebrate historic events. For example, in June 2007, EHS organised a 17th Century week at Tully Castle, Co Fermanagh, which included music, storytelling, and demonstrations of domestic life and military equipment at that time in our history. Over 400 schoolchildren, attended along with 250 other visitors.

Also in that month, I attended an event at Carrickfergus Castle organised by the Ulster Scots Heritage Council, to celebrate the strong links between Belfast and Nashville. The Mayor of Nashville attended this event.

In 2006 and 2007, Hillsborough fort was used for the Military Mayhem event, which depicted aspects of 17th Century Military Life from the Plantation through to the Williamite Wars. And in 2006, the Montgomery family, whose family can be traced back to the Plantation and who were the original owners of Grey Abbey, held a series of events at this site to commemorate its history.

In 2005, EHS organised a 17th century military display at Dunluce Castle portraying soldiers of the Scottish Garrison which occupied the Castle following the arrest of the Earl of Antrim during the 1641 rebellion.

Planning Policy Statement

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of the Environment what is her assessment of the potential of Policy Planning Statement 12: Local Development Frameworks to boost the provision of social and affordable housing; and to state what priority she will give this matter. (AQO 1469/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Responsibility for PPS 12 (entitled 'Housing in Settlements') transferred from the Department for Regional Development to my Department on January 15. The Affordable/Social Housing element of this planning policy statement is under review; this is associated with cross-Departmental work on affordable housing lead by the Minister for Social Development to which my Department already contributes. PPS 12 has an important role in relation to the future provision of social and affordable housing and I will ensure it is prioritised accordingly in the context of other work on planning policy, including the review of draft PPS14.

Local Government Reform

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of the Environment what action she is taking to ensure that power-sharing is mandatory as part of her proposals for local government reform. (AQO 1477/08)

The Minister of the Environment: As I said in response to a similar question from Gregory Campbell on 19 November, I and my ministerial colleagues on the Executive Sub Committee taking forward the review of the Review of Public Administration decisions as they relate to local government are committed to the development of a system of council governance, with appropriate checks and balances that would be placed on statute. This commitment was also highlighted in paragraph 49 of the Emerging Findings report that I published on 19 October 2007 and during the Take Note debate in this House on 13 November 2007.

If everyone is to have confidence in the new councils, there must be a statutory system of safeguards. 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.

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.

Climate Change

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the climate change impact advice she has given to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in relation to changes that need to take place in agricultural activity. (AQO 1291/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My department has provided advice to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development on the impact of climate change on agricultural activity. The advice is contained in chapter 6 of the "Preparing for a changing climate in Northern Ireland" report. This report was published in January 2007 and is available on the department's website.

The report considers the potential impacts of climate change across all government departments in Northern Ireland. On agriculture it provides an assessment of how climate change may affect its future and it details some of the likely impacts from climate change. The report analyses the threats and opportunities facing the agriculture sector and it provides recommendations for future adaptation strategies.

Protection of Belfast Hills

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on the activities of her Department in the conservation and environmental protection of the Belfast Hills since taking up her post. (AQO 1466/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department is continuing to carry out a great deal of work to support the protection and management of the Belfast Hills and the provision of access to enable people to enjoy them. Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) provides core funding to the Belfast Hills Partnership which works with public, private and voluntary bodies to co-ordinate the management of the Belfast Hills.

Support is also being provided for projects led by the Partnership and Belfast City Council to promote appreciation of biodiversity in the Belfast Hills. The management of the Slievenacloy Area of Special Scientific Interest is being supported through manage-

ment agreements with landowners and grant support to the Ulster Wildlife Trust.

In October 2007 EHS committed to contribute to the purchase costs of an additional 192 hectares of land by the National Trust on Black Mountain. Along with further projects EHS is supporting at Colin Glen Forest Park and Cavehill Country Park, this has enhanced access to and enjoyment of the Belfast Hills.

In terms of Waste Management, EHS has undertaken three recent successful prosecutions within the Belfast Hills region including a case against an illegal dumper that generated a record fine of £89,000.

Planning policies intended to conserve and protect the Belfast Hills are set out in the draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 (BMAP). The draft Plan recognises that the Hills are a striking landscape feature providing Belfast with its unique natural setting. These policies include the description of the Hills as a Green Belt as well as an Area of High Scenic Value. Development proposals, including mineral working, that would adversely affect the area's landscape quality and character would not be acceptable. The draft Plan also includes proposals for managed access to the area with accompanying small scale interpretation/visitor facilities.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of the Environment to provide details of her meeting with the Minister of State for Culture, Creative Industries and Tourism in December 2007; and to outline the outcomes from this meeting. (AQO 1287/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My meeting with Margaret Hodge MP, Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, took place in London on 13 December 2007. The meeting was held at my request. Its purpose was to clarify arrangements between the two Departments for reporting to UNESCO's World Heritage Centre in connection with proposals for a visitor centre at the Giant's Causeway and Causeway Coast World Heritage Site.

I have agreed with Mrs Hodge that my officials will provide DCMS with sufficient information to enable it, as the State Party in World Heritage matters, to report to UNESCO on recent developments.

Environment & Heritage Service Activities in West Belfast

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on the activities of the Environ-

ment and Heritage Service in West Belfast during 2007. (AQO 1465/08)

The Minister of the Environment: During 2007, the Environment and Heritage Service of my Department:

- (1) investigated 41 reports of water pollution in West Belfast. Pollution was confirmed in 27 of these cases, with 23 assessed as being of low severity and 4 of medium severity.
- (2) monitored water quality in the Lagan River and Canal and also in a number of small streams in West Belfast.
- (3) undertook an assessment of the impact of sewerage system overflows to the Ladybrook stream, Woodlands River and Blackstaff river. This work is helping to inform the proposals by Northern Ireland Water for the upgrade of the sewerage system in the Upper Falls Drainage Area.
- (4) received reports of 11 incidences of alleged illegal controlled waste activity in the west Belfast area. Reports are being followed up on an ongoing basis.
- (5) provided funding of some £ 175K to the Colin Glen Trust for the management of Colin Glen Forest Park, where paths have been significantly upgraded during 2007.
- (6) liaised with Colin Glen Trust, the Belfast Development Office and with Belfast and Lisburn City Councils over the possible development for public amenity of DOE owned lands at Black's Road through which access is obtained to the Colin Valley Golf Course.
- (7) through Colin Glen Trust, has attempted to contribute to the control of antisocial behaviour on DOE owned land flanking Creighton Road and Old Golf Course Road pending consideration of planning appeals over the use of these lands for social housing.
- (8) included 4 buildings located in west Belfast in the European Heritage Open Day, held annually to permit the public to visit buildings of significant architectural and historical interest.

Planning Approvals in Coleraine

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of planning applications approved for apartments, in the Coleraine Borough Council area, in each of the last 5 years. (AQO 1480/08)

The Minister of the Environment: As I explained in my letter of 10 December 2007 to all Assembly Members, the Planning Service is no longer providing ad hoc responses to requests for statistical information. The Agency has introduced new statistical publication arrangements to improve the quality and consistency of statistics which are released into the public domain. In future, annual and quarterly statistics will be published on the Planning Service's website.

The first statistical publication containing data for the period 1 April 2006 to 31 March 2007 will be published on 25 January 2008. The Agency intends publishing further historical data later this year.

Environmental Protection Agency

Dr Farry asked the Minister of the Environment for her assessment of the costings for an independent Environmental Protection Agency. (AQO 1460/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Our assessment is that an Environmental Protection Agency based solely on the current Environment and Heritage Service, which is not what REGNI recommended, would cost in the region of £2.5m over 4 years to establish.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Railway Line between Coleraine and Derry/Londonderry

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline what discussions have taken place between his Department and the Department for Regional Development, in relation to the plans for, and funding of, the relaying of the railway line between Coleraine and Derry/Londonderry in 2011/2012. (AQW 2655/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): During the period October 2006 to April 2007, DFP Officials engaged with DRD officials on a number of occasions as part of an Inter-departmental Steering Group which considered future investment in the railway network in Northern Ireland. The Coleraine and Londonderry Relay Project was one of a number of projects considered.

Pension Credit

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the number of households,

qualifying for pension credit, who have had to wait for repayment of rates already paid; (ii) the average and longest delays, respectively; (iii) the average amounts involved; and (iv) the current numbers awaiting repayment, broken down by Land and Property Service district office. (AQW 2727/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel:

Information on the average numbers, average times and amounts of refunds involved in these cases, and the current numbers awaiting repayment, broken down by local office, is not routinely maintained and can only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

However, in normal circumstances (and if the customer has provided all the necessary information) applications are processed within 14 working days. At the moment, because of preparations for the go live of a new HB system, the average processing time is 38 working days. Land and Property Services are working to reduce this turnaround time and expect to see an improvement very soon.

If housing benefit is then granted and the ratepayer has already paid their account, Land and Property Services will refund the ratepayer within 14 working days of the credit appearing on the rate account.

This means that currently, in general terms, a ratepayer should not have to wait any longer than 52 working days for a housing benefit-generated refund.

Civil Servants

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of civil servants employed by each Government Department, by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 2821/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The number of civil servants (permanent and temporary), based on headcount, employed in each of the 11 Government Departments and their agencies, by Parliamentary constituency, at 1 December 2007 is set out in the attached table.

TABLE 1: NICS STAFF (HEADCOUNT) IN THE ELEVEN GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS AT 1 DECEMBER 2007 BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY

	DARD	DCAL	DE	DETI	DFP	DEL
Belfast East	987	0	0	406	895	70
Belfast North	68	169	0	1	179	93
Belfast South	70	231	0	223	1322	745
Belfast West	0	0	0	40	3	59
East Antrim	41	0	0	0	0	53

	DARD	DCAL	DE	DETI	DFP	DEL
East Londonderry	261	0	0	1	0	74
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	304	8	0	1	0	70
Foyle	181	0	118	4	161	122
Lagan Valley	114	0	0	0	40	49
Mid Ulster	137	0	0	2	0	47
Newry & Armagh	262	0	0	7	0	92
North Antrim	90	21	0	5	49	56
North Down	0	0	560	1	303	25
South Antrim	255	0	0	0	0	72
South Down	88	6	0	0	0	41
Strangford	45	0	0	0	0	17
Upper Bann	89	9	0	0	63	91
West Tyrone	180	5	0	3	51	59
Outside NI/ Location not defined	11	0	0	0	0	0
Total	3183	449	678	694	3066	1835

TABLE 1 (CONTINUED): NICS STAFF (HEADCOUNT) IN THE ELEVEN GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS AT 1 DECEMBER 2007 BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY

	DHSSPS	DOE	DRD	DSD	OFMDFM	Total
Belfast East	726	0	87	303	329	3803
Belfast North	0	233	48	620	0	1411
Belfast South	177	1015	833	3541	65	8222
Belfast West	0	3	48	1127	0	1280
East Antrim	0	26	25	60	0	205
East Londonderry	0	476	174	142	0	1128
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	0	93	157	121	0	754
Foyle	33	88	75	758	0	1540
Lagan Valley	0	266	59	49	0	577
Mid Ulster	0	32	53	69	0	340
Newry & Armagh	0	56	118	147	16	698
North Antrim	0	137	218	91	0	667
North Down	0	6	41	44	0	980

	DHSSPS	DOE	DRD	DSD	OFMDFM	Total
South Antrim	0	31	76	100	0	534
South Down	0	125	191	101	0	552
Strangford	0	49	11	44	0	166
Upper Bann	0	149	199	161	0	761
West Tyrone	0	111	236	169	0	814
Outside NI/ Location not defined	3	0	2	2	8	26
Total	939	2896	2651	7649	418	24458

Notes Staff on career break are excluded.

Staff on secondment within the NICS are included within the Department to which they are seconded.

Staff on secondment outside the NICS are included within the Department from which they are seconded.

Both permanent and casual staff are included.

Both industrial and non-industrial staff are included.

Staff in executive Agencies are included in the figures for their parent Department.

Personnel Policy

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline his Department's policy in relation to staff appraisals and, in particular, how staff absence levels can be reduced as part of this process. (AQW 2866/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: A common performance management framework operates across the Northern Ireland Departments and includes annual staff appraisals and in-year reviews. While there is no direct correlation between the NICS performance management framework and staff absences, arrangements are currently being put in place that will ensure that all staff with line management responsibilities will have the management of sickness absence as an objective within their personal performance agreement. This will allow for individual performance in this area to be assessed through the performance management system

Front-Line Services

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps he is taking to ensure that Departments have adequate resources to sustain essential frontline services, which are delivered by the community and voluntary sectors who may face

funding difficulties after June 2008, when Peace 2 programmes are due to end. (AQW 3001/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The PEACE III Programme is now in place and will be available to offer some €300 million of support to projects aiming to promote peace and reconciliation until 2013. It is anticipated that many such projects will be delivered by the community and voluntary sector.

It should be noted that PEACE III is not a straightforward continuation of PEACE II but is a new programme, agreed after a significant public consultation process, with its own specific aims and objectives and projects seeking support will be scored against the selection criteria agreed by the Executive and the Programme Monitoring Committee with the highest scoring projects awarded funding. This will ensure that the projects that best meet the Programmes important peace and reconciliation objectives receive funding.

All projects supported under the EU PEACE II Programme were expected to move towards sustainability. Projects had formal end dates, and were required to indicate how they would be sustained after the conclusion of their PEACE II funding.

Former PEACE II projects may also seek assistance under Northern Ireland's other EU Programmes, or from mainstream sources, but would need to satisfy all relevant selection criteria. The Budget for 2008/09 to 2011/12, which has also been subject to widespread consultation, sets out departmental spending limits for this period. For many departments these include significant provision for projects operated by the community and voluntary sectors.

Budget Consultation

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when he intends to make a statement on the responses to the Budget consultation. (AQO 1305/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Executive's draft Budget document was launched for public consultation on 25 October 2007 for a 10 week period closing on 4 January 2008.

On behalf of the Executive, I will tomorrow present the Executive's revised spending proposals for the next three years. This will include details of the points made in the course of the public consultation process, and the Executive's proposed response.

In summary, the public consultation process took a variety of forms with four public consultation events held across Northern Ireland as well as consultation meetings with key stakeholder groups such as the Northern Ireland Local Government Association. In addition, members of the public were invited to put

forward written comments whilst there was a "Take Note" debate in the Assembly on 27 November 2007.

Overall, around 9,500 written responses have been received on the draft Programme for Government, Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland and Budget documents. I am also grateful for the Finance and Personnel Committee's Report on the Draft Budget which was published on 8 January 2008 and includes the responses from the other Statutory Committee's.

There were a broad range of issues raised during the public consultation process. The main themes included concern at the level of funding for the Arts, Mental Health, Sport, Youth Services, Libraries and Social Housing amongst many others. In addition, representations were made in respect of the need for additional funding to address issues with respect to Victims.

In response, the Executive has agreed a set of revised Budget allocations which will be set out in the revised Budget document, due to be published tomorrow. The Assembly is then scheduled to debate the Executive's revised spending plans for the period 2008-09 to 2010-11 on Tuesday 29 January 2008.

Rating System

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an estimate of the percentage take-up of the various reliefs in the rating system in the year 2006-07; and what plans he has to improve these take-ups. (AQO 1489/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The only reliefs available during 2006-2007 were Housing Benefit, commonly, known as rate rebate in this context and the Disabled Person's Allowance scheme. The figures for awards made are as follows:

As of 31 March 2007 there were -

- approximately 52,000 awards of rate rebate through housing benefit to the owner-occupier sector.
- approximately 9,528 awards of DPA, of which 200 relate to the tenanted sector.

However, the first part of the question refers to take-up, which of course is not an easy figure to provide because it requires an assessment to be made of the number of ratepayers likely to be eligible, including those not claiming. No estimates were made for the year in question and the low income relief scheme was not in place until April 2007.

It might be helpful if I refer to the Outcomes paper for the Executive Review of Rating, where the take-up levels for rate rebates made through the Housing Benefit system and the new rate relief scheme was estimated to be around 42% of those eligible in the owner-occupied sector. The analysis focused on owner occupiers because

it was known that this was where the main problem of low take-up lies. Furthermore, the analysis was not extended to rate rebate or disabled person's allowance.

It was in light of our concerns around take-up, that the Executive agreed to commission an urgent study led by the voluntary/community sector, to identify ways of improving awareness and take-up, for the full range of reliefs available within the rating system, including disabled person's allowance, by next year and I expect to see emerging findings shortly after Easter this year.

I also outlined to the Assembly on 27 November last year that the possibility of new legislation providing increased data sharing powers to relevant agencies will also be examined as a matter of urgency, to allow better targeting of take-up initiatives and open up the prospect of greater automation in the award of the various rebates, relief and allowances on offer. Great care needs to be taken, however, in any extension of data sharing powers, as recent experience has shown. Before any such moves are taken they will be the subject of a privacy impact assessment in order to protect the interests of the public and ensure the safeguarding of data.

Gross Value Added

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the latest position in relation to Northern Ireland's Gross Value Added, in comparison to the United Kingdom as a whole. (AQO 1497/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The latest economic data shows that Northern Ireland's GVA per capita figure is 81 per cent of the UK average for 2006. This differential has persisted over the last decade.

Domestic Rates Bills

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the number of domestic rates bills for 2006-07 that remain unsettled due to disputed valuations; and (ii) any other backlog issues from the 2006-07 rating round. (AQO 1505/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel:

- (i) No domestic rate bills for 2006/2007 remain unsettled due to disputed valuations. Ratepayers are billed in accordance with the appropriate valuation list.
- (ii) With regard to backlog issues for the 2006/2007 rating year, it was not possible to start legal recovery action for rate arrears due to difficulties with the IT system and the need to prepare for the issue of domestic rate bills based on capital values from April 07. As a result, rate arrears for that

period increased from £48M at 31 March 2006 to £88M at 31 March 2007. New IT functionality now enables Land and Property Services to start legal proceedings for the recovery of unpaid rates. The £88M has been reduced to £49M, with plans to recover the remaining arrears.

Giant's Causeway Development

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what discussions he has held individually with the developer, or bilaterally, with (i) the Minister of the Environment; (ii) the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment; and (iii) the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to the proposed private sector development at the Giant's Causeway. (AQO 1503/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I can confirm that I have had no discussions with the developer in relation to this matter nor has the Minister of the Environment, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, nor the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister sought or held any meeting with me on the development of the Giant's Causeway bilaterally or in any other format.

Regional Economic Strategy

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what progress has been made on preparing a Regional Economic Strategy for Northern Ireland. (AQO 1486/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The current draft Regional Economic Strategy is very much a 'Direct Rule' document. Officials are revisiting the draft Regional Economic Strategy to reflect the Executive's priorities as set out in the draft Budget and Programme for Government (PfG).

Following the disappointing outcome for the Executive of the Varney Review, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and I have agreed to a further review which will be conducted over the next three months. This study will assess the extent to which economic policy instruments need to be refocused to deliver real and enduring improvement in our economic growth rate.

In light of this, the Regional Economic Strategy will be developed in parallel with the second Varney Review.

Natural Gas

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, given the targets set by the Executive to reduce carbon emissions, what steps are being taken to

encourage public service buildings to convert to natural gas. (AQO 1269/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Natural gas is the fossil fuel of choice for public service buildings, where it is available and when suitable cost effective renewable technologies are not applicable. My department will continue to convert its buildings to natural gas when opportunities arise and it is cost effective to do so.

Around 140 buildings in the Government Office estate (and in other public bodies) have been converted to natural gas since it became available in Northern Ireland some 10 years ago.

In addition, for some years, my Department has been investing upwards of £2 million annually in projects to reduce energy costs and emissions in buildings occupied by public sector bodies through the Central Energy Efficiency Fund.

Rates

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail any plans he has to levy additional costs on those who chose to pay their rates bill by cash or cheque, rather than by direct debit. (AQO 1282/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have no plans to levy additional costs on those who choose to pay their rates bill by cash or cheque rather than by direct debit.

Under current legislation, a discount of 4% is awarded in respect of domestic properties to those ratepayers who pay their rates in full within 28 days. The discount date is shown on the bill. This would include those who pay in full by cash, cheque, single direct debit payment or by other electronic payment methods. During the recent review of the domestic rating system, some respondents to the consultation argued that this discount should be retargeted only at those who pay by direct debit. This would, however, require primary legislation and could adversely impact on pensioners who, based on analysis carried out during the Executive's review, seem to avail of the existing discount more than other groups. The Executive, therefore, decided not to pursue any retargeting at this stage and to retain the existing discount for the time being.

Draft Budget

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on the consultation process on the draft Budget 2008-11. (AQO 1484/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Executive's draft Budget document was launched for

public consultation on 25 October 2007 for a 10 week period closing on 4 January 2008.

On behalf of the Executive, I will tomorrow present the Executive's revised spending proposals for the next three years. This will include details of the points made in the course of the public consultation process, and the Executive's proposed response.

In summary, the public consultation process took a variety of forms with four public consultation events held across Northern Ireland as well as consultation meetings with key stakeholder groups such as the Northern Ireland Local Government Association. In addition, members of the public were invited to put forward written comments whilst there was a "Take Note" debate in the Assembly on 27 November 2007.

Overall, around 9,500 written responses have been received on the draft Programme for Government, Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland and Budget documents. I am also grateful for the Finance and Personnel Committee's Report on the Draft Budget which was published on 8 January 2008 and includes the responses from the other Statutory Committee's.

There were a broad range of issues raised during the public consultation process. The main themes included concern at the level of funding for the Arts, Mental Health, Youth Services, Sport, Libraries and Social Housing amongst many others. In addition, representations were made in respect of the need for additional funding to address issues with respect to Victims.

In response, the Executive has agreed a set of revised Budget allocations which will be set out in the revised Budget document, due to be published tomorrow. The Assembly is then scheduled to debate the Executive's revised spending plans for the period 2008-09 to 2010-11 on Tuesday 29 January 2008.

Underspend

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action he is taking to ensure that future underspends by departments will not be lost to the Northern Ireland budget; and to detail what mechanisms he has put in place to eliminate underspends. (AQO 1488/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Under the Treasury's End Year Flexibility (EYF) mechanism, underspend in any financial year is carried forward for use in subsequent years and is thus not lost to Northern Ireland.

While the Treasury has implemented measures to restrict access to EYF across the UK, as part of my discussion with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury I have secured full access to our existing EYF stock across the three years of the Budget period.

In terms of reducing levels of underspend, in recent years the approach has been to overallocate the level of available resources (referred to as planned overcommitment). Alongside continued, but reducing, use of this mechanism, my department is currently working with other departments to improve the overall level of financial management and hence level of underspend. This work will include implementation of the recommendations of the recent Financial Management Review, and the PKF Review of Forecasting and Monitoring.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Administration in the Health Service

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total cost of administration in the Health Service in each of the last five years. (AQW 2635/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): The table below shows administrative costs for the latest five years available.

Year	Trusts £m	Boards £m	Central Services Agency £m	Total £m
2001/02	171.7	15.6	14.2	201.5
2002/03	191.5	16.9	14.7	223.1
2003/04	206.7	19.9	15.9	242.5
2004/05	224.1	23.0	17.2	264.3
2005/06	238.2	21.7	18.5	278.4

Expenditure includes staff costs and administrative expenses such as printing and stationery, telephones, postage and office equipment. General expenses such as premises are excluded.

Services for Disabled Children

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of consequential funding that has been allocated to the Executive, as part of the increased settlement for education and children's services in England under 'Aiming High for Disabled Children', as announced in the HM Treasury Budget; and whether or not he can give assurances that this money will be used to improve services for disabled children in Northern Ireland. (AQW 2715/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The allocation for disabled children in England was funded from within the broader 3.1% real terms settlement for the Department for Children, Schools and Families which was announced as part of Budget 2007.

The Northern Ireland Executive received Barnett Consequentials on these monies in the normal way. However, any and all allocations received under the Barnett Formula are not ring fenced, and are available to the NI Executive to spend on local needs and priorities.

As part of final budget agreed by the Executive, I plan to make significant investments in children's services to improve the quality of life for children in care and reduce the number of children going into care. I also intend to invest in mental health and learning disability for both adults and children and reduce the waiting times for specialist wheelchairs. I will also be focussing resources on additional respite care, to provide additional support for carers of those with disabilities.

Response Times for Ambulances

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the response times for ambulances reaching scenes in the Moyle district council area, from 1 January 2007 to 7 January 2008. (AQW 2765/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be compiled at disproportionate cost.

Fluoridation of Drinking Water

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment he has given to research by the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, in relation to the overall potential benefits and harms deriving from fluoridation of drinking water; and to detail what conclusions he has reached in his assessment; and what plans he has to review his policy on the issue. (AQW 2786/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have not made an assessment of the report 'Public Health: Ethical Issues' published by the Nuffield Council on Bioethics. There are no plans to introduce the fluoridation of Northern Ireland's drinking water.

Mental-Health Hospital Beds for Children

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of mental health hospital beds that exist for children. (AQW 2810/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of beds currently available in Northern Ireland Hospitals for the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry specialty is 27. This includes 15 beds for children up to the age of 13 years, and 12 beds for adolescents, aged 14 -17 years.

Suicide Prevention Training

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of GPs that (i) have been given suicide prevention training; and (ii) have yet to receive suicide prevention training. (AQW 2811/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: To date 508 GPs have participated in the new training programme, and a further 71 Practice Managers/Practice Nurses have received related training.

A breakdown of the numbers of GPs trained by HSS Board area is set out in the following table:

	Summary of Practice attendance			Summary of GP attendance		
	GP Practices attended	Total practices in HSSB area	% practices covered	GPs attended	Total GPs in HSSB area	% GPs covered
EHSSB	71	149	47.6%	120	468	25.6%
NHSSB	67	83	80.7%	93	283	32.9%
SHSSB	64	77	83.1%	101	210	13.8%
WHSSB	61	61	100%	194	196	99%
NI Total	263	370	71%	508	1157	43.9%

Response Times for Ambulances

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the response times for ambulances reaching scenes in the Ballymena Borough Council area, from 1 January 2007 to 7 January 2008. (AQW 2813/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be compiled at disproportionate cost.

Response Times for Ambulances

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the response times for ambulances reaching scenes in the Ballymoney Borough Council area, from 1 January 2007 to 7 January 2008. (AQW 2816/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be compiled at disproportionate cost.

Promotion of Abstinence to Improve Sexual Health

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what priority he has given

to the promotion of abstinence as a means of improving sexual health. (AQW 2852/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Sexual health is an important part of physical and mental health, as well as emotional and social wellbeing. A Sexual Health Promotion Strategy and Action Plan which is in its final stages of development, aims to improve, protect and promote the sexual health and wellbeing of the population. The Strategy highlights that abstinence or delayed sexual activity in young people are healthy and positive choices and are socially acceptable. One of its key objectives is to promote opportunities to enable young people to make informed choices before engaging in sexual activity, especially empowering them to delay first intercourse until an appropriate time of their choosing. In addition, it has set an important target to increase the number of teenagers delaying sexual activity.

Risk Assessments for Staff

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to ensure that the five new Health and Social Services Trusts (i) will carry out frequent and robust risk assessments for all staff who work on their own; and (ii) have a fully implemented policy on lone-working. (AQW 2875/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Each Health and Social Care Trust has policies and procedures in place for risk assessments, which include staff who work on their own. Risk assessments are completed on a regular basis and include control measures and action plans to address any areas of shortfall.

As part of the on-going Zero Tolerance campaign on abuse of staff, all Trusts have policies in place which address lone working. These policies are reviewed periodically to allow for any necessary improvements.

Abstinence Before Marriage

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to the answer to AQW 2137/08, to detail the amount of (i) core funding; and (ii) project funding that his department will make available to (a) organisations who provide advice on abstinence before marriage as a preferred method of sexual health; and (b) organisations providing a pro-life approach to family planning, in each of the next 3 years. (AQW 2879/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Currently my Department has no plans to make available core or project funding to any organisations who provide advice on abstinence before marriage as a preferred method of sexual health in each of the next 3 years.

Subject to the availability of resources and the assessment procedures it is anticipated that my Department will offer the following amounts of core funding to one voluntary organisation providing a pro-life approach to family planning in each of the next 3 years. There are no plans to provide project funding.

	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
*Core Funding	£26,285	£26,285	£26,285

*Does not take account of the annual pay and prices uplift

Banbridge Community Health Village

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to the answer to AQW 238/08, if the Project Business Case for the final phase of Banbridge community health village has been completed; and to provide a timescale for an announcement on his decision on the future development of the Banbridge health facility. (AQW 2880/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The new Health and Care Centre and Learning Disability Day Centre, on the Banbridge community health village site is a high priority within

the Primary and Community Care Infrastructure (PCCI) Programme. The business case for the project is currently being appraised and further input is being sought from the Southern Health and Social Care Trust before a decision on approval can be taken. It is expected that a decision will be made within the first quarter of 2008. This will not mean delays in the overall development or construction as other PCCI programme work streams are progressing to a similar schedule.

Crane at the Ulster Hospital

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to ensure that safety lights are added to the top of the crane at the Ulster Hospital. (AQW 2885/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Following discussions between the contractor at the Ulster Hospital (Gilbert-Ash Ltd) and Air Traffic Control at Belfast City Airport it has been decided to install a safety beacon to the tallest tower crane operating on the Critical Care Complex project, currently being constructed.

Belfast City Airport acknowledged that the crane is overshadowed by the high ground to the north of the site, but suggested it would be appropriate to fit a steady red medium intensity obstacle light as close to the highest point as is practical. Two warning beacon lights have been installed on the tallest crane.

Procurement of Local Produce

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the outcome of his meeting with Ministerial colleagues in relation to the issue of the procurement of local produce. (AQW 2893/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I had a useful meeting with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Minister of Education to discuss the possibility of increased procurement of local foods. It was acknowledged that there are possible benefits to be gained from greater cross departmental encouragement of local producers to engage in the procurement process for Health and Education bodies. It was agreed that officials would continue to work together to progress this issue.

Organ Donation

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of (i) the effectiveness of the current arrangements for

organ donation in Northern Ireland; and (ii) the implications of the recent report by the Chief Medical Officer, which recommends an 'opt-out system'; and to detail what percentage of patients who are put on the transplant list receive a transplant. (AQW 2903/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Northern Ireland's current arrangements for organ donation are comparable to the rest of the UK. It is however recognised that the UK has one of the lowest rates of organ donation in Europe. A recent report by the Organ Donation Taskforce contains fourteen recommendations, which, when implemented, will contribute to a 50 per cent increase in organ donation in the UK within five years - resulting in an additional 1,200 transplants a year and saving thousands of lives. Northern Ireland was involved in the development of this report and is fully committed to its implementation.

The Organ Donation Taskforce has been asked, as a separate piece of work, to look at the issue of presumed consent for organ donation and its implications. Northern Ireland will be closely involved in this work and a report is expected to be published later this year.

The proportion of those awaiting a transplant who receive one is affected by a wide range of variables including a patient's clinical condition and the availability of a suitably matched donor organ. During 2007, approximately 327 Northern Ireland residents were waiting for an organ transplant, 69 Northern Ireland residents received a transplant and 13 died while waiting.

Acute Beds Blocking at Altnagelvin Hospital

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of acute beds that were blocked in Altnagelvin Hospital in 2007; and (ii) the average number of days a bed was blocked. (AQW 2904/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of acute beds that were blocked in Altnagelvin Hospital in 2007 and the average number of days a bed was blocked is not available centrally.

The Western Health and Social Care Trust were able to provide figures on the average number of patients delayed in acute beds in Altnagelvin Area Hospital each month over the period 1st April 2007 to 31st December 2007 and the average number of days patients were delayed in acute beds in Altnagelvin Area Hospital in each month over this period. This information is presented in the table below.

Month	Average Number of Patients Delayed	Average Number of Days that Patients were Delayed
Apr-07	14	24
May-07	14	31
Jun-07	11	49
Jul-07	13	42
Aug-07	15	48
Sep-07	13	40
Oct-07	12	38
Nov-07	9	39
Dec-07	14	34

Source: Western Health and Social Care Trust

Domiciliary Carers

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the availability of domiciliary carers in the Western Health and Social Services Board area, particularly in rural areas. (AQW 2905/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: All Trusts have arrangements for the recruitment and retention of staff to secure continuity of access to high quality services in the community. Where recruitment difficulties do arise, Trusts have flexibility to respond to specific circumstances.

The Western HSC Trust, however, has advised that it currently has no unfilled domiciliary care staff vacancies.

Acute Bed Blocking at Altnagelvin Hospital

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of the primary reasons for acute bed blocking at Altnagelvin Hospital. (AQW 2906/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The majority of hospital discharges at Altnagelvin are non complex and are completed within 6 hours of the patient being declared medically fit.

The discharge process for those requiring more intensive community support after leaving hospital is more complex. The Western Health and Social Care Trust reports a number of reasons for delays in these cases, the primary ones being: the agreement of a plan for the patient's post discharge care; the arrangement of care in the patient's own home; and the availability of suitable nursing home or residential care places.

Trusts are required by March 2008 to achieve 100% of all non complex discharges within 6 hours and 100% of complex discharges within 72 hours.

My Department continues to have regular performance management meetings with Trusts and progress towards the delayed discharge targets is being closely monitored.

Bed Occupancy Rate

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the average bed occupancy rate; (ii) the bed occupancy rate for December 2007; and (iii) the target bed occupancy rate, broken down by each acute hospital.

(AQW 2907/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) Information on the average bed occupancy rates for specialties within the acute programme of care for the financial year 2006/07, broken down by hospital, is provided in the following table.

Hospital	(%) Occupancy rates for 2006/2007 ^{1,2}
Altnagelvin area	83.0
Antrim	80.0
Ards	86.3
Bangor	91.7
Belfast City	84.4
Belvoir Park	80.6
Braid Valley	89.0
Causeway	86.1
Craigavon Area	79.1
Daisy Hill	77.6
Dalriada	85.9
Downe	90.1
Erne	70.0
Foster Green	81.6
Lagan Valley	80.8
Lurgan	87.8
Mater Infirmorum	88.7
Mid Ulster	84.0
Moyle	91.0
Musgrave Park	69.9
Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children	72.1

Hospital	(%) Occupancy rates for 2006/2007 ^{1,2}
Robinson Memorial	90.4
Royal Maternity	65.0
Royal Victoria	85.1
Thompson House	89.7
Tyrone County	76.3
Ulster	87.3
Whiteabbey	84.0
NI Total	83.2

Source: Departmental Information Return KH03A

- Occupancy rates are a measurement of the percentage of time that beds are occupied during the year in wards that are open overnight, measured at midnight. The hospital may also have a number of beds in wards, which are open during the day; beds reserved for day case admission or regular day admission are not included in the calculation
 - Occupancy rates provided in the answer are based on hospital specialties within the Acute programme of care.
- (ii) Information on the average bed occupancy rates for specialties within the acute programme of care for the quarter ending 30 September 2007, the latest quarter for which figures are available, broken down by hospital, are provided in the following table.

Hospital	(%) Occupancy Rates for Quarter Ending September 2007 ^{1,2}
Altnagelvin area	80.1
Antrim	77.0
Ards	88.4
Bangor	85.7
Belfast City	81.3
Belvoir Park	88.8
Braid Valley	92.9
Causeway	80.0
Craigavon Area	72.7
Daisy Hill	73.6
Dalriada	86.0
Downe	81.7
Erne	66.5
Foster Green	86.5
Lagan Valley	75.6
Lurgan	79.7
Mater Infirmorum	89.9
Mid Ulster	83.7

Hospital	(%) Occupancy Rates for Quarter Ending September 2007 ^{1,2}
Moyle	91.8
Musgrave Park	64.1
Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children	66.9
Robinson Memorial	81.7
Royal Maternity	58.7
Royal Victoria	80.6
Thompson House	92.9
Tyrone County	71.0
Ulster	80.1
Whiteabbey	77.4
NI Total	81.9

Source: Departmental Information Return KH03A

- Occupancy rates are a measurement of the percentage of time that beds are occupied during the year in wards that are open overnight, measured at midnight. The hospital may also have a number of beds in wards, which are open during the day; beds reserved for day case admission or regular day admission are not included in the calculation
- Occupancy rates provided in the answer are based on hospital specialties within the Acute programme of care.

(iii) There is currently no official target relating to bed occupancy rates in hospitals in Northern Ireland. The current guidance for business cases in Developing Better Services within the National Health Service in Northern Ireland includes planning assumptions on occupancy levels. These identify target occupancy levels for planning purposes of 83% for Acute, 75% for Obstetrics and Critical Care (i.e. Intensive Care Units), 65% for Paediatrics and 95% for Geriatrics and Rehabilitation.

Services for People with Learning Disabilities

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people with a learning disability who require (i) day care services; and (ii) day care in Intensive Support Units, by (a) parliamentary constituency; and (b) Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 2908/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of people with a learning disability who require day care services or day care in Intensive Support Units is not collected centrally. Information is, however, collected on the number of persons with a learning disability registered at statutory day care facilities by former Health and Social Services Trusts.

At 31 March 2007, 3,553 people with a learning disability were registered at statutory day care facilities. Across HSS Trusts, this ranged from 673 in Homefirst Trust to 180 in Ulster Community & Hospitals Trust.

PERSONS WITH A LEARNING DISABILITY REGISTERED AT STATUTORY DAY CARE FACILITIES

Trust	Number
North & West Belfast	360
South & East Belfast	382
Ulster Community & Hosp	180
Down Lisburn	262
Causeway	232
Homefirst	673
Armagh & Dungannon	240
Craigavon & Banbridge	214
Newry & Mourne	232
Foyle	445
Sperrin Lakeland	333
Northern Ireland	3,553

Source: Community Information Branch return KDC2(ii)

Funding Allocation for People with Learning Disabilities

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the funding allocation for people with learning disabilities by (i) parliamentary constituency; and (ii) Health and Social Care Trust area, for each of the last 4 years.

(AQW 2909/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below shows expenditure, excluding client contributions, incurred by each of the relevant Health & Social Services legacy Trusts for the last four years for which information is held.

Trust	2005/06 £m	2004/05 £m	2003/04 £m	2002/03 £m
Armagh & Dungannon	18.2	17.6	16.5	15.6
Causeway	7.4	5.9	5.9	5.3
Craigavon & Banbridge	7.9	7.4	6.8	6.0
Down & Lisburn	15.1	15.0	13.0	11.4
Foyle	14.5	13.1	12.1	11.3
Green Park	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.7

Trust	2005/06 £m	2004/05 £m	2003/04 £m	2002/03 £m
Homefirst	25.8	23.7	21.1	17.3
Newry & Mourne	8.5	7.9	7.1	6.0
North & West Belfast	40.1	37.4	35.8	32.4
South & East Belfast	12.0	11.3	10.6	10.3
Sperrin Lakeland	9.4	7.9	7.1	6.4
Ulster	11.0	10.0	9.1	7.9
United	-	-	-	0.1
Total	170.6	157.9	145.7	130.6

Note: The figures may not add due to rounding.

Information is not available by parliamentary constituency.

4th Capitation Formula Review

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide a timescale within which the 4th capitation formula review will be fully implemented, so that there will greater equality in health funding between each Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 2915/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Since the phased implementation of the 4th Review of the Capitation Formula began in April 2005, £29 million has been skewed towards those Boards assessed as being under funded by the Regional Capitation Formula. However, the changing demographic picture in Northern Ireland offsets some of the improvements made. The target fair shares of resources are updated annually and progress is being made towards achieving an equitable position.

The 5th Review of the Regional Capitation Formula will be issued for consultation in 2008. It proposes changes to the way in which the need for Health and Social Care is measured in Acute Services and Elderly Care and, if endorsed, its recommendations will supersede those of the Fourth Review. It is too early to comment on the timeframe for full implementation of the 5th review.

Cardiac Ambulance Cover in Omagh

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the measures put in place to ensure that people in Omagh are never again left without cardiac ambulance cover, as occurred over the recent holiday period. (AQW 2927/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The people of Tyrone and Fermanagh have access to a mobile coronary care service, which outreaches from the Erne and Tyrone County Hospitals and to the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) rapid response cardiac service. Both services provide Thrombolysis (clot busting drug treatment).

When the mobile coronary care service is not available from Tyrone County Hospital, as was the case over the holiday period, the NIAS Rapid Response Team provides this service

Delay of Operations at Ulster Hospital

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to address the delay of operations, scheduled to take place between 17 December and 28 December 2007, at the Ulster Hospital. (AQW 2938/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is assumed this question relates to trauma and orthopaedic (fracture) operations. To address the delay in operations at the Ulster Hospital between 17 and 28 December 2007, the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust ensured that in the two weeks commencing 15 December and 22 December 2007 all scheduled fracture sessions were fully utilised and two extra lists were added in each week. All the patients affected by the delay have now had their surgery.

I have set a target for the Health and Social Care sector that by 31 March 2008, at least 75% of patients should, where clinically appropriate, wait no longer than 48 hours for inpatient fracture treatment.

Orthopaedic Operations at Ulster Hospital

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an explanation as to why there was a delay for orthopaedic operations, scheduled between 17 December and 28 December 2007, at the Ulster Hospital. (AQW 2939/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is assumed this question relates to trauma and orthopaedic (fracture) operations. The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, who are responsible for managing the Ulster Hospital, have advised that the reason for the delay in trauma and orthopaedic (fracture) operations in the period 17-28 December 2007 was due to a backlog of operations from the period preceding 17 December caused by a combination of factors, including some major trauma cases reducing the number of operations that could be carried out on a daily basis; and admission of a further 51 patients during the period 17-28 December.

Ambulance Service

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the level of accountability that the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has for meeting target times when called to emergency call-outs in rural areas. (AQW 2953/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) target for responding to emergency calls applies uniformly throughout Northern Ireland and does not differentiate between rural and urban areas. The NIAS Trust Board is accountable for achieving the Trust's performance targets to the four Health and Social Services Boards, which are responsible for commissioning ambulance services in Northern Ireland, and to me as the Minister responsible for health and social care. My Department, along with the four Boards' Commissioning Group for Ambulance Services, monitors NIAS's performance closely against the required standard.

Out-of-Hours Services

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not he has plans to transfer out-of-hours services from (i) Strabane; and (ii) Limavady, to Altnagelvin. (AQW 2966/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The decision by the Western Health and Social Services Board to co-locate GMS Out of Hours (OOH) Services on the Altnagelvin site will not affect the current provision of out of hours general medical services in Strabane or Limavady. However all services are kept under continuous review to ensure they remain effective and are provided efficiently.

Efficiency Savings

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail those areas and departments that he expects will make efficiency savings of close to £500 million over a six year period. (AQW 2970/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: For the Spending Review 2004 period from 2005/06 to 2007/08 my Department is on track to deliver £146m of resource releasing efficiencies. These efficiencies have been delivered through a wide range of workstreams which operated in hospitals, community services, personal social services, the community drugs budget, family health services, the Fire Service and through capping the Departmental budget.

My Department is planning to achieve additional efficiencies of £344m on top of this, as assigned by DFP, for the next CSR period 2008/09 to 2010/11. Given the extent of the savings required, I am looking for efficiency across the whole of the Departmental baseline. I anticipate making savings from RPA, from further pharmaceutical savings and from increased productivity. Details proposals are still being developed.

Future Funding Plans

Mr Brady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the funding his department has provided to the Southern Investing for Health Partnership, in the last 3 years; and (ii) the future funding planned for the 'Know the Score Drug and Alcohol Project', based in St John Bosco Youth Centre, Newry. (AQW 2972/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Funding allocated from my Department to the Southern Investing for Health Partnership to support the implementation of locally agreed Health Improvement Plans in each year of the last three years is set out in the table below.

Year	Funding
05/06	£308k
06/07	£323k
07/08	£333k

The Southern Investing for Health Partnership has provided the following funding to the "Know the Score Drug and Alcohol Project" over the last 4 years:

Year	Funding
04/05	£15k
05/06	£30k
06/07	£30k
07/08	£30k

The Project also received the following funding from the Southern Drug and Alcohol Co-Ordination Team (SDACT):

Year	Funding
04/05	£2,000
05/06	£3,200
06/07	£675

As of 2007/08, the SDACT commissioned a range of local services, through a tendering process, to enable it to deliver on its locally developed action plan. The "Know the Score Drug and Alcohol Project" did not submit a bid to this process.

Agenda for Change

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether or not he will ensure that staff who sit on matching panels are released from their normal duties to complete the 2nd panel for Agenda for Change; and if not, to detail what action he is taking to achieve this objective.

(AQW 2973/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have instructed all Health and Social Care employers that I expect all staff to be in receipt of the Agenda for Change rates of pay by the end of March 2008. Health and Social Care employers have produced action plans to achieve the March target for assimilation; which includes prioritising of 2nd panels and the release of staff for that purpose.

Fertility Treatment

Mr Brady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (i) any feedback he has received following his agreement to review the criteria for patients accessing fertility treatment; and (ii) what is his assessment of the key areas of the review.

(AQW 2974/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Since announcing my intention to review the access criteria for specialised fertility services, my Department has received a report on the impact of the current criteria on service provision and is currently undertaking further work to assess the systems and processes relevant to waiting list management at the Regional Fertility Centre. Key stakeholders will be invited to provide feedback on their experience of the current access criteria and the provision of fertility services at a workshop on 1 February. The outcome of this workshop will help inform the consultation paper I intend to issue in the spring.

The review will assess the impact of each of the access criteria, the evidence base supporting the criteria, and the impact of the criteria on service provision.

Fertility Treatment

Mr Brady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of patients in receipt of fertility treatment; and (ii) the numbers of patients receiving each type of treatment, broken down by Health and Social Services Board area, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2975/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of couples who received fertility treatment, by type of treatment and Health and Social Services Board of residence, for each of the last five years is shown in the table below.

2003/2004:

Health and Social Services Board	DI (Donor Insemination)	FET (Frozen Embryo Transfer)	ICSI (Intra Cytoplasmic Sperm Injection)	IVF (Invitro Fertilisation)	SIUI (Stimulated Intral Uterine Insemination)
Eastern	29	19	77	90	75
Northern	16	14	35	90	30
Southern	8	8	28	46	<5
Western	8	6	33	39	11

Source: Regional Fertility Centre

2004/2005:

Health and Social Services Board	DI (Donor Insemination)	FET (Frozen Embryo Transfer)	ICSI (Intra Cytoplasmic Sperm Injection)	IVF (Invitro Fertilisation)	SIUI (Stimulated Intral Uterine Insemination)
Eastern	5	5	75	85	35
Northern	5	<5	54	42	24
Southern	<5	5	59	38	<5
Western	<5	<5	41	27	<5

Source: Regional Fertility Centre

2005/2006:

Health and Social Services Board	DI (Donor Insemination)	FET (Frozen Embryo Transfer)	ICSI (Intra Cytoplasmic Sperm Injection)	IVF (Invitro Fertilisation)	SIUI (Stimulated Intral Uterine Insemination)
Eastern	0	12	76	79	69
Northern	0	8	38	54	31
Southern	0	5	34	37	<5
Western	0	<5	24	34	<5

Source: Regional Fertility Centre

2006/2007:

Health and Social Services Board	DI (Donor Insemination)	FET (Frozen Embryo Transfer)	ICSI (Intra Cytoplasmic Sperm Injection)	IVF (In vitro Fertilisation)	SIUI (Stimulated Intra Uterine Insemination)
Eastern	0	12	63	100	60
Northern	0	8	46	63	24
Southern	0	5	35	60	<5
Western	0	<5	29	51	<5

Source: Regional Fertility Centre

2007/2008*

Health and Social Services Board	DI (Donor Insemination)	FET (Frozen Embryo Transfer)	ICSI (Intra Cytoplasmic Sperm Injection)	IVF (In vitro Fertilisation)	SIUI (Stimulated Intra Uterine Insemination)
Eastern	0	5	76	90	60
Northern	0	6	50	64	21
Southern	0	5	33	74	<5
Western	0	5	29	51	10

Source: Regional Fertility Centre

* As the financial year 07/08 is not complete, the numbers of patients quoted above is the number of couples who will be treated by the end of the financial year 07/08

Funding Provided for Fertility Treatment

Mr Brady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the funding provided to each of the Health and Social Services Boards for fertility treatment. (AQW 2976/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In 2007/08 an amount of £1.587m was allocated to Boards for specialised fertility services. This was divided on a capitation basis as follows:

Northern Board	24.32%
Southern Board	18.83%
Eastern Board	39.68%
Western Board	17.17%

Fertility Treatment

Mr Brady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people on waiting lists for fertility treatment in each of the Health and Social Services Board areas.

(AQW 2977/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of couples on waiting lists for specialist fertility treatment at the Regional Fertility Centre at 21 January 2008 was as follows:

	FET (Frozen Embryo Transfer)	ICSI (Intra Cytoplasmic Sperm Injection)	IVF (In vitro Fertilisation)	SIUI (Stimulated Intra Uterine Insemination)
EHSSB	1	88	151	0
NHSSB	0	55	95	12
SHSSB	0	48	102	0
WHSSB	0	31	26	0

Agenda for Change

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the reasons why there is no cost of living uplift at 2.5% for staff not assimilated under the Agenda for Change process.

(AQW 2979/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Health and Social Care staff who are not yet assimilated to Agenda for Change pay continue to be paid on either Whitley or the National Joint Council pay scales. In some instances these scales are higher than the equivalent Agenda for Change pay points. To continue to apply the uplift to the Whitley or National Joint Council pay scales could result in some individuals being overpaid. All staff should be moved to Agenda for Change pay by the end of March 2008 and those entitled to arrears as a result of the 2.5% cost of living uplift will receive them.

Private Finance Initiative Hospital Project at Enniskillen

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide a timescale within which the successful tender for the Private Finance Initiative hospital project at Enniskillen will be announced; and to confirm the departmental representative who will be signing the contract for this project. (AQW 2981/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is expected that the Preferred Bidder for the New Acute Hospital for the South West will be announced in May 2008. Following further clarification of the project agreement and subject to planning approval the contract will be awarded in November 2008.

Subject to final business case approvals by my Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel, it would be for the Chief Executive of the Western Health and Social Care Trust to sign the contract for this project with the private company.

Private Finance Initiatives

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not he intends to meet HM Treasury value for money tests for private finance initiatives, in the outline business cases, by privatising and seconding staff.

(AQW 2991/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is the policy of my Department to adhere to relevant HM Treasury Guidance on Value for Money and Affordability assessment of Business Cases in making a decision on the procurement route, PFI or conventional, for all health capital investment projects.

Where PFI is chosen as the preferred procurement route for a project, clinical services in a healthcare project remain the responsibility of the Health and Social Care Trust. Supporting facilities management services (known as hard and soft FM services) can be transferred to the PFI operating company. In the case of soft FM services (catering, portering, etc) the inclusion of these services within the scope of the procurement and later the final contract must be subject to a rigorous value for money test in accordance with HMT Treasury Guidance. Cleaning services and staff are excluded from the scope of such project contracts.

Where hard FM services and staff (e.g. buildings maintenance staff) are transferred to the private sector, their terms and conditions of employment are protected by TUPE regulations (Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations, 1981) and, in accordance with HM Treasury Guidance, they are to be provided with pensions schemes broadly comparable to those provided by the public sector employer.

Where soft FM services are to be transferred to a PFI operating company the associated staff are seconded to the PFI company from the public sector rather than transferred to support the transfer of services. They are retained within Trust employment for the lifetime of the project. This is in accordance with the Retention

of Employment (RoE) model adopted by DHSSPS in 2006 for soft FM services in PFI projects.

Agenda for Change

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not the deadline of 31 December to conclude on the Agenda for Change matching process is still achievable; and what action he is taking to resource this process within the Health and Social Care Trusts.

(AQW 2992/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: All 65,000 HSC posts were subjected to the Agenda for Change matching process within the 31 December 2007 deadline. In instances where the panel failed to agree on a grading, these particular jobs were referred to a 2nd matching panel. This process was given priority by all HSC employers.

Newbuild for the Ulster Hospital

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not the new build for the Ulster Hospital is on target for the planned completion date.

(AQW 2999/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The major new build project currently on site at the Ulster Hospital is the Critical Care Complex. Pre-contract Enabling Works commenced in February 2007 and the construction contract in May 2007. The contract, including commissioning, is due to complete by the end of April 2010. The works are currently on programme to achieve this planned target date.

Regional Pay Bargaining

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not there is regional pay bargaining in relation to staff on pay bands 1-4, given that they are paid less than their counterparts in England; and what is his assessment of the equality implications, given that staff in these bands are low-paid.

(AQW 3009/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In Northern Ireland we have honoured the Pay Review Body recommendation of 2.5% uplift for 2007/08 in full, unlike the NHS in England where the award was staged. The NHS Staff Council have now agreed a revised pay deal for staff on Agenda for Change Bands 1 to 4 for England only; this was on the basis that the 2.5% staged increase was unreasonable when applied to the lower paid staff. I recognise that by not implementing the lower pay award similar to

the NHS in England that the Northern Ireland rates are now out of line with the rest of the NHS. I will continue to work with my Executive colleagues to address this issue.

Emergency Calls

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of emergency calls received by the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service in each of the last five years; and (ii) the number of these calls that were found to be malicious. (AQW 3012/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of emergency calls and identified malicious calls over the last five years are detailed in the table below.

Year	Emergency Calls Received	Malicious Calls Received
2003	60908	5873
2004	54056	5952
2005	52430	5079
2006	54322	4777
2007	52490	4228

Free Dental Care

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to ensure that free dental care is available, through the Health Service, to all who are entitled; and to detail the dental practices in (i) Omagh; and (ii) Strabane, that accept new Health Service patients without requiring them to pay fees. (AQW 3044/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Each Health and Social Services Board is responsible for making arrangements with local dentists for general dental services in its own area. Currently there is no obligation on dentists to accept a patient for health service treatment, nor do current contractual arrangements permit Health and Social Services Boards to compel dentists to provide HS dental services.

I am committed to securing a robust and accessible health service dental service for everyone in Northern Ireland and, as a means of achieving this, discussions are currently ongoing between my officials and representatives of the Dental Practice Committee of the British Dental Association on a new contract for Northern Ireland. This contract, when implemented, will introduce local commissioning which will give

Health and Social Services Boards greater control over patient access to health service dentistry. The new contract will also deliver a revised remuneration system, which rewards dentists fairly for operating the new arrangements, thus addressing the dental profession's current concerns with the present remuneration system.

There is at present, a lack of dental practices in the Omagh and Strabane areas willing to actively accept new Health Service patients to their practice lists. This has caused major dental access difficulties and in the short term, patients encountering such access problems in these areas are being asked to travel outside their local area to avail of HS dental services.

The Western Health and Social Services Board are very much aware of the shortage of Health Service dentists in their area and are currently addressing these access problems through the continued advertising for the recruitment of salaried dentists which, if successful, should help to reduce the difficulties in getting access to a Health Service dentist in the Omagh and Strabane areas.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the role of PriceWaterhouseCooper staff in relation to the selection procedure for posts in Northern Ireland Water. (AQW 2656/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that PriceWaterhouseCoopers are the main provider but not exclusive provider of advice and support in relation to strategies to select and recruit the best possible staff to enable the company to meet its corporate objectives. This has included value for money advice on how to attract suitable applicants, support in designing and developing recruitment documents and assistance with recruitment exercises.

The advice and support provided by PriceWaterhouseCoopers complies fully with equality legislation and supports Northern Ireland Water in being an equal opportunities employer.

PricewaterhouseCoopers and Northern Ireland Water

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the number of staff from PriceWaterhouseCoopers working with, or for, Northern

Ireland Water in the past six months; and (b) the tasks performed by these staff. (AQW 2657/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that, in the past six months, 62 staff from PriceWaterhouseCoopers have been working with, or for, the company. Not all have been engaged on a full time basis.

During this period, PriceWaterhouseCoopers staff have covered vacancies in Northern Ireland Water's staff structure and have also provided:

- advice on change management, programme governance, process mapping, mobile work management, economic regulation and financial modelling; and
- support on customer billing, payroll implementation, staff recruitment, staff reduction programme and documentation of financial control procedures.

They have also been involved in reviews relating to the delivery of the capital programme, pay and grading, performance management, contract management and the procurement of goods and services.

Sewage Works in West Tyrone

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a list of sewage works in the West Tyrone constituency on which his department plans to carry out improvement works and upgrades, in the next 2 years. (AQW 2694/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it plans to upgrade and improve a number of wastewater treatment works in the West Tyrone constituency over the next two years. This work, which will cost in the region of £5.2 million, aims to meet regulatory standards, safeguard public health and protect the environment. The wastewater treatment works involved are at Killen, Mountfield, Plumbridge, Ballymagory and Tattyreagh.

Resurfacing Work, Lisbeeghan Road

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will give a timescale within which resurfacing work will be carried out on the Lisbeeghan road, Ballymoney. (AQW 2698/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that Lisbeeghan Road is on a reserve list of resurfacing schemes, where, depending on priorities and available funding, it will continue to compete for inclusion on future works programmes.

Northern Ireland Water will shortly commence works to place a new water main within part of the Lisbeeghan Road. As a consequence any large scale resurfacing will be postponed for approximately a year to allow for post work settlement. However, Roads Service will continue with temporary patching to meet maintenance standards in the interim.

New Railway Stop at Dunloy

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration he will give to opening a new railway stop at Station road, Dunloy, for the Derry/Londonderry to Belfast railway service. (AQW 2699/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: No consideration is currently being given to opening a new railway stop at Dunloy. The likely patronage would not be sufficient to justify a stop in Dunloy in addition to the current stops in Ballymoney (7 miles to the north) and Cullybackey (10 miles to the south).

Snow Ploughs and Gritting Machines

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide details on the use of snow ploughs and gritting machines on the A24 from Carryduff to Clough, during the 24 hour period commencing at 2pm on Thursday, 3 January 2008. (AQW 2730/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service advises that, on the basis of a weather forecast predicting widespread frost and light snow flurries from approximately 16.00 hrs on 3 January, its Eastern and Southern Divisions, in which the A24 is located, commenced the salting of all roads within the salted network, between 15.30 hrs and 17.20 hrs, with each run taking between 2½ to 3½ hours to complete. Following the prediction of heavy snowfall, snow ploughs were fitted to some gritters, as circumstances permitted, from approximately 19.00 hrs.

These operations continued throughout the evening, finishing around midnight.

Following reports of heavy snow in the Ballynahinch area, a gritter with snowplough attached, accompanied by a further gritter, was dispatched at approximately 20.00hrs, and the A24 Ballynahinch to Newcastle road was ploughed between 22.30 and midnight.

Salting operations recommenced at approximately 02.00 on 4 January and continued throughout the day in order to keep all main roads passable.

North Antrim Sewerage Infrastructure

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the locations, in the North Antrim constituency, that Northern Ireland Water has identified as having sewerage infrastructure problems; and to detail the nature of these problems. (AQW 2750/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it is currently undertaking a comprehensive exercise to reassess the availability of headroom at wastewater treatment works across the North, based on the most up to date demographic information and planning projections. This work is scheduled for completion during 2008. In addition, an out of sewer flooding register is being developed to further refine the information available on system performance and deficiencies.

The Chief Executive of NIW will write to you about locations with sewerage infrastructure problems, when the full assessment of wastewater treatment works in the North Antrim constituency is complete.

Roads with Steep Drops

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what safety measures he has put in place, in relation to roads with steep drops at either side, to avoid the risk of serious accidents and loss of life. (AQW 2766/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service is directed by the Design Manual for Roads and Bridges Standard TD 19 – Requirements for Road Restraint Systems, which came into effect in July 2007. Included in this Standard is the mandatory Road Restraint Risk Assessment Process, which enables designers of new capital schemes to determine, at specific sites, the need for road restraint systems and their performance requirements. Indeed, separate Road Safety Audits must be carried out on all highway schemes involving removal, provision or improvement of any road restraint system.

Standard TD 19 must be applied to all new or improvement works to roads with designated speeds over 50mph and on those roads with a speed limit of less than 50mph, where the "overseeing organisation" (Roads Service) considers that such provision is required.

In general, where a road has steep drops at either side, depending on the risk to road users and others, Roads Service may consider installing a road restraint system. The criteria used for design of road restraint systems include:

- Likelihood of risk, which takes account of the:
- probability of a vehicle leaving the road;

- road type, road alignment, traffic flow and type, and accident history; and,
- probability of an errant vehicle reaching the area to be protected.
- Consequences of risk, which takes account of:
- the speed of an errant vehicle;
- the aggressiveness of the hazard; and,
- whether others may be involved, eg. houses or railways.
- Total risk, which takes account of the risk to occupants and risk to others.

All of the above factors are considered in the selection and implementation of measures at any particular site.

Sewerage Infrastructure

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide details of projected investment in sewerage infrastructure for Cookstown and Magherafelt district council areas for (i) 2008/09; (ii) 2009/10; and (iii) 2010/11. (AQW 2769/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that over the three financial years to 2010/11, over £5.8 million has been allocated in its Strategic Business Plan for investment in the sewerage infrastructure for the Cookstown and Magherafelt District Council areas. The annual breakdown is as follows:

Year	Cookstown District Council Area £000s	Magherafelt District Council Area £000s
2008/09	167	1,644
2009/10	0	1,869
2010/11	324	1,800

Proposed Schemes on Farmhill Road, Killyclogher

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development what actions he is taking to expedite the two proposed schemes on Farmhill Road, Killyclogher, in the interests of the health and safety of road users, particularly young children, who walk this road to access both school and recreation facilities at Ballinamullan. (AQW 2772/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In relation to AQW 2772/08, my Department's Roads Service has confirmed that agreement has recently been reached with landowners affected by the culvert

replacement scheme at the Cookstown Road end of Farmhill Road. This will allow this scheme to be delivered over the next few months.

Unfortunately, Roads Service has encountered difficulties in progressing the scheme in the vicinity of Ballinamullan Bridge and may need to vest land, which would result in a minimum delay of 12 months.

Replacement of Glenlark Bridge, Gortin, Co. Tyrone

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will give a timescale within which the Glenlark bridge, Gortin, Co. Tyrone, will be replaced. (AQW 2774/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Glenlark Bridge is programmed for replacement during this financial year. Although the design work is complete, work has not commenced as the land necessary to deliver the scheme has not been secured. While negotiations with the landowner are ongoing, Roads Service has not yet obtained 'Permission to Enter' to start the scheme. If this permission is received, the scheme will commence within a matter of weeks. However if negotiations are unsuccessful, then the necessary land will have to be vested, thus delaying the scheme by at least 12 months.

Upgrade of Glencam Road, Killyclogher

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to implement the upgrade of Glencam Road, Killyclogher, as recommended in the Omagh Area Plan 1987-2002. (AQW 2775/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: A 140 metre stretch of the Glencam Road between Gortin Road and Killybrack Road has recently been upgraded as part of Roads Service's Development Control requirements for a residential development. This 'developer led' approach will be an essential element of any future improvements to the Glencam Road.

Although the Glencam Road was considered for inclusion in the Sub Regional Transport Plan 2015, it was ultimately not included, due to its lesser priority (in comparative terms) when considered alongside other competing schemes.

I understand that the Department of the Environment's Planning Service is currently developing the West Tyrone Area Plan 2019 (which includes Omagh). It remains the longer term intention of Roads Service to support the inclusion of the Glencam Road in the Plan as part of the transport network for this part of Omagh.

Fluoride in Drinking Water

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) what percentage of the population is supplied with drinking water that is treated with fluoride; and (ii) what areas are currently exempt from fluoridation in the drinking water supply. (AQW 2787/08)

The Minister for Regional Development:

Fluoridation of the public water supply is a dental health issue and is therefore a matter for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). DHSSPS has confirmed that it currently has no plans to introduce fluoridation in the North.

Under current legislation, DHSSPS may request Northern Ireland Water (NIW) to increase the fluoride content of the water supply in some or all areas of the North. I have been advised by NIW that it has not received any such requests. Consequently the public water supply is not presently fluoridated anywhere in the North.

Traffic Attendants

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of traffic attendants that have patrolled the Moyle District Council area, from 1 July 2007 to 7 January 2008. (AQW 2814/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service advises that parking enforcement in the Moyle District Council area is undertaken by Traffic Attendants deployed as mobile patrols from bases in Coleraine and Ballymena.

I can confirm that 25 such mobile patrols have been deployed in the Moyle District Council area during the period from 1 July 2007 to 7 January 2008.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps Northern Ireland Water plan to take to improve communications and service to elected representatives, in view of ongoing concerns about a range of matters, including (i) communication with elected representatives acting on behalf of constituents; (ii) communication between the call centre and contractors on the ground; and (iii) ensuring that problems on the ground are dealt with in a joined-up manner. (AQW 2838/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it has a dedicated telephone line exclusively for use by elected representatives. This service was introduced in August 2007 to improve communication with elected

representatives and ensure that any issues raised by them on behalf of constituents are dealt with promptly and effectively. The telephone number for elected representatives is 08453 006461 and it is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Northern Ireland Water is also introducing a new computerised mobile work management system to improve communication between its Customer Relations Centre and staff or contractors undertaking work on the ground. The system uses the latest technology to update the Customer Relations Centre on the status of work, thereby ensuring that elected representatives and customers are provided with up to date and accurate information. This system will be extended across Northern Ireland Water by the Summer of 2009.

Northern Ireland Water as an Equal Opportunities Employer

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm that Northern Ireland Water is an equal opportunities employer, given that a job is being advertised at different salary levels for internal and external recruitment competitions; and to comment on the recruitment approach being taken.

(AQW 2840/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Northern Ireland Water has advised me that it is an equal opportunities employer and that it has in place robust recruitment and selection policies and procedures to ensure all applicants are treated fairly and equally in line with best practice and the relevant equality legislation.

Both internal and external recruitment competitions are advertised based on the same grade and salary scales which were transferred from the Northern Ireland Civil Service, and are protected by the Transfer of Undertakings and Protection of Employment (TUPE) legislation and a collective pay agreement. Northern Ireland Water employees who are successful in an internal or external competition receive a salary increase based on a promotion pay policy which is a legacy from the Northern Ireland Civil Service which Northern Ireland Water has continued to apply. As this policy does not apply to external candidates, Northern Ireland Water recognises that there is potential for variations in salary between successful existing employees and other external candidates. It has therefore initiated a policy review to address this issue and will consult with the appropriate Trade Unions about its findings when the review is completed.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the religious background; and (ii) the gender, of senior members of staff within the executive team of Northern Ireland Water.

(AQW 2842/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the release of information on the religious background of members of staff on its Executive Team would be in breach of Section 1 of the Data Protection Act 1998. The religious background of staff is considered to be sensitive personal information and due to the relatively small size of the Executive Team this information, along with other information already in the public domain, could be used to identify specific individuals.

The gender breakdown of Northern Ireland Water's Executive Team is 7 males and 2 females.

Ballystockhart Road Gritting Schedules

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what action is he taking to ensure that the Ballystockhart Road, Comber, will be included in gritting schedules.

(AQW 2884/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Ballystockart Road is an unclassified road which runs between the B178 Hillsborough Road and the A22 Comber to Dundonald Road, both of which are included on the winter salting schedule. Whilst Ballystockart Road has not previously met the criteria for inclusion on the schedule, I have asked my Department's Roads Service to arrange for an assessment (including a traffic survey) to be carried out to ascertain whether this route now meets the criteria and can be added to the schedule for routine salting.

This will be undertaken at the earliest opportunity and I have asked that officials contact you when the results of the assessment are known.

Upgrading of the A26 Frosses Road

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what plans he has to submit a bid for additional funding for the upgrading of the A26 Frosses Road, in light of additional funds being made available by the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in his statement to the Assembly on 15 January 2008.

(AQW 2898/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service is currently developing a Major Works Scheme to provide a dual carriageway on the A26 Frosses Road between the northern end of the

Crankill dual carriageway at Glarryford crossroads to the junction of the Frosses Road and Drones Road (the Ballycastle fork).

Consultants were appointed in April 2006 and they have recently completed a Stage 1 assessment to review the options for a route improvement corridor. Following a number of public consultation days, alignments within the route improvement corridors are now being developed during Stage 2 of the assessment process. These will be assessed against the Government's five key objectives for transport: environment, safety, economy, accessibility and integration. I anticipate that this stage will conclude in the announcement of a 'preferred route' in mid-2008.

The delivery of the major works programme will be consistent with the level of funding proposed under the Budget 2008-2011 and the draft Investment Strategy 2008-2018(ISNI). You will appreciate that Roads Service is constrained by the levels of funding over the Budget and ISNI periods and must plan and programme the delivery of projects in line with the available funding. Within the programme the timing of individual schemes will be dependent on the outcome of the normal statutory procedures and the availability of funding.

The funding announced by the Minister for Finance and Personnel on 15 January 2008 to which you refer was allocated to Roads Service within the current financial year (March 2008).

Police Officers at Harbours

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of personnel employed as police officers at harbours. (AQW 2959/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: There are currently 39 Harbour Police officers employed at Belfast Harbour and 6 Harbour Police officers employed at Larne Harbour.

Rural Road Safety

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any new measures his department has introduced to improve safety on rural roads. (AQW 2980/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service carries out safety improvements on rural roads mainly through its Local Transport Safety Measures programme (LTSM). The annual budget for schemes undertaken within the LTSM is approximately £20million, and include the following activities:

- Network Development Schemes;
- Safer Routes to Schools;
- Collision Remedial Schemes; and
- Footway Construction.

The majority of the LTSM budget is spent on the local road network. Additional Information on LTSM schemes can be found on Roads Service's website at www.roadsni.gov.uk/minor_works

In addition, Roads Service is in the process of reviewing their speed management policy. This policy covers how speed limits are set on roads right across North, including rural roads, and is currently with the Regional Development Committee for scrutiny.

Another road safety measure, which is due to be piloted shortly, is the provision of part-time variable speed limits at rural primary schools. Once the necessary preparation work has been completed for the two pilot locations, the sites will be monitored and assessed to determine their effectiveness at reducing traffic speeds, with a view to rolling out similar initiatives at other rural schools.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Community and Voluntary Groups

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the funding her department has provided to each community or voluntary group, in the Newry and Armagh constituency, in each of the last five years. (AQW 2733/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): The Department for Social Development provides funding to a wide range of voluntary and community sector organisations in Northern Ireland through a number of targeted programmes. I have placed in the Library details of all funding provided to organisations in the Newry and Armagh constituency from 2003/04 to 2007/08. This funding was provided by the Department's Voluntary and Community Unit (VCU), Regional Development Office and by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

My Department also makes a contribution to delivery of local community support plans through VCU's Community Support Programme. District Councils are responsible for the allocation of this funding to local voluntary and community sector organisations. The contributions made to Newry & Mourne and Armagh City and District Councils in the relevant financial years are as follows:

Financial Year	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Armagh	£64,019	£64,019	£85,167	£79,119	£169,351
Newry & Mourne	£160,435	£160,435	£219,915	£225,502	£230,264

Assets Owned by DSD

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the amount of excess land that is owned by her department; (ii) the approximate value of these assets; and (iii) what plans she has to dispose of these assets. (AQW 2802/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department holds land most recently valued at approximately £543 million. This comprises 244 separate sites, which range from large areas of new town lands to smaller plots of land, individual buildings and areas of public or amenity space.

I am presently considering which of these lands could be used for social or affordable housing. None are regarded as surplus or excess

Housing Executive Accommodation

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people on the waiting list for Housing Executive accommodation in the (i) the Ballymena Borough Council area; (ii) the Ballymoney Borough Council area ; and (iii) Moyle District Council area, as of 8 January 2008.

(AQW 2803/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This information is not readily available in the format requested. However, the numbers of people on the waiting lists for accommodation in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's administrative districts of Ballymena, Ballymoney and Ballycastle are 1452, 541 and 375 respectively.

Pension Age

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Social Development whether or not there is monetary compensation available for women now reaching pension age who, as a result of bringing up a family, have not paid adequate National Insurance contributions towards a State pension. (AQW 2806/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The pension position of women is protected in a number of ways. Home Responsibilities Protection, which has been available since 1978, reduces the number of qualifying years needed to qualify for a full basic State Pension. It is available to people who care for a severely disabled person for at least 35 hours a week,

those who receive Child Benefit for a child aged under 16 and foster parents.

A woman who does not have the required number of qualifying years may use her husband's National Insurance contributions to claim a Category B pension, which is paid at 60% of the full basic State Pension rate. Currently this option becomes available to a woman when her husband reaches age 65 and claims his Category A pension.

In addition, Pension Credit guarantees that no pensioner need live on less than £119.05 a week (£181.70 for couples; rising to £124.05 and £189.35 respectively from April 2008).

The Pensions Bill recently passed by the Assembly provides for a more simple and generous State Pension system, within which working and caring will be rewarded equally. It contains measures to make it easier for people to qualify for a full basic State Pension - the number of qualifying years will be reduced to 30, a new National Insurance credit will be introduced to replace Home Responsibilities Protection and the link between a man claiming his Category A pension and a woman claiming her Category B pension will be broken.

Redevelopment of Forkhill Army Base

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Social Development to outline her position on the redevelopment of the former police and army base in Forkhill by the local community. (AQW 2853/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Responsibility for the redevelopment of the former police and army base in Forkhill by the local community is a matter for the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Department. My Department is facilitating the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) by acquiring the site on its behalf. My officials are engaging with their counterparts in DARD, local community representatives and the relevant statutory bodies to progress the matter.

Number of Travellers' Sites

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of travellers' sites located in each council area of Northern Ireland. (AQW 2874/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The table below provides details of the number of Housing

Executive owned sites available to Travellers, by council area.

Council Area	Number of sites
Belfast	2 (1 Serviced, 1 Emergency Halt)
Derry	4 (2 Serviced, 1 Emergency Halt, 1 Transit)
Strabane	1 (1 Transit)
Omagh	1 (1 Serviced)
Craigavon	2 (1 Serviced, 1 Emergency Halt)
Dungannon (Coalisland)	1 (1 Serviced)

Social Housing

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of units of social housing that have been built in South Belfast, in each of the last 2 years. (AQW 2902/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The number of units of social housing that have been completed in South Belfast was 145 in the financial year 2005/06 and 112 in the financial year 2006/07.

Renewing the Routes Initiative

Mr McCausland asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm when her department will approve the Renewing the Routes initiative at Glenbank, Crumlin Road, Belfast. (AQW 2978/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Renewing the Routes initiative is an over-arching strategic initiative aimed at regenerating the arterial routes leading to and from Belfast City Centre. The works planned for the Crumlin Road are being carried out, under the Integrated Development Fund supported arterial routes programme in the West Belfast and Greater Shankill areas of the city. The necessary approvals should be in place in the near future to allow the Crumlin Road plan to proceed.

Housing Executive Improvement Schemes

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an update on the current progress of all Housing Executive Improvement Schemes in the Lenadoon area of West Belfast; and to confirm if any (i) current; or (ii) upcoming schemes, are being postponed or discontinued. (AQW 3007/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Information on schemes under way and schemes currently programmed is as follows:

Capital Schemes

- Multi Element Improvement
- Upper Lenadoon commenced on 13 February 2006 and is 75% complete.
- Falcarragh/Kerrykeel Ph3 commenced on 11 September 2006. The original contract was terminated. A new contractor has been appointed and will commence on 28 January 2008
- Creeslough commenced on 22 October 2007, and is currently on site.
- Suffolk Road Flats is currently programmed for April 2009.
- Health & Safety Works
- Lenadoon 4/Dungloe is currently programmed for November 2008.
- Doon Road Flats is currently programmed for January 2009.

Environmental Improvement Schemes

- Liverpool Houses Phase 1 commenced on 7 February 2005 and work to Housing Executive properties is complete. A letter confirming funding by Belfast Regeneration Office for privately owned property issued on 21 January 2008.
- Liverpool Houses Phase 2 commenced on 2 October 2006 and work to Housing Executive properties is almost complete. . A letter confirming funding by Belfast Regeneration Office for privately owned property issued on 21 January 2008.
- Heating Installation
- Lenadoon Flats is currently programmed for April 2011.

Revenue Schemes

- External Cyclical Maintenancee
- Suffolk/ Doon and Lenadoon Flats commenced on 30 April 2007 and is currently on site.
- Rinalea/Lower Lenadoon is currently programmed for June 2009.
- Creeslough/Falcarragh is currently programmed for April 2010.
- Liverpool is currently programmed for June 2010.

Revenue Replacement Schemes (Kitchens)

- Liverpool commenced on 5 February 2007, and is almost complete (ahead of schedule).
- Rinalea/Shaws/Rosnareen commenced on 4 June 2007 and is almost complete (ahead of schedule).
- Doon Road/Lenadoon/Dungloe is currently programmed for June 2009.
- Carrigart/Corrib is currently programmed for June 2010.

Until the budget for future years is firmed up all current target programme dates will be at risk.

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