



Northern Ireland
Assembly

OFFICIAL REPORT

(Hansard)

Volume 27

(28 January 2008 to 24 February 2008)

BELFAST: THE STATIONERY OFFICE LTD

£70.00

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ISBN 978-0-339-80025-0

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	Mr Ian Paisley Jnr

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 28 January 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Suspension of Standing Orders

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): I beg to move

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4), inclusive, be suspended for 28 January 2008.

The deputy First Minister and I have tabled a motion to seek the Assembly's endorsement of the Programme for Government and the investment strategy for Northern Ireland. I understand that the Business Committee has allocated six hours for this item of business. Therefore, we have also tabled a motion to suspend Standing Orders to allow business to continue beyond 6.00 pm. That will ensure that as many Members as possible have an opportunity to contribute to this important debate.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question, I remind Members that resolution of the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4), inclusive, be suspended for 28 January 2008.

Mr Speaker: Given that the motion has been agreed, if required, today's sitting may continue beyond 7.00 pm.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

The Appointment of Commissioners Designate for Victims and Survivors

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister that the First Minister wishes to make a statement on the outcome of the appointment of a commissioner for victims and survivors.

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): We are glad to see, in the public gallery, a good number of those who represent victims and survivors. We hope that something that will be said today from the Benches will bring them some help and strength.

Before making the statement, the deputy First Minister and I wish to express our regret that its details were reported in the press on Friday. Our intention, as was made clear over the past few months, was that the first public announcement of our decision would be made to the Assembly. We all agree that it is regrettable that the press reports preceded today's statement.

The deputy First Minister and I have come to the House today to set out for Members, as we promised, how we intend to move forward on the issue of how we provide support and help for victims and survivors. These are some of the most vulnerable people in our Province. They have suffered great personal loss over the years, and we are determined that they should not be left behind.

The deputy First Minister and I have been working together intensely on the issue for many months, and believe that moving forward is pivotal. We have already demonstrated our commitment by delivering over £33 million in the Budget for that area of work over the next three years. Of that £33 million, £6 million is new money, as announced in the Assembly last week by the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Our recognition today of the needs and concerns of victims and survivors moves on to the start of delivery for all those in Northern Ireland who suffered over decades of conflict, terror and strife. A key part of that relates to the issue of a commissioner for victims and survivors.

Members will be aware that the process for that appointment began under direct rule. They will, moreover, recall that on 8 October 2007, the deputy First Minister and I announced that we had decided to extend the appointment process. Some potential applicants might have been deterred from putting themselves forward under direct rule. We formed the view that by extending the appointment process, the post would be more firmly grounded in the new political

environment and the person who was appointed would have broad support.

We are able to announce the outcome of that appointment process. The decision to extend the competition resulted in an additional 38 applicants coming forward. Following interviews, a combined list was drawn up of individuals who were deemed suitable for appointment by both the initial interview panel and by the extended process as announced on 8 October 2007.

As we were to get the best possible person for the job, each of the seven candidates was invited to give a short presentation to the deputy First Minister and myself.

The impact of the quality and delivery of those presentations, coupled with the candidates' drive and enthusiasm to make a real difference, had a profound effect on our thinking and our approach to this highly sensitive and complex issue. Following the presentations, we came to the conclusion that we should take advantage of all the skills and experience that we could possibly bring together to chart the future for all those who have been neglected for so long.

Our firm belief is that a team of four commissioners working together — in essence, a victims' commission — is the best way forward. Given the significant backlog of urgent work and the range of difficult challenges that face us in this area, these four people will have much more capacity to engage directly with victims and survivors than a single commissioner. To put it simply, they will be much more personally available to victims and survivors than a single commissioner.

For example, a single commissioner would, inevitably, have had to delegate many activities, including consultation and liaison, to a secretariat. It would also have been inevitable that many specific projects would have had to be undertaken by consultants. The four commissioners will be expected to undertake these and other important tasks themselves — although, obviously, administrative support will be provided for them.

Accordingly, I am pleased to announce that, in response to an invitation, four of the candidates on the list of those considered suitable for the post of commissioner have indicated their willingness to act in a joint capacity as commissioners designate in a new victims' and survivors' commission. The four people who will make up the new commission are Brendan McAllister, Patricia MacBride, Bertha McDougall and Michael Nesbitt.

We anticipate that the commission will have the same functions as the post of Victims' Commissioner described in the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. It is our intention to make formal appointments in due course, but we must first introduce the necessary legislation to create the victims' and survivors' commission that I have

described today. A Bill to provide for the establishment of the commission will be introduced as soon as possible. Subject, of course, to the decision of the Assembly, we will wish to proceed with the formal appointments as soon as possible thereafter.

I want to make it clear that, in the interim, there is much important work for the four commissioners designate to carry out. We want them to sit down together and get to grips with setting out an agreed work programme for the new commission. That will be a crucial first step as we move towards a better service for those touched by the events of our troubled past. It is envisaged that the work plan will cover all the issues that impact on victims and survivors, including a review of support services, legislation, and the setting up of a victims' and survivors' forum.

The deputy First Minister and I will continue to take a close interest in this work. We pledge our full support for the four people who are taking on one of the most important tasks facing our society. I want them to know that we will be available to them when they need us as we all seek to move forward together. For us, they will be the primary authority on victims and survivors.

12.15 pm

In commending this announcement to the House, I ask Members to give it careful consideration, not least because of the importance of the work that we are asking the new victims' and survivors' commission to do. Remember also that this announcement is really for those who have been largely without a voice. Today, we are giving them a voice — a real voice. It is a voice that will reach the heart of Government and will be heard and listened to for the very first time. May God speed this work with His blessing.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): Mr Speaker, I understand that questions will be answered by the deputy First Minister; is that correct?

Mr Speaker: That is correct.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the First Minister for his statement and I acknowledge the appointment of the new commissioners designate. I wish them well in the difficult and complex work with which they have been charged.

However, I register concern at the manner through which the announcement of their appointments was brought into the public domain. It was unsatisfactory that the announcement was leaked to the press, and that has proved unhelpful to us as we come to terms with the decisions that have been made.

Will the appointments be to full-time posts? Given that the original and subsequent advertisements announcing the job of Interim Commissioner for

Victims and Survivors indicated that there would be a singular rather than a plural outcome, will the deputy First Minister tell the House when the decision to increase the number of commissioners was taken? Will he also tell us how that decision was taken, who was consulted, and was legal advice sought to justify increasing the number of appointments?

There may be concerns arising; for example, more people may have applied had they known that there was to be a panel of commissioners. Will the deputy First Minister assure me that the legislation, when it is brought to the House, will confirm the independent status of the proposed victims' and survivors' commission? The statement said that commissioners will be the primary authority on victims and survivors, but will they be the independent primary authority on victims and survivors?

On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I ask the deputy First Minister to advise us on the status of the report of the Interim Commissioner for Victims and Survivors, Mrs McDougall, given that she has been appointed as one of the new commissioners designate.

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for his contribution. The First Minister and I share his concern about the leaking of the information and on how unhelpful that was to all of us.

I confirm that the posts will be on a full-time basis. Regarding the question about appointing one commissioner, we took the decision to appoint more than one commissioner following the presentations from the shortlisted candidates, and it is already in the public domain that those presentations were completed just before Christmas. Having reflected on the matter, we concluded that the interests of victims and survivors would be better served by drawing on the broad range of skills and knowledge exhibited by the candidates.

After the presentations, the First Minister and I decided that we would meet shortly after Christmas — we interrupted our Christmas break and met in Stormont Castle on either the Thursday or Friday following Christmas Day. We then deliberated on the presentations and on the reflections that we had had during the Christmas break.

It was at that stage that we decided that the appointment of a number of commissioners was the sensible way to proceed. We took legal advice on the matter, and that confirmed our view that we were within our rights to do so. We also, in the course of our deliberations, consulted Felicity Huston at the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments, and she declared herself content with our approach. Therefore, a sensible decision was taken to reflect, over the Christmas period, on the candidates' presentations —

they were all important and powerful. As a result of those presentations and our reflection on the matter, we came to the decision that we did. That began the business of trying to process that decision.

With regard to the recommendations in Bertha McDougall's report, we are considering a draft strategy that will signal a major step forward in the work with victims and survivors. That strategy will be built on work that has already been done, and when it is published for consultation, it will be clear that we have learned from the valuable work that Mrs McDougall carried out. We must improve the quality of life for those people whose lives were changed for ever by what happened to them. With a new strategy and the creation of the commission, we believe that the key building blocks will be in place to achieve that.

The important decision has been taken, and the four commissioners designate have been appointed. The people who have been charged with this responsibility deserve the support of every Member of this House. Their work will be onerous: there are tender feelings and raw emotions out there, and different views about how to proceed. We, on behalf of the Executive, have acted decisively.

I have listened to commentary over the weekend that suggested that we came to that decision because we could not agree on one commissioner. Nothing could be further from the truth. At no stage of our deliberations did we have a situation in which the First Minister proposed someone and I proposed an alternative. That never happened. Some people might greet that with incredulity, but it is a symbol of the way in which he and I proceed with business. We are conscious of the need to take the right decision. Therefore, I can say, without fear of contradiction, that we were never in a position of disagreement on the way forward.

Mr Moutray: I welcome the statement by the First Minister. Many in society will be reassured that victims will not be forgotten as we move forward in this Province. Will the deputy First Minister give an indication of what the commissioners' workload will be and what resources will be made available to them in advance of legislation being passed in this House?

The deputy First Minister: As I said, there will clearly be a heavy workload. It is a matter that has been much neglected over many years. The people who have been appointed — and we have held initial discussions with them — have indicated that they are engaged in the process with good heart and a firm commitment to work together. Much of the work will have to be done by the commissioners themselves.

It is the intention that the commissioners designate represent the interests of victims and survivors and, specifically, develop a work programme and agree it with us. We envisage that the programme will cover

issues such as examining all law and practice affecting victims and survivors, keeping under review the adequacy and effectiveness of services, and providing advice on the issues.

The job that has to be done will provide enough work for four commissioners. There are many people out there, many of whom have not come forward previously. However, in new circumstances, the opportunity is there for everyone to talk to people who will listen to them carefully and sympathetically.

Other commentary over the weekend stated that the First Minister and I appointed victims' commissioners designate who have particular appeal to one section of the community or the other. Again, nothing could be further from the truth. We expect the four victims' commissioners designate to engage with everyone in society and to lend a sympathetic ear to everyone who has been affected by the conflict. We do not wish to create a situation whereby people will have a particular view of the politics and allegiances of the victims' commissioners. We are moving forward on the basis that those four people must represent the interests of all victims and survivors without fear or favour.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the appointment of the four-person victims' commission. It is a major step forward for the victims, the survivors, the families and the loved ones who have suffered over the years. No two victims are the same, and one of the benefits of having four victims' commissioners is that all the various backgrounds will be represented. However, the families, the victims and the survivors will be concerned about whether the finances and the gap funding exist to allow them to continue to do their work.

The deputy First Minister: As the First Minister said, over the next three years, we will commit more than £33 million to support programmes of work designed to make a real difference to the lives of victims and survivors. The money will go towards supporting individual victims and survivors and victims' groups who have carried out much valuable work over the years.

Some £5.2 million was allocated for each of the years 2005-06, 2006-07 and 2007-08; £7.4 million will be allocated for 2008-09; £11.8 million for 2009-10; and £15 million for 2010-11. Those figures represent an increase of more than 100% over that invested in this area over the past three years.

We are working out the detail of a new strategy for victims and survivors. We will want to have discussions with all key stakeholders, including, of course, the new commissioners. The cost of the victims' commissioners is in addition to those figures. The discontinuation of support for victims' groups as a result of EU funds drying up represents a real challenge for all of us.

Naturally, we want the tremendous work of all groups in the community to continue.

Mr Durkan: I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for the statement and for the supplementary answers. As others have said, it is deeply regrettable that the news came out in the way in which it did, because it added to a lot of bemusement and concern in some quarters.

Regardless of the rights and wrongs of moving from an advertised vacancy for one commissioner to the appointment of four, we must all give the fullest possible support to the people who are now tasked with taking the work forward. They are very worthy people who will serve well. However, there is a danger that certain commissioners could be perceived as representing victims from particular constituencies. We need to work to dismantle that perception to ensure that those difficulties do not compound the challenge that they face. Will the deputy First Minister address that point?

The deputy First Minister said that "we" will be drawing up the strategy; I presume that, by "we", he means the Executive or the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. To what extent, therefore, will the victims' commission have a lead in shaping the strategy? Will it merely commentate on a strategy that has been prepared elsewhere in Government? How far will the victims' commissioners be involved in the proofing and approving of the £33 million that was delivered to victims in the draft Budget — and which the First Minister mentioned in his statement — and in tracking the difference between European funds and what happens in the future?

12.30 pm

When will the required legislation be introduced? Will it look at broadening the scope of the four victims' commissioners beyond the role that was envisaged for a single commissioner in the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006?

The deputy First Minister: The four victims' commissioners designate will be expected to work together as equals. They will agree with us a detailed work programme that will deal with issues of individual roles, responsibilities and methods of joint working. We will respect the independence of the victims' commission. It is important that victims' groups know that they have advocates who have authority, and, in moving forward, it is important that we respect the independence of the group.

The First Minister and I expect to be in a position to discuss the detail of the draft strategy with the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister at the beginning of the consultative process. We will also want to discuss our intentions regarding the strategy with the victims' commissioners designate.

We will have to consider the funding situation as we move forward, because the funding streams that have supported victims' groups for some years are drying up. That must be recognised. We anticipate that the funding arrangements in place in relation to the memorial funding, the core funding and the development grant schemes for victims' and survivors' groups operated on behalf of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will continue during the financial year 2008-09.

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will work closely with the memorial fund, the Community Relations Council (CRC), the victims' commission and the victims' and survivors' forum to manage the transition to new funding arrangements, which will be set out in the new strategy for victims and survivors.

In liaison with the victims' commission, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will also take forward work with regard to identified areas of need, such as enhanced support for victims' and survivors' groups to provide befriending services for victims and survivors, provision for respite care, and support for general practitioners in dealing with trauma. Other areas of emerging need may be examined by the new victims' commission.

Mr Durkan's first point was important. If the victims' commission is to work, it is vital that it appeals to the whole community as it moves forward, and not be seen merely as individuals who will only deal with the views expressed by people who are perceived to be from their community. That would be a huge mistake. One of the most moving experiences that I had since becoming the deputy First Minister occurred a short time after I assumed the office. I received a request to meet with a disabled member of the RUC who was badly wounded by the IRA during the conflict. That person came into the room and put out his hand; he shook my hand and wished me the best for the future.

That is the direction in which the victims' commission must go. Our political circumstances have changed, and we have a brilliant future — if it is managed properly. People must be sympathetic to each other and recognise the tremendous hurt and pain that has been inflicted on all sides. There is an onerous task facing the victims' commission. We have chosen four people who are up to that challenge; they will not allow themselves to be categorised as commissioners for a particular group. The four individuals recognise that their appeal must be broad.

Mrs Long: I welcome the additional resources that have been set aside for those who suffered during the conflict in Northern Ireland. The people who suffered most were least considered as we tried to resolve that

conflict, so this is an important step in trying to address that.

Announcing the change in policy from a commissioner to a commission at the same time as placing the names of those who were appointed in the public domain makes it difficult to consider the proposal objectively without subsequent comments being characterised as criticism of those appointed individuals. For the record, before asking my question, any criticisms of the process that I may express in no way reflect negatively on those four individuals who have agreed to take on what is a difficult and complex role. I have full confidence in their abilities to deliver on that role, and, in doing so, they have my full support.

However, there are issues. Does the deputy First Minister agree that, given the general funding reductions for such matters that are expected in the next few years, and by increasing salary and office costs by a factor of at least four, resources that might have addressed specific sector needs and those of the individuals who have suffered may, in the long term, be deflected from front-line services?

In addition, does the deputy First Minister agree that the requirement for new legislation and the inherent delay in creating and fine-tuning the structures of a commission will, in some ways, be a barrier to the hope that the commissioners designate will hit the ground running?

Finally, does he agree that it is inconsistent for an Administration that have been sabre rattling about public-service overstaffing to appoint four people to do a job that, as recently as October 2007, both he and the First Minister agreed was for an individual?

The deputy First Minister: The victims' and survivors' sector has long been neglected, there is a backlog of work, and we have no doubt that the commissioners designate will have a heavy workload.

On the subject of money, given that the commissioners designate will, themselves, undertake many key tasks, less money will be spent on delegating work and putting work out to consultants. Therefore, savings can be made, and the commissioners' direct involvement will benefit victims and survivors.

As legislation progresses, the Committee to which the Member is the Deputy Chairperson will have an important scrutinising role — as will every Member of the Assembly. Such scrutiny must be undertaken sensibly, and, in the meantime, the commissioners designate must get on with their business because, as I said, that sector has been neglected for far too long. We now have four people who are absolutely dedicated to doing that work and beginning as quickly as possible, and all Members must give them every possible support.

Mr Shannon: I welcome the First Minister's statement. It is good that victims, who have been without a voice for so long, now have a body through which to express that voice.

Will the First Minister assure Members that the four victims' commissioners will work to their individual strengths and as a team? In addition, will he also assure us that the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will work alongside the victims' commissioners, the commission and the victims in order to shape the commission's policy and strategy?

The deputy First Minister: There is a tremendous amount of work to be done. At the end of last week, the meeting that the First Minister and I held with the four commissioners designate clearly indicated that we were dealing with four people of the highest calibre who were conscious of their responsibility to advance one of the most sensitive areas of work to be undertaken.

The relationship between the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and, indeed, the Assembly must be to work in a spirit of co-operation. We want the commissioners designate to feel part of that process, and, at the end of the day, we want to put legislation forward that will generate the greatest possible amount of support in the Assembly.

Four commissioners designate have been appointed, all of whom have accepted that they will be expected to work together as equals. They will agree a detailed work programme with us, which will deal with issues such as individual roles and responsibilities, and methods of joint working. I believe that we have appointed people who are well capable of undertaking those tasks.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the appointments that have been made, and this very important statement. Bearing in mind the need for all victims of the conflict to be treated equally, and for recognition that there is no hierarchy of victims, does the appointment process reflect the diversity of experiences suffered variously by victims and survivors of the conflict? I wish to seek assurance that the appointments process was based on openness, transparency and, ultimately, the principle of merit.

The deputy First Minister: It is absolutely essential that in moving forward we give the four commissioners designate their place. All of that which the Member has mentioned is work that they will have to undertake. As far as openness, transparency and the principle of merit are concerned, it is clear to me that the whole appointments process, including the initial stage that was conducted under direct rule, was overseen and certified by the Commissioner for Public Appointments, whom the First Minister and I have met

on a number of occasions. We are very satisfied with the process and its outcome. We believe that we have arrived at an approach that will make best use of the skills and experience of four people who we consider to be very capable.

Mr Spratt: I welcome today's announcement. Folk to whom I talked to over the weekend gave a broad welcome to the appointment of the four commissioners, or a commission. It is sad to hear some people trying to politicise the whole thing. I hope that everyone will work together to assist these folks in their very difficult task.

I assume that the four commissioners will sit down with a blank sheet to work out their terms of reference and an agreed work programme. Will the work already done on behalf of victims be taken into consideration by those four people? Will the groups that represent victims be fully consulted, and will the process of agreeing the terms of reference and the work programme be time-limited, so that the important work of engaging with victims and survivors can start as soon as possible?

The deputy First Minister: It is clear that the criteria for the terms of reference set out in The Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 are the basis on which we are proceeding, and on which all decisions were taken in respect of these appointments. The work that has already been completed by Bertha McDougall, as I have already said, will form an important part of the considerations of both our Office and the commissioners, as we move forward.

I am also very conscious that there are many groups with strong opinions on these matters. That is going to be a tall order for the four commissioners designate to deal with. When we sit back and reflect on the challenge that that would have represented for one victims' commissioner, it is clear that the task to be undertaken can only be carried forward by a group of very talented and dedicated people who are committed to the process of ensuring that victims and survivors are treated with the respect that they deserve.

Mr Elliott: First, does the deputy First Minister share my concern for those victims of the Troubles who were members of the Orange Institution in Northern Ireland, an organisation that probably suffered some of society's largest losses, with more than 330 of its members murdered and many more seriously injured?

Does the deputy First Minister also share my concerns about the terminology used to describe victims? Will that terminology be handed down from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, or will the victims' commissioners make up their own minds about the terminology to be used? What does the deputy First Minister understand by the

word “victim”? Does he believe that terrorists who died during the Troubles as a result of their own actions should be classified as victims?

12.45 pm

The deputy First Minister: My sympathy goes out to everybody who suffered as a result of the conflict, and that includes those people from the Orange Order, who also suffered.

We must give the commission its place. For example, we want the commissioners designate to take forward work on the establishment of a victims’ and survivors’ forum, and the arrangements for the setting up of such a forum will essentially be a matter for them. That will be a very important element of their work, and we expect that the forum will play a crucial role in helping to inform the commission as to the needs of all victims and survivors.

Mrs D Kelly: The SDLP welcomes the appointment of the victims’ commissioners, albeit that it is somewhat confused by how the appointments came about. As a party that had no role to play in the creation of victims, it must point out certain truths. The deputy First Minister said in an earlier response that loss and pain were inflicted on all sides, but I must point out to him that they were not inflicted by all.

When exactly will the victims’ and survivors’ forum be established? Will it be established by designate commissioners, or will they have to wait for the introduction of legislation to create the victims’ commission before they can establish the forum? When will that legislation be brought to this House? What control will the victims’ commissioners have over the £33 million that has been allocated in the Budget, or will that money be given to each of the different Departments? How will the relationship between the Executive and the victims’ commission be established?

The deputy First Minister: I will not respond to the political point scoring. Given the day that is in it, it is a pity that some people are attempting to undermine today’s announcement.

The commissioners designate will make the decision on the establishment of the victims’ forum. We very much see that as being their work, and we expect the forum to play an important role in helping to inform the commission about the needs of victims and survivors. It is essentially for the commissioners designate to decide when that forum will be established.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

I thank the First Minister for his statement. Can the deputy First Minister tell us whether we now have a commission that reflects the diversity, concerns and needs across society? Can he assure us that the needs of all the various victims and survivors will be

responded to and will be reflected in the work of the four commissioners?

The deputy First Minister: It is my view that the membership of the commission — which is, in essence, what it will be — will have a very wide appeal in the community. It would be very wrong of me, or any Member, to even attempt to begin to categorise the individual people concerned and their viewpoints on many different matters. The commissioners must now engage in the important work of gaining as much support as possible, given the disparate views that people hold on the issue of victims and survivors. They must try to gain as much respect and support as possible from the bulk of people who have been affected by the conflict. It is not my job, nor is it the job of the Executive or the Assembly, to categorise the four individuals. Our challenge to them is to ask them to work towards having broad appeal in every section of the community and to be very sympathetic to everyone whom they meet.

As the commissioners make progress and report individually, or as a commission, it is important that they are able to say that they have consistently reached out their hands in support to every section of the community. I do not want to hear an individual commissioner say that he or she specialises in a particular section of the community. That would be a sign of failure, because the commissioners must have a broad appeal. After speaking to them at the end of last week, I am totally satisfied that they recognise, and are up for, the challenge.

Mrs I Robinson: I add my voice to the welcome for today’s announcement of a victims’ commission. However, I too am disappointed that the news was leaked to the public before a statement had been made to the House.

Will the deputy First Minister tell the House when legislation will be introduced and how long the term of the commission will be? Does he agree that it is vital that the genuinely innocent victims of violence regard the commissioners as four people to whom they can relate their experiences? Will he assure me that the House will be updated on the work programme for victims?

The deputy First Minister: Legislation is in the hands of the powers that be in the Assembly. The First Minister and I are determined that the work be completed as quickly as possible. Our office and the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, chaired by Danny Kennedy, will work together to that end.

The legislation will set out a four-year term for the commission, and I commit to updating the Assembly, and, most importantly, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister as work on those important matters progresses.

Mr Irwin: I also welcome today's announcement of a victims' commission, because the workload is simply too great to be handled by a sole commissioner. When does the deputy First Minister expect to see the benefits of the commission's work? Will he describe the type of programme that will be offered to assist the victims?

The deputy First Minister: The majority of victims, who were mobilised on this issue and are keen to see progress, will be pleased by the important and decisive announcement — at long last — of the establishment of a group of highly talented individuals. Many victims' issues were not dealt with previously, and people were not given their place in society. There is a realistic expectation that such matters will now be addressed because local people, who have the confidence of the Assembly, the Executive and, most importantly, the community, will take a hands-on approach that will expedite resolutions to the difficulties that have been created over many years.

The commissioners' work is vital, and people will take great encouragement from the decision that has been announced today. The commissioners understand that they have a responsibility to make swift progress on all issues.

Mr Beggs: I welcome today's announcement of additional funding for victims and survivors. The deputy First Minister told the House that he and the First Minister did not disagree on the appointment of a single victims' commissioner. In that case, why did they take so long to re-advertise for a single commissioner and then announce the appointment of four? That seems to be inconsistent. Given the increase from one to four commissioners, will he advise the House on the estimated cost of administration, salaries, accommodation and staff? Will he acknowledge that it would be better for the additional administrative funding to go directly to the victims and survivors?

The deputy First Minister: The post of victims' commissioner was advertised as attracting a salary of £65,000 a year. The commissioners designate will each be paid that amount. We believe that that is money well spent and that victims and survivors deserve that level of attention and that amount of support. There may be people who have a different view.

Under direct rule the post was initially advertised as a single post. When the post was re-advertised — on the basis of our taking ownership of the process — it was advertised as a single post. At the time of considering the issue of a victims' commissioner, we were dealing with many other vital issues, including trying to put together a draft Budget, a draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy and many other matters.

When reflecting on those matters, it is sensible that the Government have flexibility and are able to

change their minds when they feel that something different has to be done. Effectively, the First Minister and I changed our minds. Our proposal was legally proofed and we consulted the Commissioner for Public Appointments, both of which moves vindicated our stance. I think that society will welcome that.

I know that some Members are gobsmacked that there was no disagreement between the First Minister and myself on the issue of a single commissioner. However, that is the truth of the matter. We reflected deeply on all of those matters, we worked on the issue just two days after Christmas, and we gave serious consideration as to how we could best meet the needs of victims and survivors. We have accomplished that with the announcement that has been made today.

Mrs Hanna: I certainly want the victims and survivors to have the loudest possible voice. My question will not imply any criticism of any of the four appointed individuals. Does the deputy First Minister believe that by Balkanising the process, he and the deputy First Minister have failed to recognise the integrity and the oneness of the suffering of all of the victims, and, indeed, the healing process as envisaged in 'A Shared Future'?

The deputy First Minister: I am disappointed at the contribution that has just been made, which was the only attempt during this sitting to Balkanise the process. The Member has made a huge mistake and has done a great disservice to the four people who have been appointed to those onerous posts.

I remind Mrs Hanna that during the political process that we have all been involved in over recent years, there was a time when the SLDP was proactively encouraging the appointment of 10 commissioners to deal with individual departmental responsibilities. If that is not Balkanisation, I do not know what is.

Mr Lunn: I welcome the fact that — as the deputy First Minister said — "at long last" this announcement has been made. Does the deputy First Minister agree that there is widespread cynicism amongst the public about the reasons given for the appointment of four commissioners rather than one? Will the deputy First Minister assure Members that each of the four commissioners will have the full confidence of both himself and the First Minister?

The deputy First Minister: I do not share the Member's view that there is widespread cynicism. The announcement has just been made. Therefore, I do not know how he can make that judgement. Regardless of the speculation over the weekend, every single member of the victims' commission will have the full support of the First Minister and myself.

Mr Burnside: A lot of fine words, some sympathy and some welcome money for victims have been announced today. I will ask the deputy First Minister a

straight question and I want a straight answer. He commanded the Provisional IRA, which was responsible for the murder of over 2,500 people in this Province. Others also committed murders, but he was a senior commander along with Gerry Adams and his colleagues.

How does he square today's kind words and sympathy with what he was responsible for, and with his refusal — and that of his fellow IRA commanders and members — to participate in any historical crime investigation? Many widows and orphans of RUC, UDR and Army members who died because of his campaign feel that he is a hypocrite.

1.00 pm

The deputy First Minister: Again, I cannot see a question about the appointment of the victims' commissioners in what the Member has said. I will not fall into the trap of politicising the debate. Members have their own views about the history of this island: some people's views go back 30, 40 or 80 years, or even eight centuries. There is no point in our getting into that today. I will debate the history of this island with the Member in any place and at any time, but today a vital issue of concern to victims and survivors is being discussed.

There are victims and survivors in every section of our community, many of whom play very important and powerful roles in the new political situation. We want that work to continue, and we will continue to support it in the hope that the ownership that victims and survivors take of their difficulties will not only help their own healing processes, but help the overall healing process that we all must undergo.

Mr A Maginness: To paraphrase Shakespeare, methinks the Minister doth protest too much. Although the deputy First Minister protests that there was no division between himself and the First Minister, there is a widely held suspicion among Members that there was a serious division, which this scheme has been created to disguise. The scheme may or may not work — those appointed have been generally recognised as good people. However, any mechanism for their coming to collective agreement must be extremely difficult. What mechanisms will be put in place to ensure that the four victims' commissioners designate speak with a collective voice for victims?

The deputy First Minister: As an experienced member of the legal profession, the Member knows that suspicion does not condemn anyone. The First Minister and I agreed to appoint four commissioners designate. That must be remembered — there is no point talking about suspicion. We have reached agreement on a subject of tremendous importance and relevance to the entire community.

The commissioners will work by consensus. When I met the commissioners designate, I cited the example that the First Minister and I have given since we took office — working positively and constructively together. Although there will be times when people do not agree, the trick is to find solutions to the problems faced. That is what the First Minister and I have attempted to do during our stewardship of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. That message was not lost on the commissioners designate, and they will do a good job. Although the jury will be out on them for a short time, I have tremendous confidence in them.

Ms Lo: I welcome the announcement. However, does the deputy First Minister agree that it would have been more sensible to appoint one full-time chief commissioner, then setting up the commission and advertising for part-time commissioners, as happens in similar bodies such as the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission? There would have been someone to lead the commission, but the increase in administrative costs — let alone the risk of a legal challenge against the current multiple appointments — would have been avoided.

The deputy First Minister: We have appointed four people to lead the commission because we believe that there is enough work for them to do. They are eminently suited to the challenge that is before them and, whatever economic factors are brought to bear, their ability to work together and not, for example, depend on bringing in consultants will bring important savings.

We believe that the victims and survivors deserve the support of four strong voices working together on a basis of consensus, and that is what the commissioners are committed to doing. We will see what happens along the way, but the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will work positively and constructively with all of them against a backdrop of having listened to, and been affected by, their presentations and recognising that we have appointed four very talented people who have a wide appeal in society.

Mr Donaldson: I add my voice in welcoming the announcement this afternoon by the First Minister.

Does the deputy First Minister agree that some of the voices that we hear casting questions and doubts about the validity of the decision to appoint four commissioners were in Government themselves at one stage and did nothing to appoint any commission to help victims? The money that they provided for the victims sector during that period was a mere fraction of the amount that is proposed today.

Methinks that some others protest too loudly and are trying to cover their own inadequacy and failure to provide for the victims sector while, only months into the new Administration, we have the appointment of a

commission on a par with the Equality Commission, which has 17 commissioners, the Human Rights Commission with 10, and the Parades Commission with seven. Why should the victims not have four commissioners? They are no longer —

Mr Speaker: Can the Member come to his question?

Mr Donaldson: Victims are no longer second-class citizens; does the deputy First Minister agree with that?

The deputy First Minister: The Member has outlined his view of our history. I will not be drawn into that debate, except to say that this is a different place with different political circumstances, a different political dispensation and tremendous hope and optimism for the future. Some people — perhaps even some in this House — do not like that, because they do not feel part of it. The challenge for us, as the major parties in the Assembly, is to make everyone feel part of it, and that is what we want to do.

We need to come together on the many issues that are of critical importance to our community. There are wounds to be healed and difficult situations to be dealt with. What we need is the best possible start, and today's announcement is the best start that we could have achieved in the circumstances.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: As no amendments have been tabled to the Bill, there can be no debate. The Further Consideration Stage of the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill [NIA 2/07] is therefore concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Programme for Government and Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to six hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have up to 60 minutes to propose and make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have 10 minutes.

Three amendments have been received and are 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.

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the Programme for Government and investment strategy for Northern Ireland agreed by the Executive.

On behalf of the deputy First Minister and the Executive as a whole I am pleased to present the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland to the Assembly for endorsement.

Last week, the Minister of Finance and Personnel launched his draft Budget and said that:

“It is almost 40 years since a Finance Minister elected by the people of Northern Ireland presented a Budget in a stable political environment.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 26, p314, col 1*].

We should reflect carefully on three elements of that sentence.

First, how many people in Northern Ireland have spent the greater part of their lives in the past 40 years living in a society divided by conflict? The answer is: far too many. We in this House cannot change history, but we can reclaim the decades of lost opportunity, and we can strive to create a shared and better future for all the people of Northern Ireland, under the law. That is our challenge and our responsibility. As a society, and as an Executive, we must all play our part. We must

harness the talents and energy of the whole community if we are to transform our society.

Secondly, local people are, at last, making decisions about the issues that affect them. The Executive and the Assembly represent all the people of Northern Ireland. The draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland have been agreed by local Ministers, and will be debated and — we hope — endorsed today by Members of the Assembly, who have been elected by the people of the Province.

Thirdly, we are all too aware of the prize that a stable political environment presents. The Executive have risen to meet the challenges of a four-party coalition and agreed the draft Programme for Government, the draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland, and the draft Budget. That is no mean achievement and one of which we should be proud.

We have a very new Executive, but the documents that have been introduced today represent a significant milestone in ensuring the first steps towards effective and forward-looking Government for the people of Northern Ireland. Our draft Programme for Government sets out the measures that we intend to take over the next three years to build the type of future that we all desire to see. Time does not permit me to go into detail about all our planned actions, but I shall remind Members of some of the actions that we will undertake.

We shall set ourselves the ambitious goal of halving the private-sector productivity gap with the UK average, excluding the greater south-east of England, by 2015. We will work to increase the employment rate from 70% to 75% by 2020. We will secure value-added inward-investment commitments creating a minimum of 6,500 jobs — 85% of which will be above the Northern Ireland private-sector median wage. We will aim to ensure that, by 2011, 68% of school-leavers will achieve five or more GCSE passes at grades A* to C, including English and mathematics.

1.15 pm

We will reduce by 50% the number of children killed or seriously injured on our roads by 2012. At some stage during 2008, everyone aged 60 and over will be provided with free public transport. That being the case, I suppose that I should declare an interest.

We will invest more than £500 million in the regeneration of disadvantaged communities, neighbourhoods, towns and cities by 2012. By 2009, no one will wait longer than nine weeks for a first outpatient appointment, nine weeks for a test or 17 weeks for treatment. That represents a 12-week reduction in the current waiting-time standard.

During the consultation period, almost 55,000 copies of the draft Programme for Government, draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland and draft

Budget were downloaded from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister website, and more than 9,500 people responded formally. That demonstrates that the people of Northern Ireland are interested in what the Executive are doing and that they want to play their part in the operation of government. Officials from our Office, from the Department of Finance and Personnel and from the Strategic Investment Board held a series of public-consultation seminars at four locations across Northern Ireland. Each seminar was well attended, and was welcomed by those who participated. On behalf of the Executive, I express gratitude to all who took the time to contribute.

Another important strand of consultation involved our engagement with the Assembly and its Committees. We recognise the distinctive and valuable contribution that the Committees can make to such exercises. On 26 November 2007, the Assembly debated the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy. Various opinions were expressed during that debate, some of which people outside the Chamber have also voiced. I assure the Assembly that we have considered carefully those contributions and all the responses. The consultation process has, without doubt, informed our decisions on the final Programme for Government and investment strategy for Northern Ireland, and that is reflected in the amendments that have been made to the documents.

I also wish to acknowledge the work of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which helpfully co-ordinated all Committee responses to the draft Programme for Government and carried out a similar role for responses to the draft investment strategy.

A particular concern, which was raised regularly throughout the consultation process, was the tight timescale and opportunities for consultation. These past nine months have been exceptional. Last May, the Executive were faced with the challenge of creating from scratch a new Programme for Government on which we had to agree, and uncertainty over financial allocations hampered progress until a very late stage in the process. However, mindful of that, the Executive will look carefully at the arrangements for the preparation of future Programmes for Government.

We will publish the results of the consultation process after tomorrow's debate on the Budget. We will also publish for consultation shortly a draft equality impact assessment (EQIA), which has been carried out at a strategic level, on the Programme for Government, the investment strategy and the Budget. The consultation will last for 12 weeks and will include a series of public-consultation events across the whole Province. Details of dates and venues will be found in that document.

The Executive fully recognise the importance of equality and good relations, and a draft equality impact assessment is being carried out at the strategic level. The Executive will take account of the final equality impact assessment in the implementation of their Programme for Government, which now incorporates the public service agreement (PSA) framework, and the investment strategy for Northern Ireland.

The approach that the Executive have adopted to the draft Programme for Government is different to that adopted by the last Executive. That approach attracted some attention during the consultation process, but the Executive make no apology for the fact that they must be clear about their priorities and about what they are trying to achieve. The Executive remain of the view that the publication of a focused set of priorities, and a smaller number of key goals supported by public service agreements, provide a clear strategic framework in which they can develop policies and programmes over the next three years.

However, the Executive have incorporated the 23 public service agreements, which were previously published as a separate annex, into the main Programme for Government document. As the Minister of Finance and Personnel informed Members last week, the Executive have increased allocations to address concerns in key areas, including: health, arts and culture, victims, and social and affordable housing. Those extra allocations have been reflected through more ambitious targets in those areas in the Programme for Government.

Ministers view the investment strategy for Northern Ireland as being vital in underpinning the ambitious goals they are setting in the Programme for Government. We are determined to put right the underinvestment of previous years and help lay the foundations for future prosperity and wellbeing through the delivery of the strategy.

The Executive envisage that a sum approaching £20 billion will be invested in the next 10 years, of which around £6 billion is earmarked for the first three years. The increase from the figures announced last October is due largely to the Executive's initiative to make better use of existing assets in order to deliver best value to all our citizens.

In the revised investment strategy, more than £1.8 billion has been allocated to housing, an increase from £1.4 billion in the draft document. That will allow the Department for Social Development (DSD) to proceed with the delivery of 10,000 social and affordable houses during the next five years. An additional £140 million has been provided to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, to help underpin the modernising hospitals programme.

The Executive have attempted to focus in the Programme for Government on what they have identified

as the most pressing problems over the next three years. The important challenge is to begin to deliver on the goals and commitments contained in both documents. The public want the Executive to make a difference, and they will judge us on what we achieve. We have enormous support and goodwill from our friends outside Northern Ireland and the people here. It is indeed a great and exciting opportunity for our Province.

With that opportunity comes responsibility. The Executive hold the future of Northern Ireland in their hands. Together, we can work to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland, with respect for the rule of law, where everyone can enjoy a better quality of life now and in years to come.

However, if we do not achieve the type of society to which we aspire, through lack of effort or commitment, people's lives will be affected. We will all be the poorer for that, and history will judge us accordingly. At the start of my speech, I said that we cannot change history: however, we can work together to create a better future. Let us begin to write a history that we will not want to change. I present the Programme for Government and investment strategy for Northern Ireland, and I commend them to the House today.

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

"calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to lay a revised Programme for Government before the Assembly, as the Programme for Government currently before the Assembly does not properly address the deep divisions in this society and the need to build a shared future, does not make meaningful changes to balance the regional economy, and fails to provide for sustainable and integrated public services."

I welcome that the Assembly is able to respond to a Programme for Government that has been written by representatives of the people of Northern Ireland. The fact that the Assembly can debate the issues in front of the Northern Ireland public demonstrates that significant progress has been made, even since January 2007. That must not go unnoticed or unrecognised either in the Chamber or in wider society.

Despite the combination of vitriol, abuse and contempt with which the Alliance Party's views on the Programme for Government have been treated during various debates and question sessions on the draft programme and investment strategy, the Executive have taken heed of aspects of the Alliance Party's response, albeit, in many cases, in a tokenistic way, in the final version of the Programme for Government. For example, in a change of wording, the Executive have reflected that:

"work towards a shared future is necessary if we are to deliver our better future".

The Alliance Party welcomes and acknowledges that assertion.

At present, our differences lie in whether the vision laid out in the Programme for Government is right and whether the Programme for Government can deliver that vision. Although the shared future has made its way into the language on cross-cutting themes, the Executive appear to be content merely to leave it at six words. The Alliance Party believes that it must be accompanied by the radical and robust actions that are required to truly transform society. To date, there has been no sign of that.

For the Executive, tackling sectarianism is merely aspirational. The Alliance Party believes that it must be delivered through robust policies. Tackling sectarianism has been described in the Chamber by Members of the Executive parties as woolly, fluffy stuff. Based on lack of clarity on specific actions in the documents being discussed today, I can understand why Members would have those views. However, the issue is far from woolly for those people who require it to be dealt with so that they can have mobility in the community to access local employment, improve their circumstances and live those better lives, to which the Programme for Government refers.

For the Executive, rebalancing the economy is simply a matter of lowering a few taxes. My party believes that low taxes must be accompanied by ending the costs of division and delivering the high quality public services that define the most prosperous societies. It is about dealing with underinvestment in areas where it has traditionally been a problem and ensuring that when we talk about rebalancing the economy, people fully understand what we mean.

In his statement on the Budget, the Minister of Finance and Personnel made it clear that although the costs of division cannot be unlocked during the current three-year cycle, work needs to be done and a start made on tackling the issues involved. However, the way to do that is to incorporate the work into the Programme for Government, so that at the end of the three years, we will be closer to unlocking some of that money and reinvesting it elsewhere. Although my party continues to welcome the Minister's fine words and aspirations, they are not reflected in the detail of the Programme for Government.

It seems that delivering integrated and sustainable public services is merely something for the Executive to talk about, whereas the Alliance Party believes that long-term thinking and environmental awareness must be the cornerstone of all of the Government's actions, whether on housing, health, education or transport, to name but a few.

1.30 pm

In short, the Executive seem to be interested in the process of delivering documents, whereas we in the Alliance Party are ambitious for society. We do not

simply look for handouts for a number of groups. Rather, we are ambitious for everyone who lives here. We do not want a continuation of direct rule policies that condemn Northern Ireland to compete only with the poorest regions of Great Britain. We are ambitious for a vision of this society that can compete with the best in the world. Therefore, we propose that the Programme for Government be completely rewritten.

We want a Programme for Government that tackles sectarianism, segregation, exclusion and bigotry at every turn — whether that prejudice is based on race, religion, political persuasion, nationality, age, sexual orientation or gender. We want to see it go to the core of everything that we do. We want better and shared housing; better and fairer local taxation; and better and integrated education. We do not believe that we can make it better without making it shared.

We want to see a programme that will rebalance the economy at every turn — not simply from public sector to private sector, but from low wage to high wage; from insular views to global views — and utilise the expertise of business and the voluntary and community sector. We want a programme that is integrated, sustainable and long term, and that takes on the real priority issues, rather than bickering about tokenistic issues such as mugs in local councils. We want a programme that transforms public structures so that people feel included, rather than bickering about whether people address the Speaker of the House in Irish or Ulster Scots. We want to give people a sense of ownership about what happens in the Chamber and make them see the reality of the out-turn of that for the individual. We do not want pointless Royal Commissions to explore issues that are beyond the Assembly's remit. We want skills strategies that will transform the society in which we live.

Undoubtedly, if this debate follows the pattern of previous debates — in which those of us in opposition have disagreed with Government — my colleagues and I will be subjected to the usual mix of condescension and abuse that is rapidly becoming the hallmark of an increasingly arrogant Administration. In recent weeks and days, parties have had the opportunity to road-test a few of their criticisms — and the wheels have come off a few of them already.

First of all, the Alliance Party is dismissed as “negative,” an epithet which, this weekend — to the shame of those who used it — was actually turned on some of the victims who dared to question the Executive's decisions. Alliance Party members are not negative. We are positive and ambitious about the future of Northern Ireland, and we are willing to do what we can to try to deliver on our objectives. We are not simply here to go along with a cosy consensus that does not deliver on the issues that matter to us. We have the

right to a voice, and we exercise that voice on behalf of those who have given us the mandate to do so.

Secondly, people are dismissed with an arrogance that almost suggests not that we should simply agree to disagree, but rather that, if we disagree, we should be silent. Well, I do not accept that. It may well be a motto of which Stalin would have been proud. I will not be told that simply to disagree with the current Administration is to be destructive. It is right that there should be disagreement and challenge in the Chamber, as there has been in the past when others have exercised that right through the democratic process. This is an open and accountable democracy. That may be a new concept to some: to be clear, this is not a dictatorship.

We want to move forward in a constructive and positive frame of mind. However, that does not mean agreeing with those things that we believe to be inherently flawed and wrong. The argument that we are destructive is a complete nonsense. No one suggests that David Cameron, when he rises to robustly question the Prime Minister, is seeking the dissolution of Parliament or the destruction of parliamentary democracy in the UK — far from it. However, those of us in the Chamber who dissent tend to be viewed as having no respect for the structures. In fact, those people who try to subjugate the views of we dissenters are displaying disregard for our right to oppose them.

We have had a debate about our consistency. The most recently highlighted issue has been Irish-language education.

However, the real inconsistency in the debate on Irish-language education is that the DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party are content to sign up to a Programme for Government that has committed to a thriving Irish-medium sector, yet when the issue is raised in the Chamber those parties flap around, waving their papers, and they will not fund a flourishing Irish-medium education sector. That is the inconsistency. The Alliance Party has been clear in its view that the integrated education system is the way forward. We have been consistent on that, and we are then dismissed as irrelevant.

Although our party has raised the issue of a shared future, we are not alone in seeing its importance. We lead a social movement that is much wider than the Alliance Party — including the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, Church leaders and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) — that wants to see division in the community ended. The Alliance Party is here to provide a voice for that community in the Chamber; we simply wish that some people would listen.

Mr Kennedy: I beg to move amendment No 2: After “Executive” insert:

‘; and calls on the Executive to ensure ongoing review and subsequent necessary revision’.

The Member for East Belfast Mrs Long made a wide-ranging speech, with mention made of Stalin, Cameron and others. I will not be as bold as to go to those lengths, but I preface my remarks with one important observation. It is good for Northern Ireland that the Assembly is considering a Programme for Government and an investment strategy that have been proposed by its own Ministers and formulated by its own Executive and that it is making locally based choices on matters that impact directly on the lives of all the people in the Province. Those choices will structure the way that Government operates here over the next three-year period. Although the Ulster Unionist Party gives broad support to the measures in the Programme for Government and the investment strategy, we are glad that the day has at long last arrived for those matters to come before the Assembly.

We are in favour of the motion as amended by Mr McNarry and I, because the two Departments run by Ulster Unionist Ministers account for over 56% of all Government spending in Northern Ireland. As those Ministers have responsibility for health; social services; public safety; further and higher education; and employment; they exercise both power and responsibility, unlike many of the other Ministers or those who see themselves as being in opposition. Others have the power, but not as much responsibility with regard to what they are required to deliver to the tax-paying public of Northern Ireland. The other Ministers, who make up the majority of the Executive, may wield the crude power of majoritarianism on both sides of the divide, but 56% of the services that the public receive are run by Ulster Unionist Ministers. That is why we can give support to the Programme for Government and the investment strategy, because the business of government must go on. Historically, we are a responsible party in carrying out our job for the people of Northern Ireland by delivering peace, stability, progress and good government. We are glad that other parties are now trying to follow our example.

That is why the Ulster Unionist Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety put up such a vigorous and spirited battle for more financial resources for the National Health Service in the debates that took place between the initial allocations and the final outcomes. He did that because, as the responsible Minister in all senses of the word, he understood the importance of delivering a Health Service that is free at the point of need for all patients. He understood the importance of stability, morale and effective delivery in the Health Service, over the siren voices of irresponsible and unaccountable quick-fix merchants who blandly proposed the closure of local hospitals simply to save money.

Power without responsibility is very dangerous. We are told that, historically, it is the prerogative of the

harlot, but I am sure that no one in the House would be familiar with that right.

The public in Northern Ireland would do well to take note of that quotation. While lending its support to the Programme for Government, my party makes it clear that it reserves its position on certain issues. Two such matters are water charges and effective measures to combat child poverty.

My party remains deeply unhappy about the use of capital values as a basis for calculating rates and water charges. Although administrative convenience might be the reason that they will be used, capital values should not be the main device by which those taxes are calculated and collected. Fairness and transparency are the only tools that should be used. Given that metering is the best way in which to ensure fairness and transparency, it must be reconsidered during any ongoing review.

My party is also concerned that the targets that have been set to tackle child poverty are somewhat conservative and unimaginative. They appear to be too consistent with the tame targets that have been set on the mainland, and they look like a Civil Service pipeline quick fix, rather than a well-thought-out strategy. The Ulster Unionist Party wants child poverty to be eradicated. It finds it disturbing and unacceptable that over 100,000 children in Northern Ireland live below the poverty line. While that remains the case, that figure is an indictment against any Government or Executive. Special programmes and measures that target child poverty in hot spots such as north Belfast should be implemented so that this blight, which is so persistent in certain areas and so closely associated with educational underachievement, can be eradicated. Talent is being squandered through such underachievement. Our greatest resource is our children, so our greatest concern must be their future.

The Programme for Government — and the investment strategy, which supports it — should not become frozen and rigid. Rather, both should be living documents that are subject to continuing revision, flexible and capable of change in the light of any given circumstance. It was therefore necessary for us to table our amendment, as it calls on the Executive to ensure ongoing review and subsequent and necessary revision.

Both documents should feature regularly on future agendas of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, of which I have the honour to be Chairperson. If those matters were discussed at the Committee, the Executive could create a mechanism for revision and flexible updating. That important process would involve not just the Executive, but the Assembly.

People in Northern Ireland — Mr and Mrs Joe Public — must understand what the Programme for Government is about. They need to know more about it, and they

need to understand it. It must be real to them. We must consider the ways in which all our decisions are made, and we must earth as many decisions as possible through public debate in the Chamber, rather than leaving over-mighty control in the hands of the Executive Committee. I therefore strongly commend amendment No 2 to the House.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will briefly speak in my capacity as the Chairperson for the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Although the Committee did not have the opportunity to discuss in detail the final Programme for Government and investment strategy in advance of today's debate, I will use previous discussions to nonetheless attempt to give a quick reflection of its views.

I welcomed several aspects of the draft Programme for Government and the draft investment strategy when I spoke on behalf of the Committee during the take-note debate of 26 November 2007. I particularly welcomed the targets that were set for the development of a victims' and survivors' strategy. I also welcomed the additional resources that were allocated to OFMDFM in order to progress that strategy. The final Programme for Government sees the Executive having committed to publishing a new strategy for victims and survivors and to establishing a victims' and survivors' forum by March this year.

Additional funding for victims issues has been allocated in the Budget and that is welcome. The Committee looks forward to early consultation by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on the proposed victims' charter. It is vitally important that the deadlines for developing the victims' strategy, as set out in the Programme for Government, are met so that we can move speedily to deliver for victims and survivors.

Individual members of my Committee will raise other matters; however the amendment has been moved in my name and on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party.

1.45 pm

Mr Durkan: I beg to move amendment No 3: After "Executive" insert

“; and calls on the Executive to address further social and economic needs and support for the community and voluntary sector and to develop and promote policies for ‘A Shared Future’; and further calls for appropriate review and revision of the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland to ensure that it best delivers balanced regional development and underpins equality”.

It has — rightly — been said that a debate on the Programme for Government in our own devolved Assembly is a significant and welcome development. We recognise that there are many positive things about the Programme for Government, and that it and the draft Budget would be proofed and improved by consultation and scrutiny in the Assembly and its

Committees. We have seen evidence of that: some people who said, a few weeks ago, that it could not be improved now agree that some adjustment was necessary.

However, more can and must be done. We recognise the time constraints and the pressures on Ministers and on the Executive; nevertheless, it is important that, if the Assembly endorses the Programme for Government, it is made clear to the Executive that more is required from them on issues of particular concern. The amendment calls on the Executive further to address social and economic needs, because targets on several issues could be more ambitious and significant. With regard to the strategy to combat poverty, essentially, the direct rule policy seems to have been adopted in respect of lifetime opportunities. All of us, as parties, criticised that as deficient and defective in several ways, yet it has been recycled, and includes the unambitious targets for child poverty. Those are exactly the targets that were announced by Peter Hain and direct rule Ministers, by Tony Blair, and re-announced by Gordon Brown — halving child poverty by 2010 and reducing it by 2020. Towards 2016, which is the social partnership agreement in the South, has a strong focus on child poverty and issues of child services. A more significant and ambitious plan could be developed in the North, and the Executive must focus further on that. If we go forward with current plans, in a few years' time, Northern Ireland will have, for example, a handful of child centres compared with the 70 provided in England.

I do not want our ambitions for child services to be less than those of our counterparts across the water. References have been made to differences between this Programme for Government and earlier ones. Previous Programmes for Government had far more targets and detailed actions for Departments. Perhaps, too much detail made matters unwieldy and difficult. Ministers and Departments did not like having specific targets, and resisted adopting them if they were ambitious or significant. There is a danger in going too far towards the other extreme where everything is cross-cutting and blurred; we in this Chamber could perhaps end up with less ambition and a lesser capacity for tracking and monitoring what happens. For that reason, we shall propose separately that some sort of device for joined-up, or cross-cutting, scrutiny should be used in the Assembly. Committees could meet periodically, perhaps focusing on the different cost-cutting priorities of the Programme for Government, just to track and monitor delivery.

A number of civil servants have acknowledged that the current form of the Programme for Government will make it harder to track and monitor what different Departments are doing and what different Ministers are delivering. However, I recognise that the new form — the lighter form, with a more blurred focus —

follows the Whitehall fashion. Departments there are less detailed in their targets and less clear-cut in their ambitions. That is why I differ slightly from the First Minister. He said that the Executive are now much clearer on their priorities: in fact, we are less clear on the detail of targets than was the case in the past.

The SDLP is calling for the Executive to further address the issue of support for the community and voluntary sector. The Finance Minister said that his Budget statement last week was:

“good for householders and good for business”. — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 26, p314, col 1*].

That may be so, but we also want to make sure that the Budget is good for public services, and that the Budget and the Programme for Government are good for the community and voluntary sector, which has done so much work to keep the fabric of the community together during the difficult years. That sector is facing a drop-off in European funding. The implications of the review of public administration may cut off the traditional funding lines for local bodies from the trusts and boards. There is a possibility that the efficiency savings for Departments framed by this Budget could actually lead to the cutting off of funding lines to the community and voluntary sector as well. We want to see the Executive address their future relationship with that sector on a wider basis.

I have heard two senior civil servants say that we no longer need the community and voluntary sector in the way that we did in the past, because we have peace, devolution and democracy — and I have heard reports of others saying the same thing. The Executive need to address this collectively, because there will be more than one Department dealing with the community and voluntary sector.

There are strains and difficulties in the move towards neighbourhood renewal. Questions arise as to whether Departments and agencies are properly buying into that strategy and lending their resources and responsibilities to good partnership in the way that they should. That is another issue that we want the Executive to address further.

Similarly, our amendment addresses the need for appropriate review and revision of the investment strategy for Northern Ireland. I welcome the fact that parties which, in the past, condemned the whole idea of a long-term investment strategy and were opposed to things like having a strategic investment body to drive the capital spending programme across Government Departments, and which seemed to be somehow suspicious as to what a 10-year investment plan for infrastructure and public-service capital could be, have now embraced that idea. However, we need to keep it under review, with a particular focus on ensuring that

that significant investment delivers balanced regional development and underpins equality.

Many of us have complained in the past that the pattern and prioritisation of infrastructure investment and capital spend have locked some areas into disadvantage and created some of the geographical structural inequalities here. If we are serious about reversing those trends, we have to use the investment strategy for Northern Ireland as the key tool. The Assembly needs to signal that it wants that subject kept under review. It might be appropriate for the Assembly to have a Committee to receive periodic reports and review the performance of the investment strategy in overall terms.

Our amendment accepts that the Programme for Government, such as it is with its limitations, will be endorsed, but offers the Assembly an opportunity to set out some additional, important concerns. Like others, we are worried about some other issues. The whole issue of water charges is not properly addressed or articulated here. We were told, when the review was set up, that we would have outcomes by the time of the revised Programme for Government and the revised Budget, but we do not. There are some unknowns that some of us have fundamental reservations about.

There are other issues. At different times, all parties have said that most important issue facing our society is the future of secondary education. However, the Programme for Government, which is supposed to be all-singing, all-dancing, and completely joined-up, is silent on the issue — and it is not being dealt with in the Budget either. We have to rely on indications that the Minister of Education has told the Minister of Finance and Personnel that her proposals, when they are ready, will be cost-neutral. How can we rely on her assurance, when the proposals have not been costed? They could not have been costed, if they are not ready to be presented to Committees or anyone else. There are some large, unknown issues still involved; and it is right that we, as MLAs, use our accountability and scrutiny roles to highlight those issues and concerns so that we can say to the Executive that there is more that they need to do as they take this work forward.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): I welcome many provisions in the Programme for Government that will assist people and make their lives better in Northern Ireland. That should be the desire of elected representatives. We will all be judged on delivery by the community that we serve.

Many of the proposals are positive and constructive, and I commend many of my colleagues for their excellent work. I commend my colleague, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in particular, for his expertise in dividing a finance cake that is finite and bounded by the resources available.

In the foreword to the Programme for Government the Executive state:

“We recognise the trust you have placed on us as your elected representatives. We are determined to repay that trust and to seize this opportunity to make a real difference and improve the lives and opportunities for everyone”.

That work comes down to individual Departments; and it is why I, on behalf of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, have to deal with the priorities that are in the budget for that Department, which is where my disappointment lies.

I would love to be able to state that the programme for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, as it stands, achieves the goal that was set out in the Executive’s statement. However, I do not believe that it does. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development did not seize the opportunity. Its programme will make a change to people’s lives, but not in the positive way that we all hoped. It will not bring about the change in the agriculture community that we thought it would.

On 26 November 2007 I stated, in the House, in my capacity as Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development:

“Farming, and farming communities, remain the backbone of the rural economy and are the true guardians of the rural environment. The Committee believes, therefore, that agriculture should have a significantly greater profile and that it should be supported and enhanced to ensure the survival of the industry and the natural environment.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 25, p317, Col 1.*]

I do not diverge from that position. Arguably, agriculture is Northern Ireland’s only remaining industry, and its contribution to the economy and social fabric of Northern Ireland, either directly through the agrifood sector or indirectly through the hundreds of thousands of tourists who descend upon these shores each year, is vital.

Although other Departments recognise the difficulties in front of them and face up to them by devising priorities that will move them forward, DARD has done absolutely nothing in relation to its priorities. It has no priorities for countering the findings of the Red Meat Industry Task Force; no priorities for dragging the pig industry from the abyss; and no priorities to ensure that our fishermen are afforded the opportunity to make an honest living.

The Department’s contribution is to produce a series of headlines: £45 million to improve competitiveness; £100 million in local development strategies; and £10 million to combat rural exclusion and poverty. The Committee is delighted at the levels of investment being heralded in the Programme for Government but continues to ask itself — and to ask the Department to ask anyone who will listen — where is the substance, and what are the outcomes? The Department is clearly

immersed in the mentality that it should under reach in order to overachieve.

2.00 pm

In November 2007, the Committee called on the Department to re-prioritise its targets given the state of the industry, and backed that up in correspondence to the First Minister and deputy First Minister. It is extremely disappointing that those calls have not been heeded, and, so, we are left with vague, unchallenging priorities such as those detailed in PSA 23 — managing the risk of flooding from rivers and the sea.

The Department aims to reduce the number of properties at significant risk of flooding from — and this is not a misprint, because I checked — 28,000 to 27,700. That is right: the target is to reduce the number of properties at risk by 300 in three years. It is reassuring to know that the Department is busting a gut to protect our homes and businesses from the risk of flooding.

There is also the heady target of reducing the incidence rates of TB and brucellosis by 27% and 20% respectively. In November 2007, the Committee called on the Department to change the emphasis of that target from reduction to eradication. If there were any other serious disease threat to the public, we would, quite rightly, direct our undivided attention and resources to ensuring that the threat was removed completely — not reduced, but removed.

The Department admits in papers that the Committee will discuss tomorrow that brucellosis, for example, is a serious animal disease that affects people, but one that can be eradicated. What target does it set therefore? It seeks to reduce the incidences of brucellosis — not to eradicate them, but to reduce them. It seeks to reduce the number of reactor herds from 127 to approximately 103 in 2011, and to spend £13 million a year to reduce incidence levels by roughly nine herds a year. Is that a great target? I do not think so.

The Department spends approximately £36 million a year firefighting TB and brucellosis. That makes a total of roughly £100m by 2011 just to reduce the incidences of those diseases. However, they will still be there; they will still pose a serious health threat; and DARD will still be throwing good money at them. Thankfully, though, the Department will have done a wonderful job in reducing, for example, brucellosis incidences by nine herds each year.

In the past, the Committee has been accused of forgetting that rural development is part of the Minister's portfolio. Unfortunately, it would appear that the Minister has forgotten that agriculture is also part of her portfolio. There is nothing in the Programme for Government for the red meat industry, the fishing industry, or the pig industry. Their priorities have been ignored: by a Minister seemingly intent on closing down industry and by a Department more intent on achieving efficiency

savings — a matter that I will return to tomorrow — than protecting the very industry that it exists to support.

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

I would love to be in a position to stand here today and commend the agricultural element of the Programme for Government to the House; it is with a heavy heart that I cannot. Certainly, to an official in the Department's press office, the programme must represent a dream come true — it is jam-packed with headlines. However, to the farmers, fighting to keep their businesses afloat, struggling to keep their heads and those of their families above water, trusting from day to day that some form of respite will be forthcoming, and looking to the Programme for Government for a sign of hope, I am afraid that the DARD part of the Programme for Government falls far short and their efforts to find any hope will be wasted, because there is little or nothing there.

I ask those present: has the Department repaid those farmers' trust in it with the farming part of the Programme for Government? Has the Department seized that opportunity? Have the Minister and the Department offered priorities that will make a real difference and improve the lives and opportunities of rural people and rural communities?

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Dr W McCrea: My time is almost up.

Unfortunately, the answer to those questions, in my opinion, is no. The farming community is looking to this Assembly for a future, not to diversify into some other industry, but to do what they know best and to remain what they are — farmers.

As I said in a Committee meeting last week, I want to see a red meat industry that puts the animals out on the green grass, rather than the Minister's policy of putting the farmers out to grass. That is a retrograde step. We can build on the vision for the future that has been recommended in the Programme for Government, but that can only be done with the assistance of a Minister who is committed to farming, rather than to headlines. Unfortunately, we do not have such a Minister.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to today's debate. The Committee for Finance and Personnel recognises the importance of the Programme for Government and the investment strategy, especially as reflected in the Executive's Budget allocations for 2008-2011.

In late November 2007, the Committee for Finance and Personnel responded to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on both documents. Since then, departmental officials have updated the Committee for Finance and Personnel,

and we are pleased that many of our recommendations have been taken on board.

The Department of Finance and Personnel's main contribution to the strategic priorities contained in the Programme for Government relates to the delivery of modern, high-quality and efficient public services. Under that priority, reference is made to the Civil Service reform programme, which aims to realise significant savings that will be redirected to delivering key services. Following the Committee's consideration of the draft documents, it requested details from the Department of Finance and Personnel of the savings to be generated by the reform programme over the three-year budgetary period. However, departmental officials informed the Committee that those details were not available, as work was ongoing on the benefits realisation framework, which will detail the quantitative and qualitative savings to be achieved from the reform programmes.

The Committee has questioned how progress in achieving efficiencies can be monitored if targets have not been established for each project to date, and it has raised concerns that those savings cannot, therefore, be accurately reflected in the finalised Budget.

PSA 11 relates to driving investment and sustainable development. The Committee had concerns that the target in objective 4 for considering sustainable development principles in capital investment decisions would take three years to achieve. However, it is pleased to note that implementation will now be achieved by 2008.

PSA 20 relates to improving public services. The Department of Finance and Personnel has the main responsibility for objective 1, which aims to deliver a programme of Civil Service reform. Target dates for the various Civil Service reform programmes were included under that objective in the draft Programme for Government. The Committee sought clarification from the Department that those targets were for the full implementation of the various programmes, as opposed to the piloting of those programmes. Again, it is content that the matter has now been clarified.

However, the Committee has raised further concerns with the Department of Finance and Personnel at the apparent delays that have only come to light in the Workplace 2010 project. The draft Programme for Government originally referred to the implementation of Workplace 2010 by 30 November 2008. However, the final Programme for Government document states that the target is to award the contract by February 2009, for implementation by June 2010. The Committee has requested that officials explain the 18-month delay and its potential consequences for the Programme for Government.

Objective 4 of PSA 20 aims to promote and improve access to public services and information. Under that

objective, a single telephone number point of contact for selected public services is to be in place by December 2008. Due to the potentially high-profile nature of the project, the Committee believes that it must work effectively from the outset. The Committee recommended that the targets for NI Direct should be strengthened in the revised Programme for Government to include the proportion of public services to be covered when the first phase is introduced in December 2008; further detail on subsequent roll-out; and a specific target to deal effectively with a given percentage of calls at the first point of contact.

Again, there was a positive response to those recommendations, and those targets have been included in the revised document. However, the Committee has concerns about the target to deal effectively with at least 50% of enquiries at first point of contact. Although that is an improvement, the target may be too low given likely public expectation. The Committee has requested further information on the proposed benchmarks for performance.

The Department of Finance and Personnel also has a key role in PSA 21, which relates to enabling efficient Government. The Committee has raised with the Department of Finance and Personnel the issue of an annual timetable for budget-setting and review that will build in sufficient time for the effective involvement of the Committees. The Committee will work with the Department to achieve that as soon as possible.

Objective 2 aims to build the capacity of the Civil Service to deliver the Government's priorities by improving leadership, skills, professionalism, diversity and equality. The Committee has been briefed on the actions taken by the Department of Finance and Personnel, thus far, to encourage applications to the Civil Service from under-represented groups, and on new research into perceived barriers to employment in the Civil Service. The Committee looks forward to the outcome of that research and notes that — in line with its recommendations — 2008 has been included as a timescale in which the Civil Service must be reflective of the diversity of our wider society.

Objective 3 contains a target to ensure that public spending delivers value for money. The Committee understands that departmental efficiency plans will be published alongside the final Budget and will, therefore, be available to Committees for scrutiny. The Committee recommends that those are a regular agenda item for Committees.

It is vital that efficiencies are achieved to deliver essential resources to front-line services. The proposed performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) is expected to have a role to play. The Committee will monitor the outputs from the unit in driving higher levels of savings, and we would like to see PEDU

commence work as soon as possible — subject to the addressing of outstanding organisational issues, which the Committee identified in its report on the draft Budget.

Objective 5 of PSA 21 aims to deliver value-for-money improvements in Government procurement. The Committee wishes to see the revised programme include dates for delivery against some of the targets under that objective — including the 3% value-for-money gains on procurement spend. The Committee is grateful that that has been taken on board.

With regard to the draft investment strategy, the Department of Finance and Personnel bid for approximately £94.2 million over the three financial years from 2008 to 2011, but it was allocated £68.7 million. The Committee will continue to monitor how the Department of Finance and Personnel plans to manage with an allocation significantly below the amount that was sought. The Committee is keeping a watching brief on whether the capital allocations for the Land and Property Services are sufficient to permit it to resolve the difficulties with its IT systems, especially with regard to rates relief take-up.

Land and Property Services has an important role in the implementation of the rating reforms that are to be introduced later this year, and the Department of Finance and Personnel must consider how any further funding requirements that arise from rating reform can be met.

The Department of Finance and Personnel also bid for £15 million over the three years for the central energy efficiency fund that is used to support measures to improve the energy performance of, and to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide from, Government buildings. The £6 million allocation runs contrary to the prominence that the Executive gave to sustainability in the draft Programme for Government, and the Committee will monitor the delivery of the efficiency fund's objectives.

One of the Department's major contributions to the investment strategy is the delivery of the £175 million capital that was received from the Workplace 2010 programme. Departmental officials assured the Committee of the accuracy of that figure and stated that it would be delivered in the 2008-09 financial year. However, the latest information received casts doubt on that.

The draft investment strategy stated that Departments are in the process of developing individual investment delivery plans and that oversight arrangements are being developed to monitor departmental performance on delivery. The publication of investment delivery plans has been delayed until the spring. That is an issue in which the Committee will take particular interest, and we expect to play a constructive role in monitoring and scrutinising delivery in that area.

Sinn Féin welcomes the Programme for Government — particularly its commitment to ensuring that all

Executive policies will be based on fairness, inclusion and equality, and its use of watchwords in that regard.

2.15 pm

There are several issues, which all parties will address in turn, on which the Assembly and, indeed, the Executive Committee must be able to deliver in the new social, economic and political reality, and which must be addressed within the limitations on our ability to respond to such challenges. Although taxation and public-expenditure policies are set in London and are inextricably linked, the policies that we are attempting to deliver today demand a more flexible and creative response from British Treasury officials and the British Government. The Assembly can deliver, but requires the tools to do so. Go raibh míle maith agat.

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

The Committee welcomes the Programme for Government's recommendation that the population's overall health status requires urgent attention. The Programme for Government states that Northern Ireland continues to have higher than average mortality from coronary heart disease, cancer and stroke. At the same time, obesity levels — particularly among children — are rising at an alarming rate. The Committee also supports the assertion that, in the areas of mental health and learning disability, we are over reliant on long-stay hospitals and the range of primary-community services is limited.

The Northern Ireland population's relatively poor state of health was clearly identified in 'A Healthier Future: A Twenty Year Vision for Health and Wellbeing in Northern Ireland 2005-2025', which also highlighted the higher rates of people with disabilities and mental-health problems compared to GB.

The Committee also welcomes the Programme for Government's acknowledgement that many people still live in areas of deprivation and experience high levels of poverty, disadvantage and exclusion. People who live in socially deprived areas suffer from poor health, lower educational standards and higher unemployment. That issue was also recently brought to the Committee's attention by the Chief Medical Officer, and it must be tackled robustly.

The Programme for Government sets out several key goals in what it describes as work to create a fairer society and look after our most disadvantaged. I will comment on three of those key goals.

First, by 2013, anyone with a mental-health problem or learning disability should be promptly and suitably treated in the community, and no one should unnecessarily remain in hospital. As I have previously stated, I have a strong interest in mental-health issues — as do all members of the Health Committee — and I am determined that the 'Bamford Review of Mental

Health and Learning Disability (Northern Ireland)' should be fully implemented as soon as possible. The Committee welcomes the additional funding that is earmarked for that purpose in the Budget, and we will work to ensure that those funds are used solely for that purpose.

The second key goal relates to strokes. The Programme for Government states that, by 2013, everyone who suffers a stroke will be assessed within 90 minutes for suitability for clot-busting drug treatment and that mortality rates will be reduced by 15%. That is an ambitious, but achievable, target. A draft stroke strategy is out for consultation, and the Committee will shortly examine its proposals in order to ensure that the right services can be delivered to stroke patients.

Thirdly, there is a target to reduce suicides by 15% by 2011. The Committee has been undertaking an in-depth inquiry into the strategy approach to the prevention of suicide and self-harm in Northern Ireland. Although the evidence gathering for that inquiry is nearing completion, obviously, the Committee has not yet reached any conclusions. However, it is fair to say that some evidence questions the merits of setting such challenging targets, particularly in the short term and given that the suicide strategy is relatively new.

Some suicide strategies in other countries have targets, while others do not. The danger highlighted to us is that if the target is not achieved, questions may be asked and doubts may be cast on the validity of the overall strategic approach, which could lead to confusion and uncertainty.

In my role as DUP health spokesperson, I am delighted to speak on the Programme for Government on my own behalf. It is no mean achievement to arrive at an overall strategy like this, as well as an accompanying Budget and investment strategy, which has been unanimously approved by Ministers from all four main parties. Having a Programme for Government produced by locally elected politicians represents a significant step forward for Northern Ireland, which will go a long way towards reassuring the public that we are a Government committed to delivering for the good of all the people of Northern Ireland.

I welcome the fact that there is a strong focus on the economy. Although my overriding concern will always remain on health matters, it is only through building and sustaining an improved economy that health and all other sectors can best be served in the longer term. It is not that long since some parties were claiming Northern Ireland to be a failed political entity. Today, they are joining with the rest of us in strengthening and improving Northern Ireland. Unlike previous Programmes for Government, this is a clear and concise document, intentionally written in more accessible language. It is a political document that sets out the Executive's strategic

plan, rather than, as before, simply throwing together what each Minister wanted to be included. It is tightly focused, with clear objectives and measurable targets.

Previous Programmes for Government were vague and unfocused, with few action points. This time there are radical new proposals, and each Minister must prove that he or she is up to the challenges of his or her Department. There is a strong focus on health promotion and disease prevention, with commitments to increased screening, particularly the introduction of a bowel-screening programme and follow-up treatments, which, it is intended, should reduce death from bowel cancer by 10%. A comprehensive human papilloma virus immunisation programme will be introduced from September 2008, which will be capable of achieving a long-term reduction of 70% in the incidence of cervical cancer. By 2009, the regional breast cancer screening programme will be extended to cover those aged 65 to 69 years of age.

The state of public health in Northern Ireland is much worse than in GB, and we have only ourselves to blame for much of that. I welcome the commitments to halt the rise in obesity and the decline in adult participation in sport and physical recreation. I support the enhanced co-ordination across different Departments; the public health of the people of Northern Ireland is not just a matter for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I welcome funding for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to encourage leisure and exercise — one example of the Executive's providing joined-up Government.

There are targets for reducing the proportion of adults, particularly manual workers, who smoke. By 2010, there is to be a 5% reduction in the proportion of adults who binge drink, and 10% reduction in the proportion of young people who drink and who report getting drunk. There are also targets for reducing by 5% the proportion of young adults taking illegal drugs, and by 10% the number of children at risk from parental alcohol or drug dependency.

I am delighted that education and awareness-raising programmes on sexual-health issues and teenage pregnancies are to be expanded in schools, workplaces and community settings. By 2010, we aim to achieve a 40% reduction in the rate of births to mothers under the age of 17 years. In my own constituency, it is encouraging that phase A of the redevelopment of the Ulster Hospital is to be completed by 2010. However, I am keen to see progress on phase B as soon as possible. I also welcome the confirmation that the regional adolescent psychiatric unit and the child and family centre are to be completed by the same year.

Efforts to reduce healthcare-acquired infections will be welcomed by everyone, particularly after the recent revelations about *clostridium difficile*.

By 2009, a 10% reduction in the number of hospital patients with staphylococcus aureus bloodstream infections, including MRSA, is to be achieved, as well as a 20% reduction in cases of clostridium difficile.

The Health Committee has also taken evidence on mental health and suicide. It is important to slash the waiting times for access to talking therapies, although that will require sustained effort and investment over a prolonged period.

To conclude, all those actions and targets will demand greater productivity. Again, I say to the Minister that there must be no delay in setting in train the formation of a Province-wide strategic health authority and in overhauling commissioning arrangements. A strong local commissioning role is essential, with real incentives and sanctions to sharpen performance.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As time for questions to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is at 2.30 pm, I ask Members to take their ease until then. The debate on the draft Programme for Government will resume at 4.00 pm, and the first Member to be called to speak will be Martina Anderson.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Early Screening: Heart Disease, Stroke and Kidney Disease

1. **Mr O'Loan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to offer screening for early signs of heart disease, stroke and kidney disease. (AQO 1526/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I have no plans to introduce screening for those conditions. Heart disease, strokes, diabetes and kidney disease make up a fifth of all hospital admissions. The Prime Minister recently announced his intention to introduce check-ups to monitor those conditions. The UK National Screening Committee will advise him on the evidence for additional screening procedures. My Department is represented on the National Screening Committee, and, when it produces advice on any additional screening procedures, I will be in a position to decide what further measures should be introduced in Northern Ireland.

Mr O'Loan: Will the Minister comment on his Department's decision to confine screening for breast cancer to women under the age of 60, given that it is best practice for it to be available to women of all ages?

Mr McGimpsey: I am at a loss to understand the question, because I recently announced that screening for breast cancer is to be extended to women aged over 65. Under the draft Budget, the Department was unable to go beyond 65 years of age, but, as a consequence of the extra money in the final Budget allocation, that important extension of screening can take place.

Mr McNarry: The Minister will have heard the negative comments about his Department from some DUP members when the draft Budget was published. Will the Minister tell the Assembly whether the further investment that has been awarded thanks to his efforts will be used to enhance screening programmes, thereby saving lives in the long term?

Mr McGimpsey: The additional funding did not come about purely through my efforts: thousands of people across Northern Ireland lobbied hard for increases to the health allocation. As a result of the

increases, in addition to the introduction of breast cancer screening for women over 65, screening for bowel cancer and abdominal aortic aneurysms will now be available. Screening is a crucial activity, because prevention is better than cure, and early indication allows early intervention.

Mr T Clarke: The Minister has mentioned screening for bowel cancer, which he promised last year to introduce. Will he update the Assembly on his progress?

Mr McGimpsey: Following the publication of the cancer control document that Mr Clarke refers to, a programme of screening for bowel cancer is being planned, and I anticipate that it will be in place from 2009.

Health Inequality Report

2. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the findings of the health inequality report had been broken down by health and social care trust; and to detail what action was being taken to tackle the widening inequality gap.
(AQO 1522/08)

Mr McGimpsey: As part of my Department's health and social care inequalities monitoring system, an update was recently published detailing various inequality gaps in Northern Ireland. Information on the gaps at a lower level, such as by health and social care trust, is not routinely available. However, information on individual indicators is available. Health inequalities in the most deprived areas, in rural areas, and in Northern Ireland as a whole are the product of social, economic and health issues. A wide range of strategies, programmes and activities are under way to address the inequalities, as part of the cross-departmental Investing for Health strategy. That work also aligns with, and contributes to, other Government strategies, such as those on neighbourhood renewal and fuel poverty. At a strategic level, Investing for Health continues to be overseen and monitored by the ministerial group on public health that I continue to chair.

Mr McGlone: Will the Minister comment on the finding that there has been a significant rise in the number of manual and professional workers suffering from ill health in the past eight years? Does his Department have any new policies to tackle that significant long-term problem?

Mr McGimpsey: As regards inequalities in health, the gap is well documented. For example, life expectancy for males in the most deprived areas is 3·8 years lower than the Northern Ireland average. For females, the figure is 2·6 years. My Department will be targeting that issue.

I do not have the information at hand regarding the specific manual-worker cohort. I am happy to examine the available information and respond to the Member in writing. Focusing on health inequalities and on people taking responsibility for their own health is very much part of the Department's strategy.

Mr Buchanan: Does the Minister agree that the best way to examine inequality is on a Province-wide basis, in the same manner that all strategies for health in Northern Ireland should be determined? Therefore, will he finally agree to set up the regional strategic health authority that the DUP has been demanding since he took office?

Mr McGimpsey: Following on from the previous answer, my Department addresses all issues on a Province-wide basis. However, it is important that Mr Buchanan accepts that there are differences between rural and urban areas. Furthermore, there are significant differences between affluent and disadvantaged areas.

I planned to make an announcement today concerning a regional health authority. However, after consulting with my Executive colleagues, I decided that I should not do so because of today's important announcement. Therefore, I will be making an announcement next week, and I am sure that Mr Buchanan will be pleased with what he hears.

Mr Adams: Tá mé buíoch díot, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister will be aware that the latest updated statistics, as published by the health and social care inequalities monitoring system, show that the suicide rate has increased from 2001 to 2006. Will he confirm that the rate of suicide in areas of greatest deprivation is still substantially higher than the regional average? Furthermore, will he undertake to ensure that the allocation of resources by his Department for suicide prevention is targeted towards community services that provide a lifeline for those who are at disproportionate risk of taking their own lives? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McGimpsey: I am aware of those statistics. Although suicide affects the whole of society, I am aware of the point that Mr Adams made regarding the rate in deprived areas being substantially higher than the Northern Ireland average. The suicide prevention task force, chaired by Colm Donaghy and overseeing the Department's suicide strategy is also aware of that point. Clearly, they skew resources to the places that will achieve the best outcome.

Craigavon Area Hospital: Business Plan

3. **Mr Simpson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the business plan for Craigavon Area Hospital.
(AQO 1617/08)

Mr McGimpsey: The new Southern Health and Social Care Trust, which was established in April 2007, has initiated a review of its investment requirements for all services — including acute and local hospitals — to ensure that maximum quality and effectiveness is achieved in service delivery for the whole population.

My Department will continue to work with the Southern Health and Social Care Trust to develop its proposals for future hospital services. In light of the constraints on funding, we will obviously need to carefully consider and prioritise any investment proposal when we receive it, together with many others, when determining final allocations of capital investment funds beyond the CSR period.

Craigavon Area Hospital has not been neglected in the provision of capital investment — to the extent that more than £40 million worth of developments have either been completed or are under construction.

Mr Simpson: I thank the Minister for his comments. He will be aware that Craigavon Area Hospital is 35 to 40 years old and was not built for the services that it is being asked to provide. There are major problems with the maternity unit, mental-health units and parking. The Minister will also be aware that a significant building plan was supposed to start 12 months ago. When the business plan is submitted and an assessment is completed, and if a date is fixed for a building programme to start, will the Minister confirm that that will be adhered to?

Mr McGimpsey: The Craigavon Area Hospital Group Health and Social Services Trust had a site development plan. The new trust is developing a strategic capital plan for the area, and Craigavon Area Hospital will play a key part. I am awaiting the trust's proposals before determining the way forward.

I am aware that Craigavon Area Hospital is 35 years old; and there has been substantial investment in the site. However, as there are older hospitals in the Province, there is competition for priority. For example, phase B of the redevelopment of the Ulster Hospital, which has been pushed back to the next CSR period, relates to a hospital that is in poorer shape. Therefore, there are priorities involved, and I am arguing hard for investment. I am well aware of the needs in Craigavon. As I said, there have been substantial recent investments there; we will continue to do our best to ensure that the hospital there is fit for purpose.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister will be aware that, over the Christmas period, an infant from the Craigavon area who was seriously ill and required intensive care could not get a bed in Craigavon Area Hospital or anywhere in Northern Ireland. Does he

have any plans to ensure that such a situation does not happen again?

Mr McGimpsey: I am aware of the shortages in paediatric critical care. There has been investment since I took office, and the Department is continuing to review the situation. It is not ideal, to put it mildly, that sick babies have to be transferred out of Northern Ireland: that is not the way forward and it should happen only in emergency situations. I will keep the matter under review and I will try to ensure that such situations occur only when the required treatment is not available in the Province.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister provide an update on the business case for a health and care centre at Braid Valley, and will he confirm whether he has the resources to deliver the new facility and have it open by 2011?

Mr McGimpsey: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust is responsible for the capital investment programme and is developing a strategic capital plan for its area. The health and treatment centre at the Braid Valley site, which will cost around £15 million, will be a key part of that plan. It is part of the current investment programme and, although I cannot remember the precise date, 2011 or 2012 would not be far away from the opening date that the Department anticipates.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that supplementary questions must relate to the original question. Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Influenza Vaccination

5. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how many people have received the influenza vaccination over the winter period. (AQO 1521/08)

Mr McGimpsey: The number of people aged 65 and over who received the influenza vaccination by 31 December 2007 was 177,671, which is 73% of the target population of 243,416. For people under 65 who are considered to be at risk, the figure was 106,385, which is 66·8% of the target population of 159,346. As some GPs have yet to submit their returns to the health boards, the final figures for the 2007-08 vaccination programme will be higher.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his answer. Is there any data on the effect of the uptake rate of the vaccination on the size of the winter flu outbreak and hospital admissions from respiratory infections? In a recent poll about the vaccination, 25% of GPs felt that the vaccination was unnecessary: will the Minister comment on that point?

2.45 pm

Mr McGimpsey: I am reluctant to comment on the statement by GPs. The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation has advised the Department that flu vaccination for the elderly reduces the severity of the disease, reduces the incidence of complications by between 50% and 60%, and reduces deaths by approximately 80%. Those are very high numbers, and are the ones that we follow. Therefore, it is important that those who are entitled to the flu vaccine receive it.

People who are under 65 and are considered to be at risk are also offered the vaccine, and we exceed our target of 70% for over-65s and the target for under-65s. However, we are far from complacent. Our campaign slogan is “Catch the vaccine not the flu”, because the expert advice that I receive is that the flu vaccine is a very positive step.

Mr Craig: Is the Minister confident that we have a good enough supply of the flu vaccine in the Province to meet the demand if everyone who is entitled to it chooses to take it up?

Mr McGimpsey: Yes, I am confident that the procedures that we have in place for flu immunisation for people who are entitled to it are adequate, and I am not aware of a shortage. If our planners have a requirement over and above stocks they can purchase it when they need to.

MRSA

6. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to control MRSA in hospitals. (AQO 1638/08)

Mr McGimpsey: The problem of MRSA, like all healthcare-associated infections, needs to be addressed by a range of policies, both medium- and long-term, that seek reduction in incidence, since eradication is not regarded as possible.

We continue to implement the Changing the Culture action plan, as stated in my major announcement last Friday, and a number of new measures are in place that will help achieve the target for reducing the prevalence of MRSA by 10% by March 2009. I am also investing an additional £9 million over the next three years in a bid to improve patient safety and, in particular, to reduce the spread of infections such as MRSA across health trusts.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Minister agree that, as well as the concern about MRSA, recent revelations about clostridium difficile in both Whiteabbey and Antrim Area Hospitals are a matter of grave and immediate public anxiety? Will the Minister explain the measures that he would encourage the Northern Health and Social Services Board and the Northern

Health and Social Care Trust to adopt to counter that threat? Will he encourage both bodies to be proactive by transferring patients to the beds available at Inver House in Larne?

Mr McGimpsey: There are three steps in the management of those infections: containment, the antibiotic policy, and infection control. That relates specifically to clostridium difficile, which is a result of the use of broad-spectrum antibiotics — they cause a bacterial imbalance in the gut that allows the clostridium difficile bacteria to prosper. Isolation and cohort nursing are key, along with keeping patients together rather than sending them to other hospitals to spread the infection. MRSA has a slightly different cause, but the response is the same, and, of course, a high standard of cleanliness is very important.

Inver House is for the acute convalescent care of the elderly and, although I have not asked the Northern Health and Social Services Board, I believe it would be wrong to move sick patients into such an environment. It is important to keep the patients in Inver House cohorted away from those who are suffering from these infections.

Mrs Hanna: I welcome the announcement of the £9 million that will go towards tackling hospital-acquired infections, and accept that it is many faceted. With regard to deep cleaning wards, will the Minister assure me that there will be regular inspection and recording of the level of cleanliness to ensure that high standards are maintained, and will that include the enforcement of hand washing in all hospitals by patients, staff and visitors?

Mr McGimpsey: There will be regular, unannounced inspections as part of the new measures that I have announced. The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) will review the incident at Antrim Area Hospital once the authorities are confident that the outbreak is under control and that the pressure has been removed. Part of the £9 million will go towards single rooms in new hospitals and single rooms in hospitals that are being refurbished, unannounced inspections and restrictions on hospital visiting and dress code, and MRSA screening for high-risk patients, which we are now standardising and will possibly follow the pilot scheme in Scotland for universal MRSA screening.

Cleanliness, deep cleaning and a regional hand-hygiene campaign are key issues, and I have been told that over and over again. We will attempt to enforce those measures and ensure that all those entering and leaving wards wash their hands. It is a simple procedure, but it has proved very difficult to enforce universally. The Member is correct: hand hygiene is one of the keys to cleanliness, along with deep-cleaning methods and rapid-response cleaning teams in all hospitals, which will be employed as a result of my announcement. I

cannot emphasise enough the need for hand hygiene among visitors, staff and patients.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the £9 million announced last week. Does the Minister agree that several issues are involved, including the need for proper changing facilities for staff and a laundry service for uniforms, and that there should be better investment in front-line services and cleaning services? The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety was informed of an issue last week, which was also highlighted by the media. Will the Minister consider initiating a public inquiry into hospital-acquired diseases following the recent deaths?

Mr McGimpsey: I will review the incident referred to, and if I feel that I should go beyond that and hold a public inquiry, then it will be considered. However, a public inquiry will not add to the task in hand, which is containment and doing our best to ensure that we press down on such incidents.

There will be a new dress code for all healthcare staff following my announcement. We will also look at laundry services and changing facilities for staff, which have not existed in hospitals for some time. There are a range of steps to be taken. We will not eradicate MRSA or clostridium difficile. Around 3% of the population carry clostridium difficile, around 3% carry the resistant strain of MRSA and around 30% carry the non-resistant strain. We can screen patients and take steps to ensure that those diseases are contained and isolated and that proper policies are put in place to keep patients safe.

Review of Public Administration

7. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to comment on the review of public administration, as it affects his Department.
(AQO 1581/08)

Mr McGimpsey: I intend to make a statement to the House on the review of public administration on Monday 4 February 2008.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister give an assurance that he has considered increasing the role for local government and local representatives so that health inequalities can be addressed by a joined-up approach at local level? Will he accept that the enhanced role envisaged for local government under the review of public administration will see it become an increasingly important local partner?

Mr McGimpsey: The direct rule Minister's proposals would have established what would have been, aside from one other body, the largest quango in Europe. It would have been enormous; and no

consultation about it would have taken place. I wanted to focus on several key functions that the body should have and cut away many that it should not.

Another key issue was that it had been stipulated under direct rule that local elected representatives would not play a role in any part of the changes. I felt strongly that we needed democratisation and a strong voice for local communities, patients and clients, and that one of the best ways to achieve those would be to ensure that local elected representatives played a role in the new arrangements, not least because they are the best people to talk about the health inequalities mentioned previously. In Northern Ireland, it seems that there is an intractable problem of different outcomes for those who live in areas of disadvantage. Local councils are in a position to assist implementation.

Mr Gallagher: I welcome the news that a further announcement on the review of public administration, in relation to the health sector, is imminent. That news may restrict what the Minister is prepared to tell the House today. However, will he comment on the assertion that the headquarters of the new health authority will be in Belfast?

Mr McGimpsey: The location of the new authority has not been uppermost in my mind — and I am not being coy because of next week's statement. I am more concerned with, and excited by, the new authority's functions. Therefore, I am unable to comment on where it should be located.

Mr Spratt: I too welcome the Minister's announcement that he will make a statement next Monday. Does he accept that in order to obtain the best and most efficient Health Service, purchasers and providers of services must be separated, and that it is essential to overhaul Health Service commissioning so that RPA reforms can have maximum impact?

Mr McGimpsey: As far as RPA is concerned, the bulk of the reforms have been established through reducing the number of trusts from 19 to six. That has caused most changes in staff numbers, functions and so on. Efficiencies will play a key part in the change from the old health service authority to the new one, and there will be a case for reviewing the purchaser/provider process. Next Monday, I intend to fully divulge what I see as the way forward. However, today I can tell Members that there will be full consultation. Unlike the direct rule Minister, I will establish a consultation period, and everybody will have an opportunity to make their opinions known.

Nursing Home Staff: Additional Training

8. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he had to make

provision for additional training for staff working in nursing homes. (AQO 1519/08)

Mr McGimpsey: In Northern Ireland, the majority of nursing and residential care home provision is supplied by the independent sector. My Department does not provide training to staff employed by the independent sector. Training of staff in nursing homes is the responsibility of the registered provider. However, my Department has recently published minimum standards for nursing homes, which include nursing home proprietors' responsibilities for training staff.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister for his answer. There was a report this morning on the RTÉ news programme 'Morning Ireland' about abuse of patients in nursing homes in the South of Ireland. Will the Minister tell the House whether there is any evidence of abuse of patients in nursing homes in the North of Ireland? I am mindful that, in the South, the evidence shows that most abuse is actually carried out by family members. Will he also confirm whether there are plans to fast-track the legislative requirement for the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) to establish a register of nursing homes in Northern Ireland?

3.00 pm

Mr McGimpsey: That question, which asks about how standards are maintained and residents protected, is pertinent. As of July 2007, 7,728 clients were in nursing homes in Northern Ireland, all of which are privately managed or privately owned and run, and 4,594 clients were in residential care homes, three quarters of which are privately run. The vehicle through which standards are maintained is the RQIA, which has been operating for two years. In those two years, 94 notices have been issued to 23 establishments for breaches of the published standards. The Department has published minimal standards, one part of which relates to staff training and the other to quality of care, life, environment and management. The issue is ongoing, and I take it seriously because so many elderly people and others are in potentially vulnerable situations.

I am unable to provide the Member with the level of detail that he requires on the register, but I am happy to write to him. However, if homes are not already registered, they must be so.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Belfast to Derry/Londonderry Railway

1. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail first, the estimated cost of the upgrading of the Belfast to Derry/Londonderry railway

to intercity standards, capable of achieving speeds of 70 mph; and secondly, to itemise the preliminary work that will be done over the next three years.

(AQO 1572/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Work will need to be done on the lines at Ballymena and Coleraine in order to rectify specific problems with wet beds. That is in advance of a track-life-extension project that is due to start later this year. That work will restore the 70 mph capability between Ballymena and Coleraine and will protect the existing overall 60 mph speed limit between Coleraine and Derry. The project will cost £12 million and will be completed by 2010.

The relay of the track from Derry to Coleraine will start in 2011. It will take two years to complete, at a projected cost of £64 million. That work will enable trains to run at 70 mph. The major upgrade of the Coleraine to Derry line could not be planned until the restrictions on investment on the line, imposed by the railways review group and the regional transportation strategy, had been lifted.

I made that decision last year, and the steps that are required to undertake the Coleraine to Derry relay can now commence. To do that work, it will first be necessary to produce both a project identification document that will outline the objectives, scope and structure of the project, and an estimate of the programme costs and risks and a delivery strategy. It could take between three and six months to produce those and to get approval for them.

The next stage involves examining possible engineering solutions to the project and producing an economic appraisal in order to assess the most economically advantageous solution. That will include the production of resource plans, detailed cost estimates, a design brief, a risk plan and a procurement plan. It will take up to 18 months to complete and to gain approval for a project as complex and high-value as this.

The sequencing of the remaining stages of the design, procurement, implementation and handover will depend on the procurement strategy that is developed for the project. It is envisaged that following the completion of design, tendering and approval processes, commissioning and construction of the new line will take two years.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the Minister's announcement. I was trying to find out what will happen during the tenure of this Assembly. The Minister will accept that the previous Assembly, despite its difficulties and suspensions, managed to get new trains for the track, the result of which is that capacity has doubled.

Will the Minister give an assurance that before 2053, which is the 200th anniversary of the construction of

the line, a decent intercity service will run between Belfast and Derry, with no ifs and no buts about it?

Mr Murphy: The answer is yes. *[Laughter.]*

I correct the Member's assumption about the previous Assembly. The previous Executive decided to invest no money in the Coleraine to Derry section of the track. The Member should recall that decision: he was part of a group that lobbied to overturn it. He lobbied John Spellar in 2005, and following that, Mr Spellar agreed to spend maintenance money only on the line between Coleraine and Derry.

The Member looks confused; however, I have repeated this answer to him so often that, by now, he should have learned it by rote.

I took a decision when I came in — I beg your pardon — the previous Executive decided to invest no money in what they called “non-core lines” or “lesser-used lines”. That effectively banned the spending of money on the part of the line between Coleraine and Derry. Under the previous Executive, the Department for Regional Development (DRD) bid for a total £4.5 million, of which only £1.5 million was secured.

Obviously, therefore, the Department of Finance and Personnel rejected bids of £3 million for necessary work to the line. In 2005, the decision was taken to remove the bar on spending, but only to allow maintenance to be carried out on the line. When I came to office, I overturned that decision yet again in order to allow investment to be made to upgrade the line and bring it up to the required standard. Of course, until that decision was taken, Translink could not advance any plans to upgrade the line as necessary.

I have secured £1 million in the Budget to allow a business case to be put together. I have often stated that it is my clear intention — and it beggars belief that the Member comes back to me with the same question — to secure £64 million of investment in the project, which will begin in 2011, within the lifetime of this Assembly.

Mr G Robinson: Can the Minister explain what plans there are, in addition to those that have already been announced, for the Coleraine to Londonderry line? He must renew the Ballymena to Coleraine line in order to complete the project.

Mr Murphy: The Member will be aware that the project on the Ballymena to Coleraine line that was put together some years ago is now coming to fruition. That has been possible because of an allowance to spend on upgrading the line and an investment of £12 million to deal with wet beds, particularly in the Ballymoney area. That project has now started, and work on it will continue.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer and

commend him for his assurance that the restriction on investment has been lifted. People will ask how much money has been invested in the Derry line in the past. However, the people of Derry know that money has been invested. I want to commend the Minister for that. What effect will the improvements have on future travel times when there is, for the first time, a notable intercity service?

Mr Murphy: On completion of the track relay between Coleraine and Derry, the line will have been improved sufficiently to reduce journey times by 30 minutes. By then, two additional trains will be deployed on the line. That will allow commuter trains to arrive in Derry before 9.00 am.

Flooding: Emergency Plans

2. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister for Regional Development what emergency plans are in place to deal with flooding, where previous experience or an assessment by the Department shows that a risk of flooding exists. (AQO 1569/08)

Mr Murphy: Responsibility for the drainage infrastructure is shared between Roads Service, Northern Ireland Water and the Rivers Agency. The Rivers Agency has taken the lead in the formulation of procedures that have resulted in the development of best practice guidelines, the flooding hot spot list and the liaison and co-ordination of the emergency response for localised flooding events.

Roads Service has emergency plans to deal with flooding-related incidents, including, where the risk of flooding is greatest, ensuring that a 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week response service is in place. Roads Service makes preparations in response to early warnings of heavy rain from the Met Office, in order to ensure that, as far as is practicable, it is ready to deal with the impact of adverse weather. Those preparations include putting operational staff on standby; checking that drainage outlets, culverts and identified hot spots are clear from debris; and checking the readiness of emergency equipment and stocks of sandbags.

Northern Ireland Water has developed a major incident plan to provide a co-ordinated response to all operational emergencies. The plan contains contingency arrangements for responding to severe weather warnings.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for that lengthy answer. Obviously, in theory, much is being done. However, what meaningful dialogue exists between the two agencies? Does he agree that those agencies do not so much talk to each other as play hide-and-seek when a problem arises? Can the Minister talk to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development with a view to bringing the agencies closer and, dare I say it, knocking a few heads together, so that some of the flooding that

takes place can be avoided? From where I am standing, it seems as though, right across Belfast city in particular, all sorts of problems arise because of the refusal of either agency to take responsibility for water. One passes the buck to the other.

Mr Murphy: I am surprised that the Member is advocating violence and knocking heads together. It is a test of his commitment to non-violence. I cannot possibly agree with that.

Three agencies are involved in dealing with flooding: the Rivers Agency — which is under the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development — Northern Ireland Water and Roads Service. The Rivers Agency has taken the lead in forming procedures.

I appreciate that flooding causes people great frustration and inconvenience, particularly when their properties are flooded. Quite often, that puts a strong focus on the response. Recent weather patterns have made it virtually impossible for agencies to deal with some problems associated with flooding: that was particularly the case during the floods in Belfast last summer.

My Department will seek to improve procedures and practices where possible. The Executive undertook to review emergency procedures as a result of last year's floods in Belfast, and I await the outcome of that review. Although some agencies deal with problems caused by flooding as it is happening, others deal with the aftermath of floods, such as clean-up operations and compensation arrangements in respect of damaged properties. The Executive have taken the lead on all those issues. I assure the Member that where communication strategies between agencies are found wanting, the Department will be quite happy to ensure that procedures are tightened up.

Mr Gardiner: What steps has the Minister taken, if any, to introduce a dedicated helpline for people in dire need — such as those who suffered during the recent floods — so that they do not have to ring various Departments to try to get answers to their queries? Such a helpline should cover all situations associated with flooding and would help to relieve the stress suffered by people whose homes are flooded.

Mr Murphy: The Member has raised an issue that is for the Executive's review of emergency planning to examine. As that review is not being led by the Department for Regional Development, it would be better if his question were asked of OFMDFM. I appreciate his point about the additional stress that people suffer when they are faced with a problem and find it difficult to get through to the required Department.

The Executive are examining several issues including preventative measures and responses to incidents. They are also looking, firmly, at the concept of a telephone

helpline, which would comprise a single telephone number of which everyone would be made aware.

Mrs Long: The Minister, in his response to Dr McDonnell's original question, rightly said that the division of responsibility regarding flooding and drainage is complicated. In light of that, what measures are he and his Department taking to protect areas that have been subjected to significant and repeated flooding from further intensification and development? In areas where flooding has not been addressed, where the sewerage system is under pressure, and where people are allowed to continue with developments, there seems to be little by way of a robust response that would bring the situation under control.

Mr Murphy: Agencies that deal with the problems associated with flooding have registers of flooding hot spots. The Member's point relates to planning — it is whether planning approval should continue to be given in areas that have been identified as flooding hot spots. That is a matter for the Department of the Environment. Of course, there is a wider issue — whether planning should be allowed in areas that have been identified as flood plains. As I said, that is primarily an issue for the Department of the Environment. My Department is happy to share the information that it has on flooding hot spots with the Department of the Environment. Whether development should be allowed to continue in such areas is a matter for the Department of the Environment.

Rapid-Transit Network, Belfast

3. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made on the feasibility study into a rapid-transit network in Belfast. (AQO 1645/08)

Mr Murphy: Feasibility studies for a pilot rapid-transit system are nearing completion, and I expect to receive a report in the coming days. That will enable me to consider the findings and to discuss the way forward with ministerial colleagues in the Executive.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister indicate whether the technology used for a rapid-transit network will be bus-based or rail-based? Does he share my view that the potential for a light rail network to showcase Belfast as a twenty-first century city should be taken into account when the feasibility study is being considered? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Murphy: Undoubtedly, people consider the development of a light rail system to be a sign of a modern city. It is a feature of Dublin and of modern cities across the world. We are considering the feasibility of all options, including light rail systems, bus-based

systems and tram systems. Our intention is to achieve the best scheme for Belfast.

3.15 pm

The type of rapid-transit system that is selected will be influenced by potential demand and affordability. Indicators suggest that bus rapid transit can be more easily accommodated within existing highway boundaries than light rail, which is likely to be more problematic in negotiating city-centre junctions. However, I assure the Member that all options will be considered, and that we will consider some of the rapid-transit systems that are in place in other European cities, particularly those in Holland, to try to get an idea of what might work best for Belfast.

Mr Newton: Will the Minister confirm that, in his list of priorities in the rapid-transport network strategy, the top priority will be the need to develop the former Comber to Holywood Arches railway link? Will he confirm that he will not rule out the involvement of the private sector in either the development or the operation of the network, when it eventually arrives?

Mr Murphy: When I assumed office, there were two elements to the pilot study. One of those was the E-way link, which the Member mentioned, and the other was the city route, which would service the Titanic Quarter. I asked the consultants to undertake a further study into how that would affect other parts of the city, and to examine the options for extending that service into west and south Belfast. I assure the Member that, not only are the location of the routes and the type of system that might best serve Belfast under consideration, but all options in connection with the provision of that service are being examined.

Mrs Hanna: I welcome the Minister's response on sustainable public transport for Belfast; it cannot come too soon. As the Minister mentioned affordability, will he assure the House that any money that is needed for new investment will not come from the provision for rail that is already in place?

Mr Murphy: A substantial investment in rail is included in the Budget statement of 22 January 2008. We have envisaged and targeted substantial investment throughout the process of ISNI up to 2018. The rapid-transit system is a separate project, and all options for funding it and developing the best possible system will be considered, but that will not be at the expense of other public transport options.

Traffic Flow: Armagh City

4. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm whether any representations were made to his Department outlining proposed changes to the traffic flow in Armagh city. (AQO 1557/08)

Mr Murphy: When I met Armagh City and District Council on 6 December 2007 to discuss the Armagh East Link and West Link road schemes, representation was also made regarding traffic flow in the council area.

My Department's Roads Service is investigating matters such as traffic signals at Irish Street and Friary Road, with a view to making improvements. A planning application has been submitted for a major environmental improvement scheme for Armagh city, and my staff in Roads Service have been engaged with various bodies, including Armagh City and District Council and the Department for Social Development.

My staff are also aware that representations have been made about alterations to traffic flow, which have been proposed as part of the scheme. Any changes will require my Department to make an order that involves advertising and a formal notification process to allow objections to be received.

The Member will be aware of the intention to remove the security barrier at Abbey Street in the city. My officials recently met senior officials from the council and the NIO about that issue. The location is now being reviewed to determine what opportunities exist to improve traffic conditions, and I understand that a meeting about that will be held with local councillors.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his response. The environmental improvement (EI) scheme appears to be in jeopardy as the costs have put the plans £1.3 million over the budget of the lowest tender that was submitted. Has the Department been officially approached for further financial assistance, either by DSD or by Armagh City and District Council? Will the Minister give an assurance that his Department will ensure progress on that much-needed scheme as soon as possible? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Murphy: The environmental improvement scheme involves other bodies besides Roads Service. Ongoing discussions have taken place between officials from DSD and officials and members from Armagh City and District Council. Roads Service had offered £300,000 towards the scheme over a three-year period and, following a discussion last week, it has offered an additional £30,000 for the first year. I hope sincerely that the scheme is not in jeopardy; it is in all of our interests to ensure that it goes ahead.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Minister continue to ensure that, in any consideration of changes to the road network in Armagh city, officials and members of Armagh City and District Council will be kept fully informed and involved in all those discussions?

Mr Murphy: As I said in my answer to the previous question, work on the particular changes that may result from the EI scheme and that may have an impact

on traffic flow around Armagh city has been a three-way process involving DSD, DRD through Roads Service, and Armagh City and District Council. The meeting to which I went on 6 December 2007 with representatives of Armagh City and District Council covered a range of issues that involve Roads Service, NI Water and matters that are within the general DRD remit. I assure the Member that if any further changes are planned, such as road or street projects, I will certainly keep the council fully informed.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer on the Armagh scheme. Will he undertake to investigate traffic-flow problems in Newry with a view to alleviating congestion at black spots such as the Camlough, Warrenpoint and Dublin Roads?

Mr Murphy: The Member's namesake who represents that area has previously asked questions on his pet project, the Narrow Water bridge, so the Member will know that a substantial survey is being carried out on traffic flow in Newry and how any problems might be mitigated by the provision of a southern relief road. Work on that survey has been going on for some time, and those who are involved in it are also in discussion with Louth County Council, which is carrying out the feasibility study on the provision of a bridge at Narrow Water.

The Member will also be aware that the study on the southern relief road will involve not only the Warrenpoint Road, but the Dublin Road side of Newry. That is because any relief road would effectively act as a link between those two roads.

I have asked officials to come back to me about the situation with the Camlough Road, with which I am obviously familiar. Given that the new road is being constructed, I have asked about the impact that it will have near the junction that is in the area of the railway bridge that we know as the Egyptian arch. I have asked officials to update me on how they propose to deal with any traffic issues that result from the new road scheme.

Public Consultation

5. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister for Regional Development what measures he took to ensure that public consultation was undertaken on matters relating to his Department in first, the draft Budget; secondly, the draft Programme for Government; and finally, the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2.

(AQO 1640/08)

Mr Murphy: Between 11 December 2007 and 16 January 2008, the Department ran an equality consultation on the DRD elements of the draft Programme for Government, the Budget for 2008-2011, and the investment strategy. The consultation document assessed, in light of the available data — including those equality impact

assessments that had already been carried out — the equality-of-opportunity, good-relations and disability impacts of the DRD elements of the proposals. On 11 December 2007, that document was issued to over 400 groups and individuals that are on the Department's section 75 consultation list. A series of public consultation seminars was held in the week commencing 7 January in Omagh, Derry, Armagh and Belfast. Additionally, a seminar for stakeholders, including members of the equality coalition, was held on 9 January in Belfast.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response. I, too, acknowledge his commitment to develop the Derry railway line. That commitment contrasts starkly to that given by Mr Mark Durkan — who is from Derry — when he was Minister of Finance and Personnel.

What were the main themes that emerged from DRD's equality consultation meeting? Were any of the issues that are being highlighted by the Stand Up for Derry campaign among those?

Mr Murphy: I do not know about that, but I am sure that in the Derry meeting, plenty of issues that related to DRD spending emerged. I am sure that those will continue to emerge over the next while.

The need to increase investment in rural transport services was one of the main themes that emerged from the seminars. Although the proposed extension to the concessionary-fares scheme to people who are aged 60 and over was welcomed, there was general disappointment about other unsuccessful proposals to extend the scheme, particularly those to grant free travel to current recipients of half fares and to provide reduced fares to people who use rural transport services.

It was also felt that additional funding opportunities should be used to rationalise rural transport and concessionary fare arrangements to ensure that older people and disabled people are treated in the same way.

The written consultation responses echoed those points, and the process raised additional concerns about the equity of urban/rural and east-west provision, the need for EQIAs on future arrangements for the delivery of water and sewerage services, efficiency savings, and the need for a mechanism to secure future equality scrutiny of public spending plans.

Mr Armstrong: Does the Minister agree that both an appropriate and adequate consultation period that results in a faster decision-making process, particularly in matters that relate to planning and infrastructure, should be one of the benefits of the restored Assembly, in which democratic views on all proposals can be openly expressed and deliberated? Should those replace the consultations of the direct rule regime? If so, can we expect a direct line?

Mr Murphy: I appreciate that arrangements are different now, and every Department has its Committee to scrutinise rigorously all the plans, spending and other proposals of the Department. That is appropriate. The Budget is set over the next three years, and spending plans are substantial. I welcome the fact that the Executive are, rightly, committed to equality impact assessment in regard to the Budget and the Programme for Government.

We are all here as public representatives; however, opportunities to engage the public to hear their views, particularly concerning the Budget, are never a wasted exercise. It is always of benefit to find out the views of the people who elected us in relation to such issues and to public spending plans.

Mr Shannon: Has the Minister, at any stage, consulted his Department, elected representatives and the general public regarding the deterioration of roads in the Strangford area? The reason I ask is the clear private spend of some £6 million for Castlebawn Bypass. Has the Minister given any consideration to matching that spend in the Strangford area, thereby ensuring that Strangford's roads are equal to — or better than — roads in the rest of the Province, and far beyond those in the County of Londonderry?

Mr Murphy: The Member knows I will be very happy to consult. He has had me down in Strangford — not necessarily looking at roads. *[Laughter.]* The first time he invited me to a constituency, I was happy to undertake the trip. He may know that Mr McCarthy has invited me to look at roads in the Ards area; no doubt I will have another opportunity to look at the roads in that part of the world. Furthermore, Mr McNarry has tabled a question about roads in Strangford, and if I do not talk too long, we might come to it.

There are many opportunities to engage in consultation on roads. The Department would like to spend as much possible on roads, and it bid for as much as possible in the Budget.

I am happy to look at the road that the Member mentioned, and to respond to his question in writing.

European Charter on Minority Languages

6. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to meet his commitment to be proactive in promoting the European Charter on Minority Languages in relation to the use of Irish road signage in (i) Northern Ireland; and (ii) the Gaeltacht quarter in West Belfast. (AQO 1642/08)

Mr Murphy: Although the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages places no direct responsibilities on the Department in respect of roads signing, it requires that the Department's business,

particularly in relation to the use of Irish, be examined proactively with a view to protecting and promoting the use of the language. Road signs are authorised or prescribed by my Department under the Road Traffic Regulation (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. There is, however, a doubt about the power to promote languages other than English in road signs. As such, my Department's current policy is not to provide bilingual road signs.

However, following requests and representations, my Department's Road Service is developing policy proposals that will lead to legislative amendment and enable the authorisation of a limited number of bilingual road signs. I hope to bring my policy proposals to the Executive in the next few months.

Regarding the Gaeltacht quarter in west Belfast, on 10 December 2007, I met representatives of Forbairt Feirste to listen to their proposals for promoting the Irish language. The proposals that I intend to bring forward will apply right across the North.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra.

I thank the Minister for that reply. As he knows, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages was one of the commitments under the Good Friday Agreement to which the British Government and all the political parties signed up. Could he be more specific about when his Department will create a policy and legislative framework for the Irish language to be used in relation to street signs and traffic signs?

Mr Murphy: The proposals are one element of the miscellaneous provisions bill that I intend to bring forward this year. The timing depends very much on progress of the bill through the various stages in the Assembly. As Members will be aware, that can take up to two years.

Mr McCausland: Does the Minister agree that the European Charter has relevance for two indigenous minority languages in Northern Ireland? Does he agree that the Charter requires the Government to take resolute action to promote both languages? Therefore, any departure from the present situation would require a move to a trilingual arrangement, rather than a bilingual arrangement? Would he tell us what assessment he has made of the impact of trilingual signage as regards its visual intrusiveness and the impact on road safety?

3.30 pm

Mr Murphy: I have not had any representations from any sector seeking the provision of signage in Ulster Scots. Of course, I am considering my response to the representations that I have received. I am aware that south of the border, just 50 miles from here, there is bilingual signage. In other European countries and other countries around the world, there are signs in

more than two languages. We will consider all the issues that might be involved in this, including safety and cost, when we decide to proceed with it. The Assembly, of course, will have an opportunity to debate it at that time, as a change in the legislation will be necessary.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Has the Minister had any discussions with his counterparts in the Irish Government about the harmonising of road signs? The linguistic issue has been dealt with, but what about speed limits and moving to kilometres an hour?

Mr Murphy: Although road signs are our responsibility, the responsibility for speed limits and road safety policy across the island largely lies with the Department of the Environment. I have been to two sectoral meetings at which road safety issues across the island were discussed, and I am happy to discuss signage arrangements as part of that. No specific propositions were put to either of those meetings in relation to universal signage North and South, whether in miles or kilometres.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Social and Affordable Housing

1. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Social Development what action she is taking to ensure that her targets for new social and affordable house building are met.
(AQO 1564/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): Since the draft Budget was issued for consultation some three months ago, I have continually sought an increase in the funding available so as to secure the necessary investment in housing. Since the publication of the draft Budget, I have secured an additional £70 million for this financial year and an additional £205 million over the next three years, which will help me to deliver 1,500, 1,750 and 2,000 new starts. In that respect, I am grateful to all those who have supported me, including the Chairperson and members of the Social Development Committee, all those groups involved in the wider housing family, Members of this House and district councillors. I am pleased that the Minister of Finance and Personnel listened to the case that I made for additional resources to be invested in the social housing development programme in order to meet the clearly identified need.

To ensure that the management and resource structures are in place to deliver a social housing programme, I will be making a detailed announcement shortly.

Mr Dallat: With 38,000 people on the waiting list — half of them experiencing some level of housing

stress, and many homeless — will the Minister give us an insight into some of the innovative new plans that she has to ensure that the housing plans are delivered?

Ms Ritchie: As I said, I will shortly be making an announcement on the housing agenda for the next three years. In addition to providing details of the social housing programme, I will be referring to other initiatives to boost the social and affordable housing supplies for all of Northern Ireland, including developer contributions. In that respect, I am having continuous discussions with my colleague the Minister of the Environment.

There is also the issue of private-sector finance. I commissioned Baroness Ford to consider various aspects of housing associations, Government land, and property owned by the Housing Executive. I am examining the issue of land and asset sales, including the assets of the housing associations, and I will be making a statement shortly on all those matters.

I am charged to meet housing need in Northern Ireland. As Mr Dallat said, there are 38,000 people on the waiting list, of whom 50% are in housing stress, and 21,000 are homeless. I am also conscious that many young people have had some difficulty in accessing the affordable housing ladder. Most of this finance will assist me in delivering the programme. I accept that there is a need for delivery and I am determined that no stone will be left unturned in order to do that job.

Mr Kennedy: I will try asking a question that the Minister has not seen. She will recall that the Assembly passed a private Members' motion on 12 November 2007 calling for an expansion of co-ownership to at least 10% of the entire housing market in Northern Ireland, with a wide variety of shared equity options to be made available to first-time buyers. Will she state what steps she is taking towards meeting that objective?

Ms Ritchie: I am exploring all aspects of co-ownership housing, including widening staircases and broadening shared equity options. I am very conscious of the need to address that issue and that there is a lot of support for the programme. I was able to invest a significant proportion of the £47.5 million, which I received through in-year monitoring, in the co-ownership housing programme to help me to meet this year's target.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that the targets will be meaningless unless they start to reduce the need for housing in areas such as West Belfast, where the number of people on the waiting list rose from 2,575 to 2,797? Almost 10% of the people on the housing waiting list in the Six Counties are in West Belfast.

Will she also agree that her retrograde proposal to create areas of unrestricted development of houses in multiple occupation in several parts of West Belfast is a poor substitute for an effective, properly resourced strategy to create social and affordable housing? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Ritchie: I am very much charged with the need to address social housing conditions throughout Northern Ireland irrespective of whether they are in urban areas such as Belfast and Derry or rural areas. I am examining all proposals that will assure me that I will be able to deliver the programme, and I will be making an announcement shortly.

Many people in the House, particularly from one political party, urged me to accept what I had been offered back in October 2007. Would I not have been a fool had I accepted that funding while knowing that a specific need was being highlighted continuously by Members across the House? I made my case — and I am glad that it was listened to.

Fuel Poverty

2. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of her Department's budget provision for combating fuel poverty over the next three years. (AQO 1539/08)

Ms Ritchie: This year, my Department will spend more than £40 million and will help around 17,000 families who are fuel poor to improve the energy efficiency of their homes. I welcome that success and remain committed to do all that I can to help those who are most vulnerable in our community.

The prospect is challenging, given the funding in the three-year budget allocation. However, I remain committed to alleviating fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. I am determined to secure all necessary funds, and I will be bidding in the in-year monitoring rounds for funds to make up the shortfall. I am determined to act as a champion for those who are elderly or vulnerable by continuing to seek additional resources.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for her reply and I acknowledge that many vulnerable and older people are fuel poor. What impact have the Department's fuel poverty measures had on alleviating fuel poverty?

Ms Ritchie: The results of the 2006 Northern Ireland House Condition Survey are likely to show that 34% of households are in fuel poverty, which is a rise of around 7% on the position in 2004. However, had it been the case that only increases in the cost of fuel had taken place and that there had been no changes in two other factors, namely, incomes and energy efficiency, 66% of households would have been in fuel poverty.

None of us has control over fuel prices. Therefore, I have written to the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, lobbying him for the people of Northern Ireland, to ensure that there is an increase in the winter fuel payment. Since he took up office only on Friday, I have written to him today.

Mr Campbell: Will the Minister outline the steps that she intends to take to reduce the waiting list for the Eaga plc warm homes scheme, which she and almost all Members of the House support enthusiastically? As most people will concede, the list continues to grow rather than shorten. Will the Minister say what measures she intends to take, over the next two years, to eliminate the waiting list, which has grown to disproportionate lengths?

Ms Ritchie: I am conscious of the impact of the warm homes scheme in reducing fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. I am also aware of the popularity of that programme with regard to the insulation measures that have been installed in homes. I applaud the Eaga partnership, located in Dungannon, for the tremendous job that it has done. The programme is, however, overcommitted. It is highly popular, which shows that there is a need out there that must be addressed.

As a result of the in-year monitoring round and the money that I received in December, I have put £2 million into the warm homes scheme for this financial year, and along with my officials, I am examining the budgetary priorities for housing for the next three financial years. I assure the House that I will do all that I can to address the issue of fuel poverty throughout Northern Ireland and to support the work being done by Eaga plc.

In order to meet any shortfalls, I will also make a case to the Minister of Finance and Personnel for further allocations from the in-year monitoring rounds to address that shortfall and to protect the most vulnerable and the elderly in our society. I cannot agree more about the importance of that programme.

Mr Cobain: Given that we have no control over prices and wages, will the Minister agree that the idea of eradicating fuel poverty is absolute nonsense?

Ms Ritchie: In that instance, the better word, which the Housing Executive uses, would be "alleviation". Members on all sides of the House work with their constituents, with Government and with the Housing Executive to ensure an alleviation of fuel poverty. I hope that I have the support of my ministerial colleagues in trying to reduce levels of fuel poverty throughout Northern Ireland.

Proscribed Organisations

3. **Mr Burnside** asked the Minister for Social Development what meetings she and her officials have had with members of proscribed organisations since taking up her post; and to detail the nature of these meetings. (AQO 1508/08)

Ms Ritchie: In the course of my duties, I meet a wide range of individuals in a wide range of settings. It is not possible for me to attest to the status of each of them regarding their membership or otherwise of proscribed organisations. I can say, however, that neither I nor my officials have had meetings with any proscribed organisations.

Mr Burnside: That is a pretty clever answer. Therefore, what the Minister is saying is that it depends where the proscribed area is defined. The reason that I asked the question is that while I and others recognise that there are those in society who have been involved in terrorist activity in the past and who have evolved into good community work, there is a feeling from decent people in community organisations that many community groups are no more than fronts for past terrorist — proscribed or unproscribed — organisations. I hope that the Minister will agree that when granting community funding, we should be very careful that it is directed into pure community groups and not into fronts for former terrorist or proscribed organisations.

Ms Ritchie: I take on board, of course, what the Member for South Antrim Mr Burnside says. Shortly, I shall be considering the funding priorities for the voluntary and community sector. However, it would be very unfair and quite wrong of me or anyone else to make judgements about people on the basis of speculation or hearsay. As he will appreciate, applications come in for funding, and they are judged on their merits. However, I take on board what the Member has said.

3.45 pm

Mr Lunn: Irrespective of whether the Minister has met with representatives from proscribed organisations, does she agree that the end can justify the means, as has been frequently proven in recent times?

Ms Ritchie: The Member is obviously referring to the conflict transformation initiative, which is sub judice at the moment; therefore, I cannot comment on it. The Member is shaking his head, therefore, he is obviously not referring to that project.

We all meet a wide range of individuals in different settings, and when I meet people in a ministerial setting, it is not possible for me to attest to the status of their membership of organisations. People come to me with an expressed case, perhaps looking for resources

or trying to ensure that their project is given priority. However, I take on board the Member's comments.

Mr Craig: It has been an interesting debate about whom Members meet and whom they do not meet, especially considering that certain people tried to get political representatives of certain organisations to join with them. *[Interruption.]* Will the Minister outline what action she has taken to provide funding to small pockets of deprivation in loyalist communities that fall outside the Noble index? I believe that she has done some good work in those areas.

Ms Ritchie: On 13 November 2007, I was pleased to announce a further extension to the areas-at-risk programme. As Mr Craig will know, I designated Seymour Hill in Dunmurry as an area at risk.

A Member: Seymour who? *[Laughter.]*

Ms Ritchie: It was not that Seymour.

I also designated Ballybeen and other areas. In early November 2007, I met several delegations to discuss the need to target funding to those hard-to-reach loyalist communities. I am awaiting a paper from the DUP, which was promised to me on that occasion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Additional Resources: Departmental Plans

5. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to use the additional resources announced by the Minister for Finance and Personnel on 15 January 2008. (AQO 1637/08)

Ms Ritchie: The housing programme received additional resources of £52.64 million in the December monitoring round. The allocation is as follows: the social housing development programme will receive £26.6 million; the Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association will receive £19 million; the special purchase of evacuated dwellings — more commonly known as the SPED scheme — will receive £3.54 million; fuel poverty will receive £2 million; and the housing association voluntary purchase grant will receive £1.5 million.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for her answer. Although I am interested in the financial allocation, which is thanks to the due diligence of the Finance Minister, I am more interested in where that money will be spent. Recently, a Ballymena newspaper reported the Minister's party colleague and my North Antrim colleague Mr O'Loan as saying that a large amount of spending on social housing is an absolute must. Will the Minister assure me that areas such as Ballymena, Ballymoney and Ballycastle will not miss out on affordable and social housing, and that those areas will not play second fiddle to other areas of Northern Ireland?

Ms Ritchie: Having visited many parts of Northern Ireland over the past eight months, I am well aware of the social and affordable housing conditions in those areas. As the Member is aware, in September 2007, I visited the Dunclug estate and another area in Ballymena.

Furthermore, I met the Member for North Antrim Mr Storey, along with Mr O'Loan and Mr McKay, in November. I was charged with the need to upgrade that area of Dunclug. Interestingly, the Housing Executive is putting to its board this month proposals for phase one of the Dunclug improvement programme — an environmental improvement scheme. If approved, the Executive will proceed to scheme, design and tender with a proposed start date later this year. I will write to the three Members who came to me — including Mr Storey — when I am fully apprised of the situation.

I will make an announcement shortly about the social and affordable housing programme. In that announcement, I want to be able to address the housing needs that exist throughout Northern Ireland. Many people — in urban and rural areas — are on housing waiting lists and in need. As a representative from a rural constituency, I do not want to forget about the people who live in rural areas, irrespective of their geographical location in Ireland.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister confirm that the Colin area — in which I live — and others, such as the Shankill and west Belfast, have vital community youth services, which are in receipt of short-term funding from the Department, and that many of those services and the people employed to deliver them have not yet been informed by the Department whether they will receive funding after March 2008? Will the Minister undertake to resolve that situation urgently as she considers the additional resources available to her Department? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Ritchie: That question does not deal with housing, but notwithstanding that, I will be looking at the different aspects of the Department for Social Development when considering the resources available. I am conscious of the situation with regard to children and youth services, because representations on that matter — in the context of the overall voluntary and community services — have been made to me. I will try to address deprivation, need and disadvantage, because the Department for Social Development is about building communities through addressing those vital components.

Mr K Robinson: Considering Sir John Semple's estimate that 2,000 new social house builds are required each year, does the Minister accept that the additional budget allocation enabling her to deliver 1,500, 1,750 and 2,000 new units over the Budget period is little more than standing still?

Ms Ritchie: Some history of the situation may be of help to the Member. When I took up office on 8 May 2007, I had the funding to build only 600 new houses this year. With the provision of in-year monitoring, I hope to be able to achieve the target of 1,500 as specified in this year's Programme for Government. Following the initial negotiations of the draft Budget, I had the funding to build very few houses. I, therefore, consider the progress made to be an achievement in thinking, research and negotiation. The winners are the people of Northern Ireland who are on the waiting lists and those who have substantial savings and who are trying to get on the first rung of the housing ladder.

I am determined to ensure that Semple's — and the Executive's — target of 10,000 houses over the next five years will be met, and I will be seeking the support of my ministerial colleagues around the Executive table to do that. There might be problems in achieving that, but I am determined to leave no stone unturned. I need everybody's help, and I will also be making a case for shortfalls through the in-year monitoring process. Rest assured — I will provide housing to meet the specified need.

Travellers' Sites

6. **Mr Simpson** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline her Department's policy on locating Travellers' sites. (AQO 1636/08)

Ms Ritchie: The Department's policy on locating Travellers' sites is to ensure that the Housing Executive identifies, acquires and gets planning permission after full consultation at a local level to meet the assessed accommodation needs of Travellers.

It is worth noting that, in 2002, the Housing Executive carried out a comprehensive needs assessment of the Travelling community's accommodation requirements, which informed a five-year, rolling programme of work. Currently, the Housing Executive is carrying out a further needs assessment exercise, which will form the basis of a programme for Travellers' accommodation for the next five years. In addition, I am fully conscious of the recent 'Good Morning Ulster' programme that dealt specifically with Travellers' sites in Craigavon.

Mr Simpson: Does the Minister agree that no equality legislation states that Craigavon should be the dumping ground for Travellers' sites? In addition, why, in contravention of the direct rule Minister David Hanson's pledge that full consultation and community buy-in were essential, are additional sites being created in Craigavon? Finally, will the Minister give a clear-cut commitment to the House that if seven permanent sites are required in the Province, they will be equally divided across the Province and not simply placed in Craigavon?

Ms Ritchie: All Members must bear in mind that there must be a balance between the Traveller and settled communities. The Housing Executive has already written to Craigavon Borough Council about that issue, and I have asked the Housing Executive to facilitate a meeting with local political representatives as soon as possible in order to clarify how many sites are required to meet the needs of the Travelling community in Craigavon. When potential sites have been identified, local consultation will take place.

When listening to that radio debate, I was conscious of the wide range of views that were proffered from the settled community, public representatives and members of the Travelling community. A balance must be struck, available sites and particular needs must be considered, and a certain degree of sensitivity must be shown.

Mrs D Kelly: Under the review of public administration, does the Minister have any plans to transfer the delivery and planning of Travellers' sites to local government?

Ms Ritchie: During the consultation process, there was no significant support for the transfer of Traveller-site provision to councils. I have given further consideration to the transfer of certain housing functions to local government, but, as yet, I have not made a final decision on that matter. Travellers have a right to expect to be accommodated in housing of their choice. However, that right must be balanced with the rights of the settled community. I believe that responsibility for that issue should remain with the Department and the Housing Executive.

Mr Gardiner: Craigavon has been described as the headquarters for Travellers' sites in Northern Ireland, and new sites proposed by the Housing Executive would mean that there would be a total of five. Given that the majority of other authorities have made no provision whatsoever for Travellers, will the Minister assure Craigavon ratepayers that they will not have to pick up the rates bill for the disproportionate allocation of Travellers' sites, and will she undertake to hold an inquiry into the sanitary and waste-disposal facilities on those sites?

Ms Ritchie: I accept the sensitive nature of those issues. I repeat, there must be a balance between the needs of the settled and Travelling communities. I am well aware of the issues raised by Mr Simpson, Mrs Kelly and Mr Gardiner, and I heard such opinions vented on that radio debate. I am also aware that Mrs Kelly has written to me about those matters. That is why I have asked the Housing Executive to facilitate a meeting with Craigavon Borough Council and local political representatives in order to clarify the issues, and, following that meeting, I would appreciate it if the

Housing Executive and the council fully apprised me of the situation.

I take on board the comments that have been made today by Members on this issue.

4.00 pm

Social Housing

7. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of social housing starts that will be achieved by the end of the year 2007-08. (AQO 1545/08)

Ms Ritchie: The target is to achieve 1,500 social housing starts in 2007-08. As far as future years are concerned, I am delighted that my representations on the draft housing budget have been accepted. As the Member will know, additional funding has been made available to support me in delivering 1,500, 1,750 and 2,000 homes over the next three years respectively. My officials and I are currently considering the budgetary implications. I will, shortly, make an announcement on the social and affordable housing programme for the next three years. It remains my aspiration to deliver on the target of up to 10,000 new social homes over the next five years.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That ends Question Time. We will now continue with the debate on the Programme for Government and investment strategy.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Programme for Government and Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland

Debate resumed on amendments to motion:

That this Assembly endorses the Programme for Government and Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland agreed by the Executive. — [*The First Minister and deputy First Minister.*]

Which amendments were:

No 1: Leave out all after “Assembly” and insert:

“calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to lay a revised Programme for Government before the Assembly, as the Programme for Government currently before the Assembly does not properly address the deep divisions in this society and the need to build a shared future, does not make meaningful changes to balance the regional economy, and fails to provide for sustainable and integrated public services.”

No 2: After “Executive” insert:

‘; and calls on the Executive to ensure ongoing review and subsequent necessary revision’.

No 3: After “Executive” insert

“; and calls on the Executive to address further social and economic needs and support for the community and voluntary sector and to develop and promote policies for ‘A Shared Future’; and further calls for appropriate review and revision of the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland to ensure that it best delivers balanced regional development and underpins equality”.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin seo agus i bhfabhar leasú 2. I support the motion and amendment number 2. I endorse the Programme for Government and investment strategy that the Executive have put before us today. Furthermore, I applaud the process for the remarkable achievement that it is, and mark it as a huge step in the development of the process of government.

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

That process is remarkable, and, in many ways, exemplary. It is a path-breaking experiment towards government of the people by the people. It is a process that emanates directly from the objectives established by the Programme for Government:

“to address poverty and disadvantage, and to build a fairer and more equitable society”,

and to make

“A commitment to use prosperity to tackle disadvantage and to build a tolerant, inclusive and stable society”.

The Executive could, of course, pay lip service to those objectives. However, the statutory requirement of equality impact assessments (EQIAs) and the requirement of consultation with the people holds the potential to make real those ideals, allowing all to have their say and to influence outcomes.

Each departmental Committee will be part of scrutiny and ongoing monitoring and review, set against equality criteria. I am sure that all MLAs understand the simple seven-stage process of an EQIA. Without monitoring and measuring outcomes or equality impact assessments, the Programme for Government, investment strategy and Budget become futile.

Although all parties share constituencies of interest, Sinn Féin and the DUP have working-class interests at the forefront of our common ground considerations. We know that unless we measure the impacts that policies, programmes and projects are having on disadvantage and discrimination, and, therefore, changing outcomes in places such as the Village in south Belfast and the Bogside in Derry, we will not succeed in making a difference to people’s lives.

It is precisely through the process of consultation that we can ensure that we are working towards our objectives, and that we are making a difference to people’s lives. It is by engaging with them, in each sector, that our allocation of resources can be assessed and distributed. Indeed, the commitment given by the First Minister on OFMDFM’s intention to carry out a full equality impact assessment, and, in future, to allocate monitoring rounds on the basis of objective need, is a welcome development. I have no doubt that civic society will respond to the 12-week consultation and take ownership of the process.

It has been noticeable over recent months how so many media commentators feel a need for what they call a “real opposition” in the Assembly. Is an opposition an essential construct of democratic government? Is not the Government themselves, when they are directly accountable to the people, engaging and consulting with them, a more democratic institution?

Of course, the limitations of the process are evidenced by the fact that only three Departments had separately undertaken departmentally focused EQIA consultation processes at the end of last year. Smaller parties should take note, because it was by using the results of those consultations — although the consultations were not, in themselves, perfect — that the Minister of Finance and Personnel was able to allocate more funding from the block budget to the Education Minister for children and young people. Therefore, this is Government by the people, rather than Government by one team that continually squabbles with others and feeds a sense of division. Who wants to promote a false paradigm that serves to divide communities and keep them apart, and which in no way engages people’s strengths and innovative ability to work together to address inequalities as a community? That is not the work of modern intelligent governance.

Last week, our Finance Minister, Peter Robinson, said that, in a global world economy, Government

could have only limited influence on the state of the economy and that it is not the public sector that will be responsible for success. He went on to say that public spending alone can never create the society we want.

On the contrary, I believe that it is through the public sector that we can directly address the inequalities that characterise our regions and communities. Let me paraphrase Marshall McLuhan's famous saying "the medium is the message" to "the process is the outcome".

We do not need to write ourselves, Peter Robinson or the Executive out of the equation in the false belief that the global economy will change inequalities when left to its own devices or through its reliance on the employees of Société Générale — last week, one of that bank's employees performed in the global world economy and lost £3.5 billion.

It is only in the public sector that we can have a direct impact on the inequalities in our society. It is only when the public sector is under clear scrutiny and works in close engagement with the people that the processes and objectives set out in the draft Programme for Government and draft ISNI strategy can be realised. Take, for example, the £1.8 billion spent on procurement. How can we use that public money to buy social justice? How can we ensure that social requirements are included in procurement contracts so that we increase apprenticeship training for young people and tackle our economic inactivity register?

Structural change needs structural measures. By using the tools of public procurement alongside external investment that is used fairly, the Executive can help to close the widening gap between the rich and the disadvantaged. By using prosperity to tackle economic and social inequality, we would all be able to participate in future prosperity. That is not only right in itself, but it is also essential if we are to create a stable base for economic and political development. The best way to address exclusion is for us, ourselves, not to exclude, but to engage wholeheartedly in the process through equality impact assessments and to listen to what the community has to say.

The north-west wants its say. It wants to be heard, and it wants the outcomes to reflect that it has been listened to. The Stand Up for Derry cavalcade arrived at Stormont last week. Departmental statistics show how Derry has been neglected by direct rule Ministers. We want to know whether all local Ministers intend to use equality tools to ensure that areas such as Derry will no longer be discriminated against. Given that there will be a multi-billion-pound investment strategy in the coming decade, will Ministers address the most acute needs of the north-west? Will Ministers address the acute needs of north, west and south Belfast and Derry and elsewhere? The Stand up for Derry campaign demands that our public resources be allocated on the

basis of objective need and that external investment should have a direct and measurable impact on those most excluded from the labour market. If we are to make real the requirements and promises of inclusion and equality, all Ministers must adopt that approach to tackle the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots.

It makes good economic and political sense. Integrating the building of prosperity with the tackling of disadvantage will enable the Assembly to modernise the economy and to transfer the inequalities of a difficult past into a new and effective social dynamic, thereby creating a better future.

In laws and policies, the Assembly has the tools of change, and it must now make them work. In his statement today, the First Minister gave OFMDFM's commitment to making them work. The peace process requires inclusive and effective change. The last Executive merely promised; the new Executive can deliver. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Campbell): I welcome the Programme for Government and the investment strategy for Northern Ireland.

During the debate on the draft Programme for Government, I said that it was time to abolish silo thinking and time for Departments to choreograph their activities to achieve the best outcomes, avoid duplication of effort and make the most effective use of resources. The strategic and cross-cutting nature of the Programme for Government and investment strategy plays a part in getting all Departments to work together to address the central challenges and to build a better future for all the people of Northern Ireland.

The Committee welcomes the priorities as set out in the Programme for Government, because they embody the Department for Social Development's role in tackling disadvantage and building communities. The Committee particularly welcomes the identification of five strategic priorities, the highest of which focuses on growing a dynamic and innovative economy. Economic growth is the driving force behind the creation of wealth and the regeneration of all communities.

The work of reducing poverty and disadvantage is at the core of the Department for Social Development's policies and programmes. Therefore, the Committee is pleased that the commitment in the draft Programme for Government to use increased prosperity "to tackle disadvantage" is retained in the final document.

I welcome both the priority that has been given to tackling the housing crisis and the planned investment in social and affordable housing. The revised goal of investing £925 million in social and affordable housing by 2011, and at least £1.8 billion by 2018, is a good indication that the views expressed during the consultation period have been listened to. The decision

to invest £925 million by 2011 reflects the urgency of the social housing situation.

To realise that investment goal, all relevant Departments must play their part. The housing crisis is not an issue purely for the Department for Social Development. If the desired outcomes and targets of the Programme for Government are to be achieved, it is critical for that Department to work strategically and effectively with other Departments.

I welcome the Programme for Government's commitment to working towards the elimination of child poverty by 2020 and to reducing extreme child poverty by 50% by 2010. As was evidenced during Question Time, the Committee had serious reservations about the commitment in the draft document to the eradication of child poverty by 2020, because that seemed aspirational rather than realistic. I am pleased that the revised goal appears to be more realistic.

The target of working towards the elimination of severe child poverty by 2012 is welcome. However, there is an urgent need to develop and agree a definition — the target cannot be met unless we know what is meant by "severe" child poverty.

As many vulnerable households face fuel poverty, the objective of reducing the levels of that type of poverty is welcome. The Committee had serious concerns about the draft Programme for Government's targets for the eradication of fuel poverty. I am pleased that its target of eradicating fuel poverty in vulnerable households by 2010 and in all households by 2016 has been revised. Given the Government's limited influence on fuel prices, a target of alleviating fuel poverty in approximately 9,000 households each year through the implementation of energy efficiencies is much more realistic.

For the above reasons, the Committee for Social Development supports the motion.

Mr Elliott: I welcome many of the measures that have been outlined in the Programme for Government. However, we must be realistic and to accept that many of those measures will be difficult to achieve — more so, as time passes.

4.15 pm

My first point — and I am sure that many Members will agree with it — concerns the roads infrastructure in the Province. There is an ever-increasing number of vehicles on roads throughout the United Kingdom, and Northern Ireland is no different.

Members will all be aware of individual difficulties and problems in their own constituencies and areas. Enniskillen, which is one of the largest towns in my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, is currently without a bypass. I believe that it is the only major town in Northern Ireland without one, and,

despite the fact that it is an island town that provides a crossing point on Lough Erne, is therefore subject to major traffic congestion every day.

Other crossing points on Lough Erne are many miles outside the boundaries of Enniskillen, and many people have to travel that significant distance to cross the lough, resulting in a significant traffic bottleneck in Enniskillen.

Further major difficulties are created by the number of cars that travel from places such as the Republic of Ireland so that people can enjoy the outstanding shopping and other facilities offered by Enniskillen, and, indeed, County Fermanagh.

That is just one issue, and it is an example of a problem that will require much hard work and investment if progress in the west of the Province, and, especially in Fermanagh, is to be achieved.

Another significant difficulty is the road-maintenance structure. Many roads in Fermanagh and South Tyrone are in a poor state. The reason for that — and I am almost reluctant to say it — is that they have been abused by vehicles, and have had no maintenance and no protection. Many heavy-goods vehicles travel along those roads, and that is necessary for the people of the constituency. Fermanagh and South Tyrone have no significant public transport, no train service and no rail system. The only way that products can be transported is by road. Therefore, if those roads are not regularly upgraded and repaired, they become ever more dangerous.

In tandem with that is the knowledge that the process for road maintenance is becoming slower, with many roads in the constituency five years behind in their maintenance structure budget. If that continues, a situation will arise in which roads will not have been maintained for maybe 20, 30 or 40 years. Furthermore, I have been told that the prospect of roads being resurfaced only every 105 years is under discussion. That will not only infringe on the mobility available to the people of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, but will especially impact on the lives of many rural-based businesses and rural dwellers, many of whom are completely dependent on the ability to move their machinery and products to manage their businesses.

Another noteworthy point is the issue of little public transport and no rail facilities. People of Fermanagh and South Tyrone are often envious when they see so much finance and public money being invested in a rail network that they cannot use.

The A32 connecting road between Omagh and Enniskillen serves as an example: it is a protected route, it is an A-class road, but it is in a condition that we might have expected to see in the last century when people were using horses and carts to travel. It is outdated.

Mr S Wilson: I thought that you still used those.

Mr Elliott: Maybe some people still do. Maybe the Member from East Antrim travels to Stormont in some environmentally sensitive way.

As we seek to move into a progressive twenty-first century society, it is vital that road maintenance has a priority status with a view to developing internal mobility in this Province. Therefore, we must ensure that all people have equal status and equal rights to fair and equitable transport provision in the Province.

It would be remiss of me not to comment on agriculture and rural development. The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development highlighted some issues extremely well. I welcome that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development wants to be a rural champion. For too long, departmental bodies have been disconnected from the ordinary agriculture worker. Through an ever growing amount of red tape and bureaucracy, those bodies play a role in increasing the levels of stress experienced by many farmers and agriculture workers throughout Northern Ireland.

As locally elected representatives, we have a real opportunity to make a difference. However, rebuilding our farming industry will not be an easy task. I was disappointed that there was no reference to the report by the Red Meat Industry Task Force in the Programme for Government, which should form the basis of future arrangements for that part of the agriculture sector. It was compiled by people who are committed to helping our ailing red-meat industry and paints a true, if highly depressing, picture. Its recommendations deserve to be acknowledged as having been made from an informed position, which is why I find it disappointing and aggravating that the report has been forgotten about in the Programme for Government.

On a practical level, the Programme for Government does not go nearly far enough on the major issue of animal disease control. The aim to reduce the annual herd incidence of brucellosis by 20%, and of TB by 27%, in cattle by 2011 is not adequate. We should be trying to eradicate those diseases and, through animal-disease control, give the people and farmers of Northern Ireland a much healthier society. It is a demoralising situation for the farmers who have diseased cattle taken from them and slaughtered to have to rebuild their herds. Unless we promote the eradication of such diseases the situation will not change.

I welcome the increased funding secured by my colleague the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Michael McGimpsey, as an investment in the future of our children. Undoubtedly, all Members will be delighted by that news. However, although I have full confidence in the Minister to put the money he has received to good use, continued investment in

that area is required — we can never invest too much in the future. We have the opportunity to watch our children mix with one another and grow together, which has not been possible for the last 40 years and, in many instances, for the last century. It is imperative to address the needs of our young people so that, when they take over the mantle as the governors of Northern Ireland, they are prepared in mindset and ability to help this country fulfil its potential. The Programme for Government could have gone further in investigating the methods and aims of initiatives for children in Northern Ireland. That demands further insight due to the complexities that surround the treatment of our children.

I am a strong advocate of the need to differentiate between children in relative poverty, and those in the severest poverty. I do that, not with the aim of creating two levels of poverty, but so that the issue can be tackled in an appropriate and effective manner. That means that families with children in the severest poverty are given a helping hand to increase opportunities for their children. The Programme for Government fails to reach that level of detail in the provisions for children, which disappoints me. Overall, I am hopeful for the future of our children, and I am sure that the Minister will invest money in an appropriate and rewarding manner.

The Programme for Government has given me some hope for the future. As I have made clear, there are issues that worry me, which I look forward to tackling in the Chamber and in the Committees. Members have the chance to help Northern Ireland move forward, and I, and the Ulster Unionist Party, remain committed to playing our part in creating increased prosperity for this Province and for my constituency.

Mrs D Kelly: I support the amendment standing in the name of Mark Durkan. Although I welcome some of the stated aspirations of the Programme for Government, it is characterised by a number of failings, including the gaps in key issues and the disconnection between its stated aims and the capacity of actions, targets and budgets to deliver on them.

I do not share the Member for Strangford Iris Robinson's view that the Programme for Government is focused, with clear strategies, targets and actions. Going by the Programme for Government, one would hardly know that this society was emerging from nearly 40 years of intense conflict. Priority 2 deals with tolerance, inclusion and health, and it is striking that the short paragraph that addresses division is high on rhetoric, low on specifics, and includes no key goals.

The SDLP believes that the key priority must be to tackle sectarianism and promote good relations, as required by the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It is not clear whether references to improving societal relations are aimed at replacing existing commitments, or

whether the priority of recent years has simply been downgraded. Commitments on good-relations obligations are noticeably absent from the proposals of Departments.

It is breathtaking that the Programme for Government and the Budget are silent on the far-reaching implications of the proposals to end academic selection and reform post-primary education, when children from disadvantaged families achieve fewer GCSEs, are much less likely to pass the 11-plus, and are less likely to go on to third-level education. There is a steep hill to climb to tackle the legacy of inequality.

Gaps persist in respect of the Civic Forum, and on the targets and proposals that aim to demonstrate how the Government will deliver on their stated aims. There is no specific reference in the programme's aims, strategic priorities, themes or principles to tackling the legacy of uneven economic and social development across the North, which has contributed to the conflict of the past and the injustice of the present. The investment strategy for Northern Ireland is not satisfactory on that score either, and the lack of proposed investment in the Belfast-Derry railway is a good example. However, one of the main parties in Government promised the following in their election manifesto:

"Sinn Féin in government will work to...ring-fence a meaningful proportion for programmes aimed at reversing economic inequality and eliminating poverty."

There is a disconnection between the warm words and the actual commitments in the Programme for Government. For example, it contains a welcome commitment to sustainability as a cross-cutting theme, but there is no commitment to create an environmental protection agency — which was another Sinn Féin commitment.

We are also told that one of the strategic priorities is to promote tolerance and inclusion, but there is no reference to a shared future. Equality is championed, but there is still no single equality Bill. Progressive proposals on the Civic Forum would have supported the commitment to partnership, and that is another issue on which there has been undue delay.

The Programme for Government also indicates a very welcome new target for tackling severe child poverty, but that is undermined by the budgetary reality. The SDLP in the last Executive ensured that a children's fund was created, along with a children's strategy that was supported by a budget. Halving child poverty by 2010 and eradicating it by 2020 are the Whitehall targets that were announced by Tony Blair and repeated by current Prime Minister, Gordon Brown MP, and which were written into the direct rule anti-poverty strategy by former Secretary of State Peter Hain MP.

An emphasis on growth in the absence of a properly funded anti-poverty strategy creates a Thatcherite impression that must be dispelled. Clear strategies must be outlined to show how prosperity will be used to tackle disadvantage, as promised.

The Lifetime Opportunities strategy was limited in its ambition and lacking in detail. Nevertheless, it was a starting point from which the Executive should not retreat. A detailed action plan is urgently required, and I hope that I will not be challenged on that point by Sinn Féin Members, after their repeated criticism of the Lifetime Opportunities strategy for being too general and unfocused.

Continued emphasis on investing in an infrastructure is essential. However, the SDLP remains concerned about the approach to investment and repeats its call to reshape the SIB to reflect the Executive's commitment to partnership.

The SDLP wants reassurances that the investment strategy has undergone a full equality impact assessment and that the historic underinvestment west of the Bann will be robustly addressed. It would have been helpful if, as a basis for moving forward, a strategic audit had been carried out of the social and economic condition of Northern Ireland. I understand that one such report exists, but neither the First Minister nor the deputy First Minister believes that it is worth publishing.

4.30 pm

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Programme for Government, the investment strategy and the Budget contain comments from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, among which is a statement saying that Executive are determined to make a difference by building a better future for all — and I emphasise the words "for all".

The statement also said:

"Our over-arching aim is to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society".

I will focus on the words "fair and prosperous".

In response to a question from Mr Hamilton on the promotion of economic growth in all areas, Mr McGuinness admitted that the focus was previously on Belfast, but that the PFG wanted economic growth everywhere. I welcome that.

On 22 January, I asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Robinson, whether the final Budget was a good Budget for areas west of the Bann, especially my constituency of West Tyrone, which includes Omagh and Strabane District Councils. Of course, the Minister said that he believed that "this is a good Budget". He went on to say that the PFG tied the Executive to ensuring that:

"prosperity is shared equally across Northern Ireland." —
[Official Report, Bound Volume 26, p323, col 2.]

Those are all positive comments, and I welcome them. Equality, fairness and prosperity are all referred to in the documents.

Given the historical underinvestment in places such as Strabane and Omagh, I looked through the documents to see whether I could spot any mention of Strabane. However, I could not find it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You may continue.

Mrs McGill: I am sorry; I thought that a Member wanted me to give way.

Strabane is in the unenviable position of being first in the league table of figures showing the levels of deprivation in the 26 district council areas. It has the worst score.

The documents contain many positive points, including the fact that OFMDFM has made tackling poverty, deprivation and disadvantage a priority. Despite that, however, I thought that a connection would be made between the historical situation in Strabane and Omagh, which also features in the top 10 of that league table, and tackling poverty and disadvantage in areas such as West Tyrone.

I hope that those people in my constituency — in Strabane and in both urban and rural districts — who have vision for the area and who want to create jobs and move forward will be supported by the Executive and the Assembly. I hope that there will be inward investment and that Strabane, in particular, and Omagh will get their fair share of the planned 6,500 new jobs.

Every day, as I travel to the Assembly from outside Dunnamanagh, I notice the young fellows in vans — tradesmen, builders and construction workers — who have had to leave the area to work in Belfast. They leave their families and travel to Belfast and back every day, because there is not much work in their areas. The situation is improving, but I want those areas to be considered in other monitoring rounds, and when other finance is available. I am not asking for anything different or exceptional; I am asking that Government priorities target the areas of need.

I wish to mention a couple of other matters, including water and sewerage provision in the rural area in which I live. I have mentioned it before, but it is important to people in my area. Some houses have no mains water. A man with a young family told me that bringing mains water to his premises would cost him £90,000, despite assistance from the Department. The quotations that I referred to earlier mentioned fairness and equality — that is not fair. That family should not have to pay £90,000 for mains water. Although money is being spent on welcome infrastructure projects, such as the dualling of the A5, sewerage and water are key issues for people in my area.

The documents mention tourism. I have mentioned the signature projects before, and I will do so again. My area, the Glenelly Valley, is one of the most beautiful. The route that goes from Lifford and Strabane to County Derry, through Ligfordrum, Plumbridge and Cranagh, is one of the most beautiful drives. I mentioned it when Minister Dodds was in the Chamber. Clearly, there is no signature project for my area in the Programme for Government, although I mentioned it at the time. I welcome Minister Dodds's statement that projects on a lesser scale to that of the signature projects could be funded. I hope that some of that funding will come to my area.

I repeat that I was looking for mentions of Strabane in the documents. I noticed that Lisburn and its library were mentioned. I hope that Newtownstewart, which is in the Strabane District Council area — the area that is in the unenviable position of being top of the league of disadvantage — will get a library.

I have touched on some of the issues that matter to people in my area, and I hope that I have not been too critical of some of the Ministers — including those from my party. Contrary to what was said earlier, I have not been silenced. I will challenge them, and it is important that people do so.

It is important that they are challenged. However, Sinn Féin Members are encouraged to speak up for the people they represent, and I am proud to do that. In conclusion, I hope that some of my points will be taken on board. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It would be remiss of me not to note that history has been made in the House this afternoon. For the first time, a Sinn Féin Member referred to Northern Ireland as "Northern Ireland". I cannot allow that to pass without having it noted on the record.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Wells, you know fine well that that is not a point of order. You are just delaying Mr Sammy Wilson.

Mr Wells: Mr Wilson, will you get to your feet and speak please?

Mr S Wilson: I knew that that could not be allowed to pass.

Mrs McGill: On a point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I was quoting the Minister. I said "Northern Ireland" as a matter of accuracy. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Again, that is not a point of order.

Mr S Wilson: I welcome the fact that we have an agreed Programme for Government — not a draft, but the final document — despite the begrudging amendment from the Alliance Party, which seems to think that the role of the opposition is to find fault

where there is no fault; to be negative when there is no need to be negative, and to cry about problems when there are none. I suppose that we will just have to indulge them.

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: OK — why not.

Mr McGlone: The Member should have been here when his colleague Rev William McCrea expressed his concerns about the Programme for Government in considerable voice. He opposed a number of projects put forward by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. It will be interesting to see what way he votes this evening.

Mr S Wilson: The Member will find that I, too, have some comments and qualifications to make.

I was referring to how the Alliance Party wants to throw out the whole document, rather than identify the one or two issues about which it is concerned, just because it does not provide them with a few more quangos on which they can serve under the guise of ‘A Shared Future’.

Dolores Kelly is sitting too close to the Alliance Party. Perhaps their kind of negativity is beginning to rub off on her. Her whole speech was about how the Programme for Government did not deal with economic inequality or real social issues. Yet, on reading the document, one encounters policies such as: increasing productivity in the private sector, which should increase wages; getting the long-term unemployed into work, which is one of the best ways of lifting people out of poverty, and getting people additional qualifications so that they can get better jobs. I do not know how else people can be lifted out of poverty, other than through the kind of policies that are set out in the document.

Rather than dwelling on the detail, had the Member read the highlights in the Programme for Government she might have been able to identify the ways in which economic inequality is being addressed.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Wilson: I wish to say a couple of things. I would give way, but I think I am time limited, and I have already lost a minute earlier through the intervention of one of the Member’s party colleagues.

I, too, have concerns about the Programme for Government: given the size of the document, it would be foolish for Members to say that they have no concerns about it.

I will mention one issue, about which the Committee for Education, on which I serve, has expressed concern; and Members will wish to keep a careful eye on the matter also. There is a commitment in the Programme for Government to set up an education and skills authority. I congratulate the Executive: in September,

they realised the size of that task and instructed the Minister of Education to carry out extensive pre-legislative scrutiny.

4.45 pm

Over the past three months, the Committee for Education has had the opportunity to speak to departmental officials and those who have been tasked with setting up the education and skills authority. I warn the House that coming down the road is the one of the most extensive pieces of legislation that there has ever been in the Assembly. In the form of two Bills, and through 1,200 amendments, it will rewrite much of the education legislation that has existed since 1948. Its essence will be the setting up of the biggest, unelected education quango in Europe. That quango will not be accountable and will be put in place to do the Department of Education’s will.

The Assembly was told that the education and skills authority was designed to save money. Indeed, savings of around £25 million were written into the education budget for the next three years. However, when it came to scrutiny of the supposed £25 million, the Committee was told that savings might be in the region of £15 million to £25 million. It was then told that yearly savings would be at the bottom of that range. Later, it was told that savings will be £15 million over a period of time. The setting up of the education and skills authority will have a dramatic effect on the education budget for the next three years, because half of the efficiency savings that are built into the education budget are attributed to it. However, a letter from the Department has now indicated that instead of £25 million each year, as previously promised, it will be £15 million over a period of time. That will affect schools in all Members’ areas.

The education and skills authority will implement the Bain Report’s recommendations and the area planning of schools, which, because of closures and rationalisations, will affect schools in every Member’s constituency. I am not against that: I understand that the Assembly must deal with that issue. It is one of the issues that will show whether the Assembly has grown up. However, that should, at least, be carried out by a body that has some degree of local and regional accountability. As it stands, the body will take decisions that affect schoolchildren right across all constituencies, without the necessary input from the Assembly or from local people. There is no interface with local areas. Although I am not a cheerleader for education and library boards, at least they allow some local accountability for the delivery of education services. Those services, many of which are essentially local, will be administered regionally by an authority that has no local or elected input. Members ought to be aware of what is coming down the line in that regard.

The Assembly was promised that the education and skills authority would do away not only with education and library boards, but with all the fractional, sectoral interests that have wasted education resources through the duplication and triplication of schools in some areas of Northern Ireland. However, as a result of pressure from some of those sectors, the original promise that 11 bodies would be merged into one will not be fulfilled. The boards will go and the controlled sector will lose its voice. However, the Catholic, Irish-medium, integrated and voluntary sectors will maintain their voices.

The Assembly is setting itself up for collision with the representatives of the controlled sector. The proposed legislation will lead to a change in the boards of governors of controlled schools; yet, because of equality legislation, places can no longer be guaranteed for Protestant churches on those boards.

However, because there has been no change in the boards of governors in the maintained-schools sector, the Catholic Church schools sector will still be able to retain the same degree of control over its schools. The Assembly is heading towards a head-on collision with the Protestant Churches on this issue, because they are going to be denied any input into controlled-sector schools — control which they handed over. However, Church control will still be maintained in the Catholic schools sector. The promise of that legislation is in the Programme for Government.

That is an important issue for the Committee for Education, and for all parties in the Assembly — it is not simply a DUP issue. That is an issue that will affect all of us, as public representatives. We must ensure that the changes that will be made in the administration of education are not such that we are left to watch an unelected mega-quango doing things to education that we do not wish to be done and are powerless to stop. I hope that there will be full scrutiny of the proposed legislation during the coming year.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don Chlár Rialtais agus don straitéis atá os comhair an Tionóil inniu. Nuair a chuir an tAire an dréachtBhuiséad os comhair an Tionóil dúirt sé go ndearnadh sna Sé Chontae é. Anois, déanfaidh sé féin agus na hAíre eile cinnte go ndéanfaidh siad Buiséad don mhuintir an Tuaiscirt go léir.

I support the Programme for Government and the investment strategy that have been presented by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and agreed, unanimously, by the Executive. I support the motion, and the amendment that has been tabled by the Ulster Unionist Party.

Last year, when the Minister of Finance and Personnel presented the draft Budget, he stated that it bore the

proud stamp of having been made — I am sorry that Jim Wells is not present in the Chamber to hear me say — in the North of Ireland. Last week, when the Minister commended the Budget to the House, he stated that it is now time for delivery. I agree with that sentiment. The Budget, the investment strategy, the Programme for Government, and all that we do in the Assembly, must have an impact — in a fair and equitable way — on the lives of all people.

The Programme for Government has at its core the acceptance that inequalities exist and that we must strive to eliminate them, in all their forms. The investment strategy must deliver better public services for all. Therefore, I support the Programme for Government and the investment strategy, which set out the way in which the Executive and the Assembly intend to tackle the obvious regional disparity in infrastructure, and to address the need for more investment in public transport so that it is made more accessible across the Six Counties, with a particular focus on social exclusion and rural access.

Sinn Féin welcomes the investment of £137 million in new trains and the rail network. That will allow Translink to buy 20 new trains, and will promote and assist the growth in numbers of those who travel by train. For the people of the north-west and Derry, that will end the restriction on investment on the Derry railway line and reverse decades of neglect, for which direct rule Ministers were — not solely — culpable.

That new investment will allow Translink to take important railway infrastructure projects forward, and will include £12 million for track life-extension works north of Ballymena, and the start of a £64 million track relay project between Coleraine and Derry. The latter is a point that I am keen to highlight, as it often falls on deaf ears. I am sure that Mr Deputy Speaker will be glad to know of that project, which is long overdue and is vital to the economic growth of the north-west. There will also be £40 million for other significant improvements to the railway line between Belfast and Dublin, and between Knockmore and Lurgan. Those schemes will reduce journey times and increase the frequency of services.

Over the next three years, there will also be £45 million of new investment in buses. That will allow for the continuation of bus replacements and further modernisation of the bus fleet. Coupled with quality bus corridors, it will make public transport by bus and rail a more attractive alternative to a private car. That, in turn, will encourage the demand for more routes and services, and greater linkages to island-wide networks.

We welcome joint funding — with the Irish Government — of £14 million towards runway safety at the City of Derry airport and the dual-carriageway scheme from Aughnacloy to Derry, and onwards to Letterkenny.

That dual-carriageway scheme will be one of the biggest road schemes in the country.

The funding for the airport will help to consolidate a vital piece of infrastructure for ensuring economic growth in the north-west and, with the dualling scheme, it will highlight how investment — North and South — must play a role in continuing growth. Economic growth will not be defined by a line on a map, and those investments are an effective way to bring about balanced regional development.

Over the three years to 2011, £612 million will be invested in the road network. That will result in a significant increase in the size of the motorway and dual carriageway network, reduce journey times and improve access to rural and urban centres. Sinn Féin also supports the many road improvements: the M1, Westlink and M2 upgrades; the dualling of the A4 from Dungannon to Ballygawley; and the opening of the dual carriageway between Beech Hill and Cloghogue in 2010. The investment will allow progress on a number of other strategic road improvement schemes, including the A6 from Derry to Dungiven; the dualling from Maydown to City of Derry Airport; and the dualling from Randalstown to the M22 at Castledawson. All of that is important, particularly considering that the economy of this island is the responsibility of us all, regardless of where we live. We must improve regional networks to end regional disparity.

I commend the Minister for Regional Development for his commitment to the north-west in recent decisions on roads, rail and the airport, which have left many people there expressing their deep gratitude to him. As he has said, that is work in progress, which is to be further advanced, but it is towards an end to regional disparity west of the Bann, particular in the rural areas of Tyrone and elsewhere. Standing up for Derry is also about standing up for the aim of bringing an end to regional disparity.

As a member of the Committee for Regional Development, I acknowledge that the Department carried out an equality impact assessment, which will point out where the inequalities are and provide the indicators of imbalance and disparity for our future work. I also welcome the fact that all members of the Executive now accept that we can only deliver the goals set out in the Programme for Government by equality proofing the work of the Assembly. All forms of inequality must be eliminated. It must be acknowledged that, for the first time, there is agreement at a strategic level that the Budget, the Programme for Government and the investment strategy will be subject to equality impact assessments.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member acknowledge that equality impact assessments and good relations are

statutory obligations under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and were not thought up nor dreamt of by Sinn Féin?

Mr McCartney: Absolutely. I further point out, and I am sure that the Member will agree, that no equality impact assessments were carried out under the last Executive, despite those statutory provisions.

Mrs D Kelly: There were.

Mr McCartney: If you check the records, you will find that there were not. The last Executive failed to equality-proof its work. Mindful of the SDLP's amendment, what better way would there have been to guarantee a shared future than to have carried out an equality impact assessment, which I say the previous Executive did not do?

Mr S Wilson: Which was the second biggest party then? *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCartney: In conclusion, the Minister of Finance once reminded us that, if there is no Programme for Government, there can be no Government. I agree with that, but we cannot afford to ask whether the Government can deliver its own Programme for Government. This must be the beginning of a journey to end structural disparity and the resultant inequality. Let this be the Government for all the people. Mar sin, tugaim tacaíocht don mholadh agus don rún.

Lord Morrow: I have no problem with the Ulster Unionist Party's amendment. Any Programme for Government has a statutory obligation to incorporate an ongoing review, with subsequent revision where necessary. However, I am disappointed by the negative attitude that the Alliance Party has adopted since it came into the Assembly, and I am sure that its supporters will also be disappointed. As Mr Sammy Wilson has said, Alliance always looks for negatives when none exist.

5.00 pm

Neither does the SDLP want to be outdone on negativity, so much so that it has joined that band of Members that says that they should all be negative, no matter what is being said about the Programme for Government. Those Members are saying that they have a bounden responsibility to be negative. The Alliance Party and the SDLP could therefore join to form a party that is called something like the new negative democratic labour party.

Mr S Wilson: Does the Member accept that, given that the Programme for Government is an agreed strategy, at least one Member of the SDLP is not negative? The Minister for Social Development must have said yes to it, even if the rest of her party now says no.

Lord Morrow: That is a good point: as we have been reminded so many times, the Executive are a four-party mandatory coalition. The thoughts and views of one party or organisation are not represented

on the Executive; a combination of the views of four parties are represented. We have heard much in the past — and I add that this is not a criticism— from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr McGimpsey, for example, when he felt that he was not getting enough money. I am glad to say that the Budget settlement means that he now feels that big improvements have been made to his funding and that there is sufficient room for him to deliver an effective Health Service. I am sure that we are all grateful to hear that.

Of course, the Minister for Social Development, who faces an enormous task in delivering the housing programme, has also come out with a smile on her face, saying that she is a lot happier now. When you see Mr McGimpsey and Margaret Ritchie smiling together, it must mean that good days are ahead.

That is why it is disappointing that the Alliance Party feels that it must play the role of negative party.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Lord Morrow: I will, certainly. I want to hear the Member's negativity.

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for giving way. No doubt, he will recognise the right of any Member of any democratic Chamber to propose alternative views. Rather than simply banding us as negative, would the Member care to engage with any of the criticisms that the Alliance Party is voicing?

Lord Morrow: Of course, any political party has the right to challenge any Programme for Government or, indeed, anything that a Government might do. No matter what might be thought of those of us who sit on these Benches, we have never been shy in the past about being challenging, and we will not be so in the future. If we feel that aspects of the Programme for Government should be dickied up, strengthened and directed on another path, we will say so.

The Alliance Party keeps missing the point that there is more than just being negative, which its amendment seeks to be. That party is refusing to accept that others can move this Province forward. The Alliance Party felt that it wore that mantle and that it was the only party on this earth that could ever take this Province forward.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel said:

“without an agreed Programme for Government, there cannot be government.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 25, p363, col 2*].

How true that is. Today, we have a Programme for Government. I challenge the SDLP and the Alliance Party in particular to acknowledge that we have a Programme for Government, at the heart of which is the economy. How can prosperity be created? It can be achieved through an effective, efficient and working

economy, and I believe that the Programme for Government will do that.

However, there are some things that I think should have been included in the Programme for Government. I have listened to some Members talk about the areas that they represent. One said that she looked in vain for the name of one town that she represents, only to discover that it was never mentioned in the Programme for Government, despite that fact that it had the unenviable record of being an unemployment black spot. That Member was correct on that point, and any Member is right to challenge arguments that have been made in the Chamber and to articulate the views of the people whom they represent. I intend to do that in the months ahead so far as Fermanagh and South Tyrone is concerned. For too long, the west has been neglected, and we must look to the affluent east, from where Mr Sammy Wilson comes.

They have services such as the train. We do not see trains; we have to go to Belfast to get a look at one. We want the west rejuvenated and we do not want task forces. Some Members said earlier that the way to rejuvenate the west was to have task forces. That is not the way to do it: the west must be rejuvenated by investment. We know what the problems are, we know where they exist and we want them taken on board. We do not want talking shops and task forces set up to identify them.

Our road infrastructure could be better; thankfully it is improving. The A4, at a cost of more than £100 million, from Moygashel to the Ballygawley roundabout is on course. That will bring untold benefit to the west, but it is still not enough.

We want our roads in Fermanagh to be improved. Why should Fermanagh not have the same standard of roads as anywhere else in Northern Ireland? Those of us who represent those areas fail to understand why Fermanagh roads are so inferior, for instance, to Mr Sammy Wilson's roads. Mr Wilson need not tell me that it is because he is a better representative than anybody else. [*Laughter.*] He may bring his own talents to these debates. People in the west contend that they have been treated as second-class citizens for far too long. Far too many people travel from the west to work in the east.

We want the jobs distributed to the west on the same basis as they are distributed to everywhere else in Northern Ireland. We want an improvement in our roads; we want our education system and our facilities to be equal to the rest. Why should we not?

It will not be done by taking the attitude that the Alliance Party has adopted in its amendment. I appeal to the party to show some maturity, withdraw the amendment and throw its lot behind a Programme for Government agreed among the four political parties. If

that conglomeration can agree, that says something, and the only odd one out now is the Alliance Party. My colleague says they were the odd ones anyway, so is it any wonder that their political base and their support has dwindled to such an extent? I suspect that, after the next Assembly election, we will not see them at all and they will be what is called a rare breed. They will disappear.

In the Programme for Government there is a statement which reads:

“Our overarching aim is to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland, with respect for the rule of law”

That is highly important and encapsulates what this Programme for Government is about. We must have a society built on equality. At times I think that the nationalist community feels that unionists are afraid of that word “equality”. I am not afraid of equality, but I want equality for unionists too. That is something that we have not had for the past 30 years.

Therefore, I believe that, if the Programme for Government is to mean anything, it has to be a Programme for Government that works not only for all the people of Northern Ireland, but for all the areas of Northern Ireland. That is what concerns me. I hope that it will be rural-based, not urban-based; however, there are big communities in Northern Ireland which have felt neglected.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Lord Morrow: I trust that the Programme for Government will address those issues.

Mr McClarty: I, like Lord Morrow, oppose the amendment put forward by the Alliance Party. Like Lord Morrow, I believe that we in the Ulster Unionist Party would not be doing our jobs unless we deconstructed some of the Alliance’s arguments. The Ulster Unionist Party is wholeheartedly committed to overcoming sectarianism, bigotry and racism in Northern Ireland. We are committed to rationalising the delivery of services where possible.

However, the Alliance Party’s insistence on wheeling out the sensationalist £1.5 billion figure from the cost of division report during this consultation period is misleading for the public and unhelpful in making progress in this place. Costs for policing and security are included in that figure, as are the policing of civil disorder, the key persons protection scheme and the Historical Enquiries Team. Does the Alliance Party contend that civil disorder does not happen anywhere else in the United Kingdom or Europe? Does the Alliance Party consider that we should not protect key persons in Northern Ireland? Does it contend that we should abolish the Historical Enquiries Team?

The figure also contains compensation claims for victims with terrorist-related injuries. It is difficult to

accept any approach that regards support for victims as an unacceptable financial burden resulting from the divide.

The report that the Alliance Party often quotes from also contains substantial allocations for community relations. It seems strange that a party condemns division in our society, yet it questions expenditure on efforts to overcome that division. The Alliance Party needs to bring itself back down to the ground. We cannot wish a new society in Northern Ireland into existence. We all have to get our hands dirty with all sections in society and move forward based on the reality.

The Ulster Unionist Party accepts that more must be done, but the Alliance Party’s position does a disservice to the reality of the difficulties faced by the Executive and by Northern Ireland. Having said that, the Alliance Party has recognised that the previous Executive, which was led by the Ulster Unionist Party, invested in community relations and in a shared future, despite its party’s opposition to it. Indeed, the recent statement by the five —

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr McClarty: No, I will not give way. This is a six-hour debate, and you will have plenty of time to come back later.

The recent statement by the five Protestant clergymen in north Belfast highlights the importance of a shared future. However, contrary to what the Alliance Party is implying, this is not about pleasing the accountants, even if the savings are nowhere near the reported £1.5 billion a year.

Division in Northern Ireland is a challenge that the Ulster Unionist Party is prepared to meet, but responding to that challenge is not helped by the endless use of mythical financial savings. During the consultation period, the Alliance Party also criticised the Programme for Government and the Budget for being about a low-tax economy.

Therefore, is the Alliance Party’s finance spokesperson against low taxes? Are we then to assume that an Alliance Party that is in favour of tax-varying powers for the Northern Ireland Assembly is really in favour of tax increases for Northern Ireland? It would seem so. Do we really need tax increases, in addition to all the competitive challenges that face businesses in Northern Ireland? Does Northern Ireland need an increased tax burden? The answer must be a definitive no.

I appreciate that the Alliance Party has concerns for the future of Northern Ireland. However, it should not assume that it is the only party that holds such concerns, nor should it assume that it is the only party that can deliver on those concerns. It is easy to stand on the sidelines and throw highly moral sound bites at profoundly difficult challenges.

I accept that the Alliance Party is doing its democratic duty in scrutinising the Programme for Government, but does it recognise the distance that we have collectively come and the achievements of this Executive?

The Ulster Unionist Party has reservations about the Programme for Government and the Budget. However, in the name of moving forward, we will support the Executive so that we can help to deliver a peaceful, prosperous and normalised Northern Ireland.

5.15 pm

Mrs Hanna: I speak in support of the SDLP amendment. Even in the few weeks since the publication of the draft Programme for Government, global economic prospects have deteriorated significantly.

Some commentators state that the US economy is in recession, and the health of that economy is the greatest single factor impacting on Northern Ireland's prospects for inward investment. That does not auger well for the prospects for our investment conference that is scheduled for a few months' time. The outcome of the Varney Review was a crushing disappointment and demonstrates that Gordon Brown has little interest in what goes on here.

The United Kingdom Government have bungled the Northern Rock affair, and our economy — dependent as it is on public spend — is totally reliant on the block grant. As property prices fall, it will become obvious that reliance on the sales of public assets has been overstated. It is hoped that Workplace 2010 — the selling of publicly owned estates — will be better handled than some of our PFIs.

I also fear for the social economy, in which it is estimated that 30,000 people are employed. Many of them, especially in the health sector, do indispensable work. That social economy has benefited greatly from EU funding, which will taper off rapidly under Peace III. I have no quarrel with sustainable economic growth being the central aim of the draft Programme for Government. Wealth cannot be shared equitably if it is not created in the first instance. One of the key tenets of social democracy is interdependency: economic success, social justice, protection for the environment and cultural vitality must go hand in hand. As we are emerging from over three decades of conflict, that interdependency is essential.

I agree that we need investment, but the draft Programme for Government should have delivered a baseline analysis of the economic and social profile of Northern Ireland, how that relates to the policy and the investment goals set down, and, more importantly, how progress in attaining those goals will be measured. That would have been of more benefit than the few paragraphs that the issue was afforded.

Last Friday's appointment of the four victims' commissioners shows that the two largest parties have abandoned the aims of the shared future strategy. Its coherent vision was to bring about:

"The establishment over time of a normal, civic society, in which all individuals are considered as equals, where differences are resolved through dialogue in the public sphere, and where all people are treated impartially. A society where there is equity, respect for diversity and a recognition of our interdependence."

As Mark Durkan said, there is nothing new on poverty, and there have been no new targets set. There must be a more ambitious and significant target. Neither is there any strategy for tackling sectarianism, which is still a cancer in our society. Such words as "peaceful", "fair" and "tolerance" are mentioned, but if society does not know where the starting point is, it is difficult to know where we are going; we do not have any real prospect of getting there. The idea of a vision, so well expounded in the shared future strategy, has been hollowed out.

The increased allocation to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was welcome, and it vindicated the Members who said that the initial allocation was inadequate. Health is an area in which infinite and changing demands will always have to be met from limited resources. I am particularly grateful that we can go some way towards implementing the recommendations of the Bamford Review. The commitment to targets regarding the moving of patients from institutions to the community, the aims regarding the necessary infrastructure of sheltered and supported accommodation and the targets to reduce the number of suicides are also welcome.

No area is more complex than health, and the Minister, the members of the Health Committee and Members must work together in an attempt to achieve more efficient and effective delivery of services, promote good health and coping strategies, and prevent ill health by means of good-parenting and early-intervention programmes such as Sure Start. Indeed, as the Minister said earlier, we must eliminate MRSA, clostridium difficile and other hospital-acquired infections. National Health Service dental treatment must be made more widely available; patient journeys must be shortened to 18 weeks; direct access to medical specialists must be made easier; five-year cancer survival rates must be improved; there must be a balanced and equitable geographical spread of acute and primary care; and there must be a named public servant who, no matter what agency he or she works for, will act as a Sherpa through the systems' bureaucratic complexities.

I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. On the subject of international affairs, I welcome the statement that all Members must engage positively with the European Union and build on existing

partnerships and collaboration across key policies and programmes.

Since we joined the Common Market in 1974, the SDLP has always been strongly pro-European. Europe, and the idea of dissolving traditional enmities, has been a tremendous example for us, and we benefit enormously — not only materially, but in the powerful impact of being able to participate in the European Union's great conflict-resolution model.

Finally, as Chairperson of the Assembly All-Party Group on International Development, I wish to mention a motion, which, in the near future, will instigate a debate on the role that the Assembly and civic society can play in international development — especially in our relationships with developing countries — and I am glad and grateful that representatives of all the main parties have co-proposed it. I hope that that motion will receive the widest possible support in order that the Assembly can send out an inclusive and fair message that we have a real vision for the future in Northern Ireland and our relationships further afield.

Mr Wells: As mentioned earlier in a point of order, history has been made by the Member for West Tyrone, who referred to Northern Ireland as Northern Ireland. Indeed, at a recent OFMDFM Committee meeting, a member of Sinn Féin referred to Londonderry by its proper name.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member recall that a member of his party referred to the North of Ireland as the Six Counties?

Mr Wells: We are dealing with that Member — action is being taken. The heavily-bandaged Member for Strangford is paying the price for that mistake.

The other day, in the Assembly canteen, I also noticed that a Sinn Féin Member for Londonderry did not ask for an occupied-Six-Counties fry, but for an Ulster fry. We are making progress, and the Sinn Féin females are leading the way in seeing the light by not insulting us and calling parts of Northern Ireland and its cities by their proper names. However, that is not the issue for debate.

As Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, I would normally speak after the Chairperson, Mr Cobain; however he will speak tomorrow. The Committee has reached a general consensus on the Programme for Government and the Budget, and there are few differences on the crucial issues.

Being realistic, it would be difficult to deliver the Programme for Government's policies without adequate, well-financed and well-maintained infrastructure. Without proper road, sewerage and transport infrastructures, it would be extremely difficult to deliver so many of the other important policies. Therefore, recent developments have placed the Department for

Regional Development in a difficult position. Only today, the second report from the Independent Water Review Panel was published, and there is a 12-week consultation period, which will take us into the new financial year. That unfortunate set of circumstances places the Minister and the Department in a difficult situation, because that report contains major implications for water funding and policy in Northern Ireland.

First, there is the crucial issue of the affordability tariff, which is still to be worked out. There are some interesting initial suggestions on how to avoid inflicting water poverty on many people in the Province — water poverty, of course, being defined as 3% of gross income spent on water. Similarly, the delivery of the billing system for water is a difficult issue. If we put that responsibility in the hands of Land and Property Services, we will put a tremendous burden on the Department of Finance and Personnel.

I do not know, as yet, whether the full implications of that are apparent to the Executive and to the Assembly. We would be asking Land and Property Services to bring together many strands of data in order to create a single unified bill. I can see enormous difficulties. I suspect that this time next year, April 2009, we will be incredibly busy trying to explain the new system to our constituents and working out the anomalies that are bound to occur. Therefore, I hope that the Executive has set aside sufficient budget funds to enable Land and Property Services to take on that huge task.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the Independent Water Review Panel has created a very difficult and demanding target for Northern Ireland Water by requiring it to achieve 40% efficiency savings. That target has been diluted slightly, if Members will excuse the pun, to 37%, but there is no doubt that that will place Northern Ireland Water in an extremely difficult position. We all hope that it will deliver on that target. However, the logic of the review panel is that similar savings and efficiency targets have been achieved in other parts of the United Kingdom when changes have been made by other water services. Therefore, Northern Ireland Water should be able to achieve the same, or better.

The difficulty is that Northern Ireland Water has been asked to achieve those savings after decades of lower than expected, or lower than anticipated, investment in our water infrastructure. That led, for example, to some of our sewers being totally inadequate to deliver effective treatment for waste water, and to infraction proceedings by the European Commission as a result of what is known as the "tourist hotspots". I am sorry; I meant to say "sewage hotspots".

Mr S Wilson: They sometimes coincide.

Mr Wells: Unfortunately they do coincide sometimes. Clearly, however, that has placed a tremendous burden on Northern Ireland Water. I doubt gravely whether it is reasonable to expect Northern Ireland Water to deliver on such a strict and challenging target. That is important, because the Programme for Government and the Budget are committed to delivering a high-quality environment that meets European standards.

Northern Ireland Water is well on the way to eliminating the problem of the sewage hotspots, and I must congratulate it for the amount of investment that has been carried out. I have difficulty in working out how it is going to continue to deliver on those important targets in the context of a 40% efficiency saving. I hope that I am wrong. I hope that Northern Ireland Water can achieve those targets, but to continue to force that issue might undermine one of the main goals of the Programme for Government.

I am also delighted about the extra funding that has been granted to Roads Service for planned maintenance. In its submissions on the draft Programme for Government and draft Budget, the OFMDFM Committee highlighted the fact that the funding that has been available for planned maintenance over the past decade has been totally inadequate. Although I welcome that additional funding, I understand the difficulties that the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Department for Regional Development face in that regard.

I was disappointed that we have not moved away from dependence on the monitoring rounds to release the funds required to carry out planned maintenance. As far as the Department for Regional Development is concerned, that is a movable feast, because there is no guarantee that funding will be available, nor is there any guarantee of the amount of funding or when it will be made available. That leads to a situation in which projects are rushed through in order to spend the money that has become available, or suspending much-needed maintenance because the funding has not come about as a result of the monitoring round.

I hope that, as we develop new Budget policies in future, the money for planned maintenance will be guaranteed, and that Roads Service and the quarrying industry can look forward with certainty to the amount of money that will be available.

5.30 pm

I am also pleased that more support appears to have been given to public transport. The central goal of the Assembly's public-transport policy must be to make public transport so attractive to commuters that they are lured out of their cars and onto buses and trains. So far, the news on that front has been good. For instance, the upgrading of the railway line to Dublin has attracted a huge increase in passenger numbers. The Bangor to Belfast line now carries two million passengers a year.

It has been calculated that the upgrading of trains running between Portadown and Belfast has resulted in 5,000 fewer commuters travelling to Belfast along the Lagan Valley every morning. Can Members imagine the impact that an extra 5,000 cars would have on the Westlink every morning if such public transport were not available?

There were many who felt that people in Northern Ireland were so reliant on private transport that it would be impossible to get them out of their cars and on to the trains and buses. That has been shown to be untrue. Instead, investment in public transport has led to dramatic increases in usage, and that is great news.

When the issue was first raised in the House in 2001, I remember telling the Assembly that there were trains still in use that I had cleaned as a student at Sydenham station in 1980. My job was to clean the trains when they came in at night — I assure the House that it was a very pleasant task. Some 21 years later, those very same trains were still in operation. They were literally being held together and were in a despicable condition. I assure Members that that was not because of my cleaning. *[Laughter.]*

As a result of a decision made by the then Minister for Regional Development to buy new train sets for the Belfast to Bangor line, there has been a very significant increase in the number of passengers. Therefore, the point is well made.

Mr Durkan: The then Executive made the decision to spend £80 million on buying new trains sets for the entire rail network. There was no reduction to the core network, contrary to what the current Minister for Regional Development suggested this morning. The Executive rejected the recommendation from officials that the new trains would run only on certain portions of the then network.

Mr Wells: Yes, but, it was, of course, a very wise Minister in the form of Mr Robinson —

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

Mr Wells: Oh dear. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It would have been more valuable to have combined the motions and debates on the final versions of the Programme for Government and the Budget, because the two issues are linked. For example, the Committee for Employment and Learning strongly supported the commitment in the draft Programme for Government to increase by 300 the number of PhD research students at our local universities by 2010. However, there were no clear resources in the draft Budget to fund those vital new research positions. The Committee welcomes the

increased allocation, which appears to go some way towards meeting that commitment.

I accept that there are two motions and two debates on the two documents, and I make the following points on behalf of the Committee. The role of the Department for Employment and Learning is central to the delivery of two key priorities in the Programme for Government:

“Growing a dynamic, innovative economy”

and

“Promote tolerance, inclusion and health and well-being”.

The Department’s role is at the core of the first three public service agreements (PSAs) linked to productivity growth, skills for prosperity and increasing employment. It also has a major role to play across the entire range of PSAs.

Cross-cutting is, therefore, very important in the delivery of PSAs. It is important that the terms “cross-cutting” and “interdepartmental collaboration” involve real actions and do not simply become forms of words. However, it would be unfair to put that expectation on the Executive without also stressing that Committees should work together where appropriate. My Committee is setting up cross-cutting meetings with the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment on the link between inward investment and skills requirements, and also with the Committee for Education on essential skills.

Although Standing Orders do not allow for joint Committee meetings, more informal work can take place. I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Education and the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who is not in the Chamber at the moment, for agreeing to such meetings.

The Committee for Employment and Learning welcomes the commitment in the Programme for Government to focus on small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs). The generation of appropriate R&D activity and skills support is not easily matched, or geared, to the needs of that sector. SMEs tend to require greater intervention from the higher and further education sectors to ensure appropriate alignment with local businesses. The Committee considers that, if appropriately resourced, the Department’s demand-led approach should allow that to happen.

The Committee welcomes the focus on well-paid, highly skilled jobs. There is always a temptation for economies to increase competitiveness by paying lower wages and providing poor conditions for employees. In recent debates in the Chamber, Members have said that they do not wish that to happen.

Recently, some Members have called for the provision of high-quality apprenticeships and for agency workers to be afforded appropriate protection. Economic competitiveness should be gained through high-value-added employment and innovation, and the

Programme for Government sets out a suitable basis for going forward.

When I spoke in the debate on the draft Programme for Government in November 2007, I stated that the Committee strongly supported the goals of securing £120 million of private-sector investment and encouraging 300 companies to engage in R&D for the first time. At that time, however, the Committee was finding it difficult to achieve clarity on how those objectives could be resourced. The final Budget appears to address those concerns, but I am reluctant to say too much on the subject until the Committee has received from the Department more information on resources.

Shortly, the Committee will begin to assess the impact of welfare reform. The Committee is keen that a reduction in the rate of economic inactivity be achieved, and it will assess the attempts to achieve that decrease. The Department’s Pathways to Work initiative is the vehicle through which that can happen.

The Committee scrutinised the rolling out of the Training for Success programme, and it will wish to be satisfied that the Pathways to Work programme delivers the required employment opportunities and serves to protect the most vulnerable in society.

The Committee fully supports the Executive’s goal that 90,000 adult learners achieve a qualification in literacy, numeracy and ICT by 2015. However, during the debate on the draft Programme for Government, I raised the Committee’s concerns on the subject. Although the Committee recognises the Department’s hard work, it was shocked to see the poor outcome from the CSR. The Department has assured us that it considers the resources that are available to address the issues as a good start on which it can build.

The Committee is receiving extremely negative feedback from those who work in the adult and community education sector. Recently, I asked the Minister to meet the Deputy Chairperson and me to discuss the issues that have been raised. The absence of any consultation on learner access to services leaves a considerable gap. For those reasons, the Committee will be particularly —

Mr S Wilson: Given all the issues that the Member has listed, such as additional skills, good-quality apprenticeships, adult literacy and numeracy, and so forth, does she not agree that the criticism that the Programme for Government does nothing for those at the lower end of the income scale is unjustified? Those are exactly the type of people who will benefit from the upgrading of skills.

Ms S Ramsey: That is absolutely correct. I agree with the Member, and I thank him for his intervention. The Committee has raised certain issues, but it is intent on moving forward and ensuring that the most

vulnerable in society have the opportunity to achieve their objectives.

For those reasons, the Committee will be particularly interested in the consultation on the FE Means Business strategy and, in particular, will be keen to ensure that an appropriate balance is struck between the economic focus of the Programme for Government and the achievement of important social goals.

The Committee supports the parallel goals of increasing the number of students who take STEM — science, technology, engineering and mathematics — subjects and increasing the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, I am not sure whether those goals should be linked.

Members will recall the debate on 14 December 2007, initiated by the Committee for Employment and Learning, on the increase in student fees. Recent statistics suggest that there is beginning to be a downturn in student applications. The Minister stressed the importance of the Department's proposed review of student fees on the profile of students taking up courses at our universities, and the Committee is keen to see the outcome of that review and research.

There is a proposal in the investment strategy for a new campus for Belfast Metropolitan College at the Titanic Quarter, which is scheduled for 2010; although that seems a tight timescale. It is important that lessons should be learned from the failed Springvale campus project, and that those lessons are fully recognised, particularly in ensuring full community engagement and achieving clarity of roles between the college and the Department. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Ms Lo: I support the Alliance Party's amendment and oppose the Programme for Government, as agreed by the Executive. The Programme for Government lacks any vision for this society beyond that advocated under direct rule, and it fails to place tackling sectarianism and racism, rebalancing the economy and delivering sustainable public services at the heart of all departmental policies.

We may be pleased that power for Northern Ireland now rests in Northern Ireland; however, we may be disappointed that that has not led to a more radical change in direction. I know that the Executive do not like to be challenged and that they would prefer any opposition to disappear. However, in saying what I have just said and am about to say, I have no doubt that I speak for people in this society beyond just those who voted for the Alliance Party at the last election.

Equality, community relations, a healthier environment and better front-line public services are political issues that require political leadership. The response to the draft Programme for Government indicated that many thousands of people across Northern Ireland wanted

something better. The changes were generally in the right direction, but people wanted a thorough revision.

Six references to sharing are six more than appeared in the draft Programme for Government; however, that is far short of the radical change in approach that is required. There is still no clarity on the future of key policy documents such as 'A Shared Future' and the anti-poverty strategy; nor is there clarity in the key cross-cutting funds for community relations or tackling child poverty.

People want clarification on policy and funding so that Government performance can be assessed. Much has been made of more money being made available for front-line services through efficiency savings. However, there is nothing in the Programme for Government that indicates that that means anything other than cuts to services or rash asset disposals. The temptation for Departments is to cut peripheral services that are provided by voluntary and community groups, even though they may be vital. Such services are, in many instances, good value for money and are effective in reaching the most vulnerable groups.

The Executive should be thinking about the costs of division, new ways of raising finances or new working methods for the delivery of public services. Where money is apparently allocated for housing, arts or mental health, there is no mention in the Programme for Government of accompanying actions. People are entitled to know precisely how that money will be spent.

We have no difficulty with making the economy the number-one priority, because if we do not create wealth, we cannot guarantee any wealth to distribute for public services. However, wealth cannot be created in a society that is not tolerant and welcoming. That requires hard work at every turn and consideration of every policy. To meet that objective, we advocate that every policy is proofed for its impact on religious segregation.

5.45 pm

Despite talk of sustainability as a cross-cutting theme, there is no move to rebalance transport spending towards our railways or any clarity on what is meant by the light-rail system for Belfast. The Alliance Party wants more investment in infrastructure generally, and railways in particular, including an expansive light-rail system — not just one guided busway.

If Members are serious about improving health and well-being, building a stable and cohesive society, and developing a twenty-first century workforce, inequalities must be reduced. With their strong focus on the economy, the Programme for Government and the Budget do not set a clear way of strengthening the economy and society at the same time. Those aims are not mutually exclusive, which must be recognised in all policy development.

The Programme for Government condemns us to more years of social exclusion for too many people, more inadequate health funding and more reliance on cars. It also condemns us to accepting social divisions, poor health services and polluted and congested urban centres. Most of all, the programme is an attempt at cheap populism, which could prove an expensive mistake. That is why it must be rewritten.

Mr Spratt: I welcome the debate on the Programme for Government and the investment strategy — today is a very positive day in Northern Ireland's future. The Programme for Government and the investment strategy are ambitious; there is nothing wrong with ambition, and the targets aspired to, if they are met, will serve every person in Northern Ireland well in their daily lives. That is a stark contrast to the previous Administration headed by the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP, which failed to outline any substantial measures to improve the economy in their Programme for Government. Under that Administration, a social agenda was given pre-eminence over economic development.

The commitment from Sinn Féin to build an economically prosperous Northern Ireland is most welcome. Those who incorrectly claimed, for years, that this Province was a failed entity now strive to see it succeed. I welcome that change, and society will benefit from their construction rather than destruction. As a Province, we face many challenges economically and socially, which the Programme for Government and the investment strategy will help to address. By placing economic development at the core of the programme, the Executive have adopted the correct strategic direction to bolster Northern Ireland in all areas. A good economy brings benefits across society. As all Members are mandated by those who vote for us to help to create a prosperous society, I hope that the Programme for Government and the investment strategy will do just that.

As Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I can say that the Committee welcomes the commitment to an extra 300 PhDs by 2010 at our universities. DEL's role in delivering a dynamic and innovative economy to protect tolerance, inclusion and health and well-being is clear. The Committee recognises that the cross-cutting theme is central to achieving our goals. As the Chairperson of the Committee stated, the commitment in the Programme for Government to small and medium-sized businesses is positive as it focuses on well-paid and highly skilled jobs.

There can be no doubt that the Executive are very serious about building the economy through the creation of a highly skilled workforce. The House should commend the Executive for putting greater monetary resources into that area than ever before.

By promising to invest huge sums of money in regenerating disadvantaged communities, neighbourhoods, towns and cities by 2012, the Executive have committed themselves to something that I hope will be of great benefit to my constituency of South Belfast. Other folks mentioned Strabane, Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and I make no apology for mentioning areas such as the Village, Sandy Row and Taughmonagh. Devolution must be seen to deliver improvements in the standard of living for all those areas. The investment required in social housing must go hand-in-hand with that to meet the needs of constituents, and in South Belfast that problem must be addressed.

I wholeheartedly support the Programme for Government and commend it to the House. Previous Administrations and direct rule Ministers failed to deliver the necessary direction to help Northern Ireland to make progress, so I am glad that the DUP is helping to bring about good government through local government. Every Member of the House must be sure to work hard to bring about the goals of the programme, and those who exude negativity for no logical reason must make up their minds about whether they want to be part of making Northern Ireland a success, or taking it backwards.

We, the elected representatives of the people, will be judged by our success or failure, and I am confident that we can succeed with the Programme for Government and the investment strategy for Northern Ireland. I support the motion.

Mr B McCrea: I support the amendment tabled by the Ulster Unionist Party, but as my colleague Mr McClarty said, we have some reservations about the Programme for Government, and, therefore, believe that certain matters must be kept under review.

Not many weeks ago, the Minister of Finance and Personnel made a speech in which he introduced the House to a new form of democracy named a four-party mandatory coalition — a term that was repeated many times in his speech. The Programme for Government is supposed to be the vision of a four-party mandatory coalition, but, in truth, it is not. Instead, it shows the limitations of the process, because although it is impossible to actually oppose it, the document is fairly bland and does not say very much. What is omitted is more notable than what is included, and although carefully chosen words suggest a positive view of the future, the most contentious issues are not addressed. There are no proposals on the Irish language, the Maze stadium, how to tackle sectarianism, and the opportunity to explain the loss of the fabled £1 billion financial package has been lost.

However, the really telling omission — the elephant in the room — is the absence of any real discussion about education, although it is hard to imagine a more

fundamental issue for a Government. The future of our country depends on our children and the education that they receive, and if we are to compete in a global economy instead of just talking about it, and if we are to eradicate child and fuel poverty and increase productivity and the average wage, we must increase the level of education. Although vocational skills offer well-paid jobs, the industries that are based on knowledge are the ones that really deliver and are where the demand is.

What prospects do our young people have if they have difficulty with reading and writing? How can they go through 12 years of formal education and come out with no qualifications — some of them with limited ability?

That is a fundamental challenge for our Executive — it is probably the fundamental challenge. Rather than tinker at the edges, they should grasp the nettle and place academic underachievement at the centre of the Programme for Government. However, we see and hear very little.

The draft Programme for Government set us some targets. We have reduced the challenge to ensure that school leavers get five GCSEs from 70% to 68%. What has happened to children receiving free school meals? That target is just 30%. That will mean that the very people who need to get out of the poverty trap will not get the support that they need to be able to compete. When will we start investing in our inner-city areas? When will we start to tackle the issues and set ourselves a target of 70% for children on free school meals? We should focus on the people who need help, not just on the well off.

We could have done many things — perhaps through public service agreements. We could have talked about early-years intervention. We could have talked about a step change in funding for primary schools or schools in socially deprived areas. We could have challenged lower pupil-teacher ratios and we could have looked at how free schools meals are administered, as many people will not take up their entitlement. Above all, we could have talked about the emphasis on leadership — leadership in schools, reducing paperwork, devolving powers and empowering head teachers.

The Minister of Education did not seek to address those issues. In outlining her vision to the Assembly, she sought to prioritise the removal of academic selection and to have some sort of discussion about transfer at age 14. She does not have a political consensus for either suggestion.

There is an old Japanese proverb:

“Vision without action is a daydream. Action without vision is a nightmare”.

Will the Minister of Education be allowed to implement her vision? If she is not, she has been merely daydreaming and wasting our time. However, if she is allowed to, we

will have a nightmare because we do not have consensus on the way forward and we do not have a shared vision.

The complexity of the changes alone will probably defeat what she has in mind, but it will not happen without enormous damage to our young people and to our educational system. The Executive and the Assembly should have included that in the draft Programme for Government. The proposals are so fundamental in nature and have such wide political ramifications that they should not be brought through in the dead of night; they should have been out in front and central. If we cannot get agreement, the proposals should not be included in this three-year period.

We are in danger of repeating the mistakes of the Scottish education system. Prior to the 1999 elections to the Scottish Parliament, there were several views on education. Civil servants did what civil servants do: they produced position papers on each political party's position. Post-election, a relatively small group of people, consisting of Labour Ministers, education officials and advisers, decided to proceed from policy to legislation without consulting others. There was no proper pre-legislative scrutiny, and the reports indicate that the primary motivation was political rather than academic. Does that sound familiar? Does that ring any bells?

The group then moved on to consultation. The consultation document ‘Improving our Schools’ sounds rather like ‘Every School a Good School’, an idea that came from Philadelphia. The consultation process started in October 1999 and was completed in January 2000. Some 27,000 copies of the consultation document were sent out, and 65 meetings at ministerial level were held across Scotland. What were the changes? There were none — or very few. The Education Committee of the Scottish Parliament did not like the consultation document and stated that it had problems with it. The Committee put forward 141 amendments because it did not like what it saw. Of 141 amendments, five were accepted.

6.00 pm

A final opportunity to influence the legislation arose on 7 June 2000, but opportunities for Back-Bench MSPs to contribute were limited. That led to them feeling that they were being sidelined. The academic reports described this stage as “defective” and “unduly precipitate”. Tellingly, the book says that:

“Tensions within the Executive... between the Executive and committee members, and between MSPs and the civil service all create the impression of a system that is still in transition.”

— because they were not able to tackle the real issues. The book also notes that:

“A continuing task for Parliament is to find effective means of challenging and changing the ways in which the civil service operates.”

In tabling the Ulster Unionist amendment, we want to play a constructive role, but we are concerned about the lack of a shared vision and the lack of attack on the detail, and we must therefore insist upon some form of review. Those who argue that we are in a four-party mandatory coalition and that, as such, we must agree to absolutely everything are not correct. Dissent is OK — it is all right to challenge. The Minister of Education has brought forward proposals that, at the moment, I cannot support. Had those proposals been included in a Programme for Government — as I believe it would have been proper to do so — I would have felt honour-bound to vote against them.

While I cannot disagree with the Programme for Government as presented, I see little evidence of any shared vision. I see no appetite for tackling contentious issues. I can detect no common purpose, no unifying vision and no attempt to build consensus. That may be effective party politics, but it is no way to run a country and it is doomed in the long run. If there is to be an effective four-party mandatory coalition, it will have to raise its game. It will have to start tackling and delivering on the issues. If it does not, we will have to consider the alternatives.

Mr Moutray: I echo the comments of my colleagues and commend the Executive on delivering a momentous, forward-thinking and business-led Programme Government and investment strategy for Northern Ireland. Both documents are clear and concise in content, and they will give the steer needed to build the prosperous Northern Ireland that we all long to see. I welcome the unanimous agreement on the documents among all four parties in the Executive, and add my own endorsement.

With the strategy in hand, we must now commit ourselves to implementing these practical and well-balanced documents. It is reassuring for the people of Northern Ireland that they can clearly see where we want to take this Province. That stands in stark contrast to the days of Labour “fly-in” Ministers who had little, if any, drive to build a strong and competitive Northern Ireland economy.

The Programme for Government and the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland will enable the people of Northern Ireland to instil a high level of trust in us, as locally elected representatives, to deliver our mandate of delivering a peaceful, fair and prosperous society. Contrary to the previous Administration, such content displays firm leadership and direction as to how best we face and build a shared, better and more sustainable future for everyone.

I welcome the high level of participation from Committees, individuals and organisations in voicing their opinions and administering constructive feedback. That demonstrates the Executive’s willingness and readiness to adhere to our constituents’ wishes and,

indeed, the wishes of the people who will be affected by, and who will benefit from, these initiatives in the long term.

The documents secure Northern Ireland’s future both economically and socially. They also demonstrate the long-term interest that the Executive, and this House, have in our Province and in our constituents. Unlike the previous Executive’s Programme for Government, ‘Building a Better Future’ has clear, measurable and achievable targets. This Programme for Government and its family of documents will give direction to the allocation of resources and capital investment in supporting our priorities.

I welcome the focus of the Programme for Government on proactively growing a dynamic and innovative economy. I particularly welcome the aim to secure value-added investment, leading to the creation of a minimum of 6,500 jobs in the future. I welcome the aim to promote lifelong learning, and the way in which the Programme for Government lays out the required steps to achieve that. Although much focus should be placed on pre-16 education, we must also ensure that focus is placed on third-level education, which will be vital if we are to build an innovative economy that is renowned for sound research-and-development work.

For too long, the private sector in Northern Ireland has had to live in the shadow of the public sector. I am glad that the Programme for Government commits the Executive to address that imbalance.

Increasing the number of tourists who visit us each year, thus increasing sectoral revenue, would generate income that could be reinvested into our tourism infrastructure. Growth in tourism will also assist our local businesses.

I have named only a few benefits of the Programme for Government, which, without doubt, represents a foundation on which great things can be built.

The 10-year investment strategy for Northern Ireland, which was unanimously agreed by all four parties that serve on the Executive, ultimately endeavours to deliver a high-class infrastructure to grow our economy, support social change, enhance our environment, and provide more advanced, amenable and adequate public services for all sections of the community. That is welcomed by my party.

Our infrastructure has suffered for many years at the hands of direct rule and 30 years of the Troubles, and the investment strategy starts to address those shortcomings. It is aimed at improving our transport networks, schools and healthcare system, to name only a few important matters. However, it also considers what lies before us, in respect of changing demographics and trends.

The Programme for Government, the investment strategy and the Budget will enable us to move forward

with a clear and achievable strategy for the Executive. The Programme for Government provides vision, scope and proposals towards which we can all work in order to build a better and shared future for our constituents. Those documents stand testament to the commitment in this Chamber to making Northern Ireland a more prosperous economic entity. Times have changed in Northern Ireland, and those documents send out a clear message to the community. Irrespective of the whinging from the Alliance Benches about our commitment to a shared future, I believe that the agreement on those documents sends out a strong signal of our commitment to building a prosperous Northern Ireland for everyone who wishes to live and work in this Province.

Therefore, I wish to place on record my endorsement of the two documents that are before us. They provide and signify a positive agenda for Northern Ireland, which I am committed to work towards. I support the motion.

Mr Weir: At this late stage in the debate, after several hours of discourse, there is very little that is novel — or perhaps interesting — that is left to be said. Without any attempt to reiterate any of the fine words that have echoed across the Chamber, I wish to welcome the Programme for Government, and the broad thrust that places the economy at its heart.

In an attempt to focus on something slightly different, I wish to address four matters that directly affect the work of one of the Committees on which I serve, namely the Committee for the Environment. When it comes to embracing the environment, neither Jim Wells nor Brian Wilson have anything to worry about — I have not become a latter-day tree-hugger. However, it is important that the needs of the Department of the Environment — and, indeed, some of the relevant commitments that are included in the Programme for Government and the investment strategy — be embraced and welcomed.

The first of the aforementioned four matters is the commitment in the Programme for Government to reduce landfill significantly by creating a network of new waste-treatment facilities at council level by 2011. North Down Borough Council, on which I and others in the Chamber serve, has been very much ahead of the game in that respect. Indeed, we have tried to make progress on a state-of-the-art waste-transfer station, which we hope will soon be open. However, realistically, the need to tackle the landfill problem operates on both environmental and financial levels.

It is clear that at an environmental level we cannot simply continue to fill landfill sites ad infinitum. That is not sustainable in the long run. Consequently, we must be at the cutting edge of waste-treatment technology.

Secondly, there is a strong financial imperative on us in that failure to address the problem of waste will lead, in the relatively near future, to our getting infraction

finances from Europe. Significant pressure on waste treatment has been exerted on a Europe-wide level. However, that pressure has been ignored, particularly by direct rule Ministers, for too long. For many years the level of waste-management support and investment that central Government provided was woefully inadequate. Waste management became the Cinderella service of Government: it always seemed to be put at the end of the agenda.

Even with the steps that have been taken, we are almost too late to start coherently tackling the problem of waste management. The years of neglect that are the legacy of direct rule mean that we must catch up quickly if we are to have a sustainable environment in the future. However, I welcome the commitment to prioritise the issue and to match the funding for those capital projects that will play a significant role in helping to address the problem in the future.

Thirdly, as will anyone who has served on local government, I welcome the commitment to carry out a fundamental review and overhaul of the Planning Service and the planning system by 2011. That review, as the Programme for Government states, balances the need for economic and social development with the necessity for environmental sustainability. Anyone who has been involved in the Planning Service at any level, whether at council meetings, or representing either residents or applicants, will be aware of the level of frustration that exists. Our system is cumbersome, and, with the best will in the world, it is not uniform across Northern Ireland. Members of the Committee for the Environment were recently shown figures from a report that gives details of, for example, the wide disparity of the acknowledgement of site meetings across the country. The planning system has long been in need of an overhaul, and I welcome the commitment to do that.

If we are to develop economic prosperity in Northern Ireland, we cannot have planning applications dragging on for years without reaching any conclusion. We live in a global market in which capital can move very easily, and we must provide a proper planning system. However, the system must also be environmentally friendly and sustainable. In the past, Members have raised the issues of garden-grabbing and the destruction of the green belt.

Those matters must be taken into account when developing a coherent planning system. The present system lacks proper democratic input and accountability and is therefore not sustainable in the long run. I welcome the proposals that may materialise from the emerging findings report, in that development control is likely to become a function of local government in the future. However, it must be ensured that when that happens, the system is fit for purpose, properly funded, and works coherently and fairly.

Fourthly, I welcome the commitment to deliver high-quality and efficient public services that will modernise the structure and powers of local government by 2011. Again, the direct rule RPA solution under Lord Rooker was particularly unpalatable for many of us, as it reflected neither the local needs nor the local identities of communities. The Executive will soon have an opportunity to develop a planning system that has appropriate mechanisms for supporting local government, or indeed, to have a form of local government that is the envy of the world in the twenty-first century.

6.15 pm

I hope that the RPA, while accepting that there must be economies of scale in order to ensure that public services are delivered to people efficiently, will give local government sufficient powers to ensure that what needs to be delivered locally can be delivered in a local and responsive manner.

Arguably the most important issue facing the Department of the Environment is road safety. We often use the cliché that something is a matter of life and death. However, it is difficult to find any subject that is more literally a matter of life and death than road safety. I welcome, under the priority “Promote tolerance, inclusion and health and well-being”, the commitment to reducing road deaths. The proposal is to reduce by 33% the overall number of people, and by 50% the number of children, killed or seriously injured on our roads. Since the draft Programme for Government was published in November 2007, statistics released have indicated that last year saw the fewest deaths on our roads for about 60 years. Those statistics should be welcomed, but the Minister of the Environment, the rest of the Executive and the Assembly must not be complacent, because, as anyone who has experience of death on our roads will know, one road death in a family is one too many. Lives are shattered, so anything that we can do to reduce those statistics further is to be welcomed.

The Minister of the Environment, Arlene Foster, is taking proactive steps to tackle the issue of road safety. A review of the road safety strategy, which was not due to be renewed until 2012, is under way. I believe that the Committee for the Environment will support her in looking at a range of issues that will have a bearing on road safety. The driving test may need to be looked at, and restrictions may need to be placed on very young drivers. The level of alcohol in the blood at which disqualification from driving occurs requires further examination, and the permitted limit may need to be reduced in order to bring us much more into line with Western democracies throughout Europe.

We must also re-examine the number of penalty points that are awarded for speeding, and, in particular, we must target the incidences of speeding that lead to

fatal road accidents. A wide range of measures is to be looked at. Those will be examined in a greater degree of detail, but it is important that we are seen to be proactive in trying to reduce the number of deaths on our roads, because, for many of our constituents, there is no greater issue before the Assembly than road safety.

The Programme for Government and the investment strategy give strong commitments to the Department of the Environment. Indeed, they set a series of targets for the Department. Moreover, the Programme for Government as a whole offers a positive way forward for Northern Ireland, and I commend it to the House.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat. Like many others, I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. I may find myself covering ground that other Members have already covered; nevertheless, it is as important to raise as many different issues as possible as it is to speak about the entire Programme for Government.

I have difficulties with endorsing the investment strategy and the Programme for Government as they stand. The UUP amendment, which asks that there be ongoing review of the two documents, is not out of place, and elements of the Alliance Party’s amendment merit consideration.

The Assembly has been given a somewhat soft landing, what with freezes on moneys for three years, and so on, and one asks oneself where the money is going to come from, given that no real massive gains were made from Whitehall in the first place. Someone must pay some time, and perhaps pay a great deal more in the long run. It used to be Labour Party policy to borrow as much as it could and pay for it later, and, to a certain extent, we appear to be following suit. However, that will only get us into deep trouble in three years’ time, or in five years’ time. Putting off the evil day will not solve anyone’s problems.

A review of those issues is required. The RPA will have a significant impact, and educational matters must be reviewed. That is a case in point — we must get the strategy for post 11-plus education right; I am not sure that we have the right ideas in that respect.

One issue in respect of regional development was mentioned by my colleague from Fermanagh and South Tyrone Mr Gallagher, namely a balanced regional economy. We need balanced development. The north-west does not just constitute the corridor from here to Derry. People forget that Fermanagh is part of the west; and due west of the Bann points largely in the direction of Fermanagh, Tyrone and the rest of Ireland, including Galway and other areas.

I turn to the issue of roads. There is no Enniskillen bypass, and that causes massive congestion in that town. There is no future strategic direction to address any of the problems that I have raised. I accept that the

Budget is limited, and I know that work on the A4 will be of benefit to people travelling from Fermanagh. However, in Fermanagh itself, the maintenance budget for the roads is totally inadequate. That is despite the fact that County Fermanagh has a greater number of B roads than any other county. There has been a significant underspend in the last few years; somebody is going to have to pay, and it is usually the local people. We need an Enniskillen bypass to be part of a strategy, but it does not seem to be part of any current plan. If that is not part of a reasonable short-term plan, it is highly unlikely that that bypass will be built.

There is an increasing amount of expenditure on rail and other public transport. That would normally be an appropriate area in which to have an increase in Government expenditure, but — as far as Fermanagh is concerned — neither rail travel nor bus travel is available. People who live there have absolutely no option but to drive their own vehicles. It takes people three hours to travel 80 miles to Belfast by public transport. It costs £50 for a family of four to travel to either Derry or Belfast, and back home to Fermanagh by public transport. That means that it is cheaper for people to travel by car, so there is no incentive for people to dispense with their cars — and we are well aware of how destructive four-by-four vehicles are to the environment.

Fermanagh, and indeed the west of the Bann, should be thought of as the gateway to the rest of Ireland, rather than land's end. That is the message that is conveyed when one looks at the strategies that have been drawn up, and the spending plans in respect of that region. One of the aims of the regional development strategy was to maintain and develop the public road and rail network in order to ensure a modern and efficient sustainable transportation system that facilitates economic growth and social inclusion.

It is not possible to meet any of those objectives unless the roads are fit for purpose. It is not possible for businesses to thrive and prosper in the likes of Fermanagh or Tyrone unless the infrastructure is of a sufficient standard. It costs 30% more for someone to run a business in Fermanagh than it does in Belfast because of the amount of time that they have to spend on roads, either heading to Belfast and back, or, indeed, sitting in traffic. Therefore, there is no equality of access in the Six Counties, and that is what we need, particularly from the Department for Regional Development. Future strategy must start to deliver on that — it is not currently.

I do not wish to go into a great amount of detail, because I will not leave myself enough time to talk about other issues, but I am disappointed with what the Programme for Government has to say on agriculture. I agree with some of the points that were made by Tom Elliott, and by the Chairperson of the Agriculture

Committee. Farmers will not be particularly impressed with some of the delivery at ministerial or departmental level.

The agriculture industry does not have the sort of competitiveness that Members keep talking about, and much of the £45 million will be spent on administration and will keep people in well-paid jobs in Belfast, rather than help farmers. Where are the outcomes? They are certainly not in the document. There are targets in the document, but they are never met.

For example, there is a target to reduce TB by 27%. TB should have been eradicated long ago, and farmers are being asked to pay part of the cost of the current situation. There is no eradication programme to deliver results for them: they still have to test cattle all year round and bear the massive costs involved.

We should also be examining land use: at least the Minister is looking at environmental issues relating to alternative land use. We must also look at the food situation worldwide, from the point of view of the expense of transporting foodstuffs over great distances when much of it could be produced here. Those matters must be considered.

I take the points that have been made about the education system, quangos and the Department of Education. However, savings will not be made, because the new system will be just as difficult to maintain as the present one. We must look at the number of schools that we have and decide whether we need them all. For example, should the integrated and Catholic maintained sectors look after their own interests when massive savings could be made? According to the demographics, pupil numbers are falling; yet we are proposing to build new schools that will cost millions of pounds. I am not sure that we need them at all. That issue must be examined.

When post-primary education was being considered, we should have examined the mistakes that were made in the English system and learned from them. We may find that we will have a two-tier system along the lines of the English system in which only children who are well off will get a good education. Some people in Enniskillen and Fermanagh are already moving towards postcode education, because they are buying houses in the catchment areas of academic schools so that their children will be able to go to them when the new system is introduced. Others will find that they are in unfair situations in places such as Fermanagh. That may not affect the Budget, but it will cost us dearly in the long run if we do not get it right. Ministers must take that point into consideration. At the moment, there is no indication that we are getting it right. People want to know where they stand, and those in the rural parts of Fermanagh will find themselves in a much more difficult situation than will others.

I recommend the aforementioned amendments, and I do not endorse the full Budget at this time. Go raibh maith agat.

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

Mr Cree: I fully support the two cross-cutting themes in the Programme for Government: a better future with fairness, inclusion and equality of opportunity for all, and a sustainable future for our economic, social and environmental policies and programmes. I am pleased that a growing, dynamic economy has been given top priority, as everything else will flow from that. In saying that, I accept that economic development and social welfare are not mutually exclusive, and both should be working together for the greater good.

We are all labouring under the problem of having no financial package, and, therefore, the resources for the Budget have been particularly tight. We must decrease the productivity gap that exists between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Although our employment rate is high, we cannot rest on our laurels. Those issues are recognised in the Programme for Government. However, I am still concerned that Departments will fail to meet their efficiency targets. Achievement of those targets is crucial, as they will provide a significant element of the funding mix and will have a direct impact on the delivery of services by the Departments.

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

6.30 pm

We need to be able to monitor those efficiencies in a transparent manner. The Executive must ensure that their investment delivery plans are ready before the commencement of the new financial year.

From the responses to the Programme for Government, several important points were made and need to be included. Many Members pointed to the Planning Service as an agency unfit for purpose; we can no longer tolerate the delays and inconsistencies of that organisation. A dynamic economy needs a responsive service that recognises its needs and can turn around applications promptly. The review of the Planning Service must be completed long before the 2011 date set. That is linked to the review of public administration, which should also be agreed by the same date.

Roads maintenance remains underfunded and more needs to be done to correct the shortfall. The industry has serious concerns about its future, and there is evidence of the appalling condition of roads and streets throughout the Province — and not just, as my colleague said, in Fermanagh, although I am sure that need there is great.

The target for the number of tourists to visit Northern Ireland is conservative: 1.98 million, increasing to 2.5 by 2011, despite our political stability. It is much lower

than the previous Northern Ireland Tourist Board figure and does not constitute a serious target.

The programme for education — if we can call it that — remains woolly; and the target for school-leavers is less ambitious than that set by the direct rule Administration. We await the Education Minister's strategy for a new transfer system. The matter is now crucial: education professionals and parents alike have no clear understanding of what is meant to happen. However, according to Mr Sammy Wilson, the Minister may be cooking up a cunning plan. We await that with interest.

Another concern is child poverty. The target is to reduce child poverty by 50% by 2010 and to eradicate it by 2020; those targets do nothing more than repeat the UK goal. They fail to identify the children in severest poverty. Government statistics show that all actions taken since 1994 have failed those children. We cannot allow that to continue.

I turn to environmental aspects of the Programme for Government. The volume of electricity to be generated from renewable sources is to be 12% by 2012. That target is not new; it was set in 2004. There is a target for halting the loss of indigenous species and habitats by 2015, which falls behind the UK and EU targets of 2010. In the final Programme for Government, the target is changed to 2016, which means that we fall even further behind UK and EU targets. The forestry and woodland strategy aims at doubling the current 6% of afforested area in Northern Ireland. However, the addition of 1,650 hectares amounts to only 2.7%.

Despite all that, the shortcomings of the Programme for Government can be reviewed and the necessary revisions made. For that reason, I am prepared to support the motion, as amended by the Ulster Unionist Party.

Mr Shannon: I endorse the Programme for Government and the investment strategy, and I urge Members to do likewise.

I am a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which has considered the proposals for schemes and listened to presentations, all of which were comprehensive and well put together. Many different groups made their views known to the Committee on the best possible road to the best possible future for the Province.

The Committee has seen the hard work and dedication of those people who have thought long and hard about how to bring Northern Ireland forward. The job has not been easy. How can the Assembly combat child poverty and other forms of social poverty while retaining a low-taxation economy? How can it invest heavily in infrastructure while encouraging economic growth and investment? How can it move towards the future while remembering and honouring the past? Those are three

issues that the Committee felt were priorities. They have been dealt with well in the strategy.

The targets that have been set for child poverty — reduction by 50% by 2010 and eradication by 2020 — are commendable and, more importantly, are achievable through that structure, particularly when it is taken into consideration that in Northern Ireland, despite its being a small country, over 100,000 children live in some degree of poverty — 44,000 of whom live in severe poverty. Members have heard those statistics before and are well aware of them. However, they are just as shocking today as they were the first time that we heard them. The investment strategy provides the mechanism for changing the lives of those children and for the implementation of measures that will mean the end of child poverty.

As Members are aware, I represent the Strangford area — the Ards Peninsula in particular. An old saying states that if you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day; give him a net and he can feed himself for a lifetime. As much as it is imperative that funding is set aside specifically for the reduction of child poverty and for the elderly, it is vital that a system is put in place that will foster a Northern Ireland where there is higher employment through bigger business investment. That will create higher incomes and will thereby reduce family poverty.

In order to build a better Northern Ireland, a better economy must be built. That matter has been well addressed by both the programme and the strategy. The DUP's stance in favour of low taxation, capping industrial rates and encouraging business growth has been displayed in the programme through the fact that businesses are being encouraged not only to remain in the Province, but to be enhanced. A policy that will allow business expansions to be processed in six months, subject to pre-application consultations, is a way to achieve that and to encourage new businesses to come to the Province.

The strategy will improve economic competitiveness; will improve tourism, and will overhaul the planning system — and, boy, does it need it. It underlines the need for a well-educated workforce; and provides infrastructure investment of £5.6 billion over three years, which amounts to £18 billion during the next decade. The Assembly looks forward to the investment conference in spring 2008, which it hopes will put Northern Ireland in a good position as a competitive business location for US companies.

The Programme for Government supports rural businesses. By 2013, £45 million will have been spent to improve the competitiveness of the agricultural sector; £10 million will have been spent on the modernisation of farms; at least 16,000 people will be employed in the agrifood sector; there will be a 27% reduction in

annual herd incidents of tuberculosis; a 20% reduction in annual herd incidents of brucellosis. The Assembly looks forward to the conversion of an additional 1,650 hectares of land — both agricultural and non-agricultural — to forest and woodland. Those are all pluses — positive objectives.

The strategy seeks to increase tourism through a £229 million capital investment programme for arts, sports, museums and libraries; to increase tourism revenue from visitors to £520 million, which is achievable; and to increase the number of visitors every year to 2.5 million. It aims to make lives better by reducing the number of long-stay patients in mental health hospitals by 10% and in learning disability institutions by 25%, to add an additional 200 respite packages each year, and to alleviate fuel poverty in approximately 9,000 households by implementing energy and efficiency measures.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will seek to increase the number of visitors to national museums to 585,000 by 2009; to have a public library network with at least six public access workstations for every 10,000 of the population; to provide a minimum of 10 new or upgraded facilities that will support Northern Ireland player and athlete development in Olympic and paralympic sports, and which are available for use by communities and schools; and by 2012, to attract 10 nations that are competing in the Olympic and Paralympic Games for pre-games training or acclimatisation.

Those are many ideas that have been proposed that are achievable. There is no quick-fix for our problems, or for problems in other countries. However, having sat through many Committee meetings, we believe that there is a solution. It is entirely proper to say that the Northern Ireland in which we live today will not necessarily be the Northern Ireland in which our grandchildren will be raised. That will be achieved through proper thought and through proper application of the programme that has been put in place through the strategy.

It is my firm belief that the strategy, working in tandem with the excellent Budget that the Finance Minister and his team have proposed, will bring Northern Ireland forward in leaps and bounds. As previously stated, the aims of the investment strategy and the draft Programme for Government are not a wish list. They are methods for achieving a credible goal, that of a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland, with respect for the rule of law by all.

Of course, there may be some issues that do not have the high profile that some people believe that they should have. However, I believe that the strategy caters for the essentials, and the rest can be added once the foundation has been put in place. The strategy builds a firm basis through which those aims can reasonably

be achieved. The four parties in the Executive have contributed to the Programme for Government.

We have been pushing for a commissioner for the elderly. I hope that a commissioner will soon be appointed who will ensure that the needs of the elderly are not overlooked and that proper representation is given at every level, ensuring that our elderly people will never again feel as if they are on their own and have been forgotten. There will be free transport for those aged over 60, and other benefits for the older generation, which will mean that they will no longer have to choose between dinner and warmth.

Dr Farry: What happened to the issue of free personal care for the elderly, which was included in the DUP's manifesto of last March?

Mr Shannon: Dr Farry is the man who could produce all those things, if he could tax people as much as he would like to. By adopting the Alliance Party's ideas on taxation, we could do almost anything in that land of make believe in which Dr Farry lives.

Many aims and key goals have been set out — far too many for me to talk about in detail. However, I stress that the framework is one through which those goals can, and will, be achieved. All the ingredients are available in the appropriate measures, and that the ultimate end dish will rely on the ability of the individual chefs in each Department, and the Ministers, to deliver. I hope that it will no longer be a case of “Can't Cook, Won't Cook”, which has been the attitude of some of the top chefs in some of the Departments thus far.

I fully support the Programme for Government and commend the dedication of those who have worked so hard to produce it. The people of Northern Ireland will thank us for it in years to come, as they reap the benefits. I urge Members to support the Programme for Government.

Mr McCausland: I support the Programme for Government, which has been agreed by the four-party mandatory coalition that includes the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party. I am glad that it has been endorsed by all Ministers from the four political parties in the Executive.

The overarching aim of the Programme for Government is to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland, with respect for the rule of law. That is a vision to which all reasonable people would subscribe. We want fairness, prosperity, peace and respect for the rule of law.

The document refers on a number of occasions to developing a better future for Northern Ireland. That, again, is a good prospect. Clearly built into the document is the idea of a prosperous future in which we have employment for our young people and a dynamic and strong economy that is set on a firm foundation. The

document goes beyond that, clearly stating that it will not only be a better future, but a shared and better future. A shared future is a future where there is equality — which is in the document — and diversity. We respect the differences and the diversity in our society.

As other Members have said, a shared future also includes the concept of interdependence. Therefore, I am glad that the Programme for Government states:

“we will bring forward a programme of cohesion and integration for this shared and better future to address the divisions within our society and achieve measurable reductions in sectarianism, racism and hate crime.”

6.45 pm

That programme, which will be developed by the Executive and the Assembly, is an important part of building a better future. Importantly, the programme will be created under the ownership of the Assembly; it will not be cobbled together by someone else or produced by civil servants, as was the case under direct rule. It will be a programme of cohesion and integration that has the endorsement, the buy-in and the commitment of the Members of this Assembly.

I want to comment on some of the specific elements of the programme, particularly the commitment of £229 million to cultural infrastructure — arts, sport, museums and libraries. Over the years, there has not been enough investment in capital infrastructure. Therefore, the commitment of such a substantial amount of money to those sectors is particularly welcome.

Most of us recognise that there is a need for new libraries. Throughout the world — and certainly in the United Kingdom — there has been a decline in the use of libraries. Fewer books are being borrowed because people can access books much more cheaply and have other means of communication — for instance, the Internet. There has been a reduction in the number of books that are borrowed as people tend now to buy books for themselves. If the libraries are to be sustained, investment must be put in place to develop attractive libraries that people will want to use and that are fitted to the present century.

The same can be said of museums, which are important, not only for tourism, but for our own people. One of the elements of creating a shared future is for people to have a sense of place and belonging, an understanding of our history and how we have come to be where we are. The role of museums is important in that.

I welcome the investment in the arts and sports infrastructure. I also welcome the references that the document makes to getting more people involved in culture. The Programme for Government aims to increase the number of people who visit our national museums to 585,000 by 2009. Through the National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland, we have

an excellent network of museums; there are 31 small independent museums across Northern Ireland. That element of our cultural wealth is often overlooked. Therefore, I welcome the fact that the Programme for Government encourages people to use the museums.

One of the sad aspects of direct rule was that there was never a strategy for museums in Northern Ireland. There was large investment in museums, and we have an excellent network, but the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure never got round to creating a strategy during all the years of direct rule. I find that absolutely incredible, and I said so at the time. Sports and libraries, like any other sector, need a strategy to work from, but the civil servants never got round to putting one in place. Therefore, the development of policies and implementation of policies and strategies taking place under devolution is a step forward.

The aim of increasing the number of people who participate in or attend arts events by 2% over the next three years is also to be encouraged. In addition to supporting the arts by increasing the funding for arts projects, it is important that the arts have a source of income through people coming through the door. When people come through the door, they pay an entrance fee, and that is an important source of income. The arts should not be dependent solely on grant aid; they should benefit from people's supporting their events.

There is a commitment to increase the number of tourists to 2.5 million over the next three years. Tourism is an important part of our economy, not only because of the number of people who visit, but because of the amount of money that they spend when they are here. Therefore, the more we build up our cultural infrastructure — our museums, libraries, and so on — the more opportunities there will be for people to spend money when they come here. We want the tourists to come, and we want them to stay for longer. They will stay for longer if there are more things to see and do, and more money will be spent if there are more things to see and do. The connection must exist between the cultural infrastructure, which is the tourism product, and the number of visitors.

In the past, Northern Ireland relied on certain industries, but they have declined a great deal. Therefore, cultural tourism should be one of the top priorities if we are seeking to build a prosperous economy and a better future.

Finally, the Programme for Government refers to four projects in Belfast, and I am glad that they have been referred to. The first project is the development of the Crumlin Road jail and Girdwood Army barracks, in line with an agreed master plan. There are many areas of agreement in respect of that project. However, when we were developing the master plan, it struck me that no one, at any time, said that it should not be a shared

site. There was total unanimity that it must be a shared site if the project were to work. The commitment exists for regeneration of the site, but the Programme for Government states that it will be a 10-year project. The developments at Laganside and at the gasworks in Belfast took many years, and the Crumlin Road jail project will also take a long time. However, it is a marvellous, unique opportunity to have such a large site close to the centre of our capital city. That will not only bring economic and other benefits to the people of north Belfast and the greater Shankill area, but to the whole of Belfast and the wider area.

There is also a reference to the regeneration of the north-east quarter. We are about to see the opening of the Victoria Square development. However, other areas on the northern outskirts of the city centre must be developed, and the north-east quarter is one of those. I am glad that the Programme for Government contains a commitment to implement a programme for the development of the public realm in Belfast city centre. There is a great opportunity to reshape the city centre to make it more attractive not only for local shoppers, but for visitors and tourists. That will benefit those in the commercial sector, independent traders, major city-centre traders, and particularly smaller retailers. I also noticed that there is a commitment to carry forward and deliver the overall objectives of the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Task Force, and that is to be encouraged.

I am running out of time, but I wish to mention the references in the Programme for Government to addressing binge drinking, not only among adults, but among young people. We need a coherent strategy for tackling alcohol abuse in Northern Ireland, but that is not mentioned in the Programme for Government.

Mr Armstrong: I welcome the opportunity to give my view on some problems with the Programme for Government. We have heard much talk about joined-up government, but we have seen little delivery in practice.

As a member of the Committee for the Environment, I welcome the fact that the Programme for Government addresses real, pressing environmental concerns, but much more is required than fine words. We need real delivery and leadership. As the twenty-first century progresses, there is no doubt that environmental issues and concerns are rising rapidly up the political agenda worldwide, and Northern Ireland is no exception.

The Programme for Government states that we are determined to play our part in addressing the challenge of climate change, recognising that we have the lowest levels on these islands of electricity that is generated from renewable sources, and our carbon footprint is relatively large, and well beyond a level that is sustainable in the long term.

For far too long in Northern Ireland, we have been content to send vast amounts of waste to landfill sites. I am a great supporter of the concept of “waste to energy” — of turning waste product, be it domestic or agricultural, to good use, by turning it into energy and power. We can no longer treat our waste as rubbish.

A change in attitude is required if we are to see waste as a source of energy. An initiative to convert waste to energy must be centrally directed and not done piecemeal. Local councils cannot be left to do their own thing. The draft Programme for Government states:

“We will reduce landfill significantly by creating a network of new Waste Treatment facilities at Council level by 2011.”

The public service agreement’s commitment to comply with the EU landfill directive target to reduce the amount of biodegradable municipal waste sent to landfill to 75% of 1995 levels by 2010 is not good enough.

For too long, waste has been regarded as rubbish that people throw out without a care as to where it ends up — usually landfill. People now know that that is wrong and that such an approach is no longer sustainable or desirable. Aside from the large tracts of land that are used for landfill, there are problems if local water sources are polluted as a result of the dumping of waste. Increased rainfall, global warming and rising water levels mean that such dangers are on the increase.

I welcome the announcement that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will receive an additional £14 million to fund projects, such as the promotion of investment in innovation among local firms, the commercial exploration of research projects in the renewable energy sector and research into renewable technology.

Two of Northern Ireland’s leading poultry firms, Moy Park and O’Kane Poultry, recently proposed the establishment of a waste-to-energy plant in Glenavy, County Antrim. That is the sort of development that is required. It is an innovative project that has the potential to create jobs and to generate enough power for a town the size of Larne, using a product that was, previously, regarded as animal waste. Such projects can only help to meet the public service agreement target to secure 12% of energy consumption in Northern Ireland from indigenous renewable sources.

The draft Programme for Government recognises that the scale of climate change requires action internationally, and, in Northern Ireland, only the Executive are equipped to show leadership and to give a clear direction as to how to seek out and harness alternative sources of energy and to turn our waste into power.

The Department of the Environment deals with waste, and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment deals with energy; however, the two Departments must work more closely together and realise that waste and energy are not mutually exclusive.

A strategy must be put in place to ensure that they take ownership of the issue and give leadership.

The Committee for the Environment is looking to set an example by increasing its use of laptop computers and emails, and it is seeking other ways of reducing the number of hard-copy documents that it circulates. If leadership and action are not forthcoming, the situation will continue to drift. The restoration of devolution has given the Assembly and the Executive a chance to make changes to benefit the people of Northern Ireland. This is one issue on which we cannot afford to be found wanting — or wasting.

Mr Neeson: I support the Alliance Party’s amendment and oppose the draft Programme for Government as agreed by the Executive. The draft Programme for Government represents a DUP vision for society, tacked on to New Labour policies. I congratulate the DUP on using its strong position to drive through its vision for Northern Ireland, but I am surprised that the other three parties were so meek as to allow it to do so.

The draft Programme for Government is a vision of a society where social divisions remain the norm: only the rich can afford proper healthcare, and we become ever more dependent on the car. So much for a shared future, a better future and sustainability: our vision is somewhat different. For the Alliance Party, a shared future means tackling segregation so that everyone can work and live, without fear, wherever they wish. A better future is one in which the economy will be rebalanced so that everyone is judged on merit and can create and share in wealth.

Sustainability means public services that are based on integrated and long-term thinking in order that we become a healthier and more knowledgeable society that is able to compete with the best. The Alliance party does not wish to push Northern Ireland down; we wish to drive it up.

7.00 pm

The Programme for Government laudably states that the Executive will:

“develop new and innovative measures that will address existing patterns of socio-economic disadvantage and target resources and efforts towards those in greatest objective need.”

Where is the evidence for that? Cutting rates may or may not be good policy, but developing those measures will reduce capacity and take money from those resources.

The Executive also have an obligation to demonstrate their commitment to sustainability by their actions. How does removing the requirement for new homes to be energy efficient meet that commitment? How does shifting still more money from public transport to roads meet that commitment?

Few people would have much difficulty with what is in the Programme for Government — new-found

commitments to the arts and people with disabilities are better late than never. However, people do have difficulties with what is missing. There is nothing on the subject of integrated education, on reforming our economic targeting of high-tech industries, or on changing society in order to reduce pollution.

Furthermore, the actions outlined in annexe A indicate a clear lack of ambition. We are merely working towards eradicating child poverty, rather than getting rid of it altogether. We compare ourselves economically with the UK, but exclude its most prosperous regions. We aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by just 25% from 1990-2025, despite suffering from the worst pollution in the UK — and so it continues. We will only reduce brucellosis and tuberculosis — not eradicate it. We will deliver free public transport for the over 60s, but not for students. Rather than beginning immediately to introduce a wide-ranging light-rail system for all the people in greater Belfast, the public-private transport balance will worsen, and we are still in the dark about the outcome of the review of public administration, the schools estates and the devolution of policing and justice.

Leslie Cree raised the matter of ensuring that 12% of electricity is generated from indigenous renewable resources by 2012. That is modest indeed, and is way below the targets that were set by the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment in its report on the energy inquiry in 2002.

I welcome the aim of growing the economy, which is important for creating greater political stability. Hopefully, tourism will substantially increase. Once again, the target is modest. A major aspect of tourism in Northern Ireland is maritime heritage. Nelson McCausland wisely concentrated on the development and importance of museums in Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker, at this stage, I should declare an interest, because I sit on the Advisory Committee on National Historic Ships and the Nomadic Trust in Belfast.

The promotion and development of maritime heritage is of the utmost importance; however, although we have two ships that form part of the National Historic Ships core collection — HMS Caroline and the schooner Result, which is the last ship to be built in Carrickfergus — no Department in Northern Ireland has any responsibility for maritime heritage. In addition, I hope that the Nomadic will be included in the core collection. That important aspect of tourism has largely been ignored, and Nelson McCausland is right to point out the need to develop a proper strategy for heritage in Northern Ireland.

I welcome the fact that there has been an increase in the budget for social housing. It will be a very difficult task, but every effort must be made to make new social housing more integrated. I realise that there are problems,

and that even in the private sector in Belfast, many private developments are divided along religious lines. It is a big issue, but if we are to move forward and create the shared future that we all aspire to, it is an issue that must be taken into consideration.

The Alliance Party believes in keeping its election promises. That is why we will continue to promote free personal care for the elderly, as has been achieved in Scotland. Hopefully, at some stage, we will obtain the support of the other parties in the Assembly for that objective.

We must have joined-up government if the Programme for Government is to succeed. To be honest, 10 Departments is too many, and there is a great deal of inefficiency. When people raise issues such as flooding, and ask who is responsible, they have to engage with a raft of Departments. The review of public administration should have provided an opportunity to examine central Government as well. We must create efficient and effective government.

The Alliance Party has taken a lot of criticism from all sides today. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that our amendment can be supported by at least three other parties in the Assembly. I put them to the test, if they are serious about creating an opposition in the Assembly. I know that David Burnside recently raised the issue of a proper opposition. The Alliance Party will continue to provide a constructive opposition. I support the Alliance Party amendment.

Mr Burnside: There are three areas of the Programme for Government that I would like to touch on, and which I regard as priorities. It is on these areas that I will make a judgement on whether this devolved Assembly and Executive are working. It does not take one year, two years or three years to make that judgement.

The first area that I wish to explore is the future of our education system, and, especially, the future of our grammar schools. By the summer of this year, if our Education Minister has continued to try to run her Department like an independent fiefdom, and, for the first time, we have independently financed grammar schools, perhaps using their own selection criteria, cut off from taxpayers' money — which was always one of the great selling points for Northern Ireland — it would be a dreadful admission and example of failure of the Executive. The jury is out on the Education Minister, and a decision must be made by the summer. The uncertainty in the primary, secondary and further education sectors must be ended to the benefit of all that is good in the grammar school system in Northern Ireland. Of all the decisions to be made in this House over the next six months, I regard that as paramount.

Secondly, the targets for investment into Northern Ireland that have been set for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment are not terribly

adventurous. There is another judgement for me and others in the community to make. We will consider the American investment conference that was promoted in the United States by the First Minister and deputy First Minister. If it was not for the American presidential election, we would be in deep recession. The only things that will prevent the world from going into recession, for both the Republicans and the Democrats, are the cutting of three quarters of a point off interest rates by the Federal Reserve, trying to make money cheaper, and dealing with the credit and debt crises in the American and the world banking systems. In the wake of last weekend's great brainstorm on the ski slopes of Davos, all the major economists and monetary commentators are predicting a recession.

Northern Ireland will not be separate from that recession. A large number of American industrialists and financiers will be coming here for the spring conference, and I hope that Minister Dodds and DETI will put a lot of work into that conference, because a lot more work is required to meet even the low investment targets that have been set in the Programme for Government.

There is too much borrowing in the corporate system, and there is too much borrowing from Gordon Brown. The situation has grown out of control nationally; there is too much personal borrowing in the system. I say that as someone who believes in the merits of a proper capitalist system. The banks have behaved absolutely disgracefully by financing parts of the United States sub-prime market that they should never have touched. Other people will pay for that.

Northern Rock does not need to be nationalised. The Bank of England should pull in all the other banks and tell them to take a pro rata equity share in Northern Rock and bail it out. The banking system should be told to bail itself out to stop the steamroller effect of other banks being put under pressure. Thus, the second major test of the Programme for Government will be whether it can successfully attract industrial and financial investment into Northern Ireland in what will be a period of near recession, if not actual recession.

The third issue is the size of Government, to which my colleague in the Alliance Party also referred. Of course, much depends on how one defines public sector and private sector; in recent years, there have been a great many PFIs, which I define as being public-sector finance. The Programme for Government is full of great objectives and talk about reviving the private sector and the economy, and reducing the size of the public sector and setting targets to make it more efficient. However, in six months' time, let us look at the criteria and see how many people are employed by central Government, the Assembly, local government and the quango industry in Northern Ireland.

I read Sammy Wilson's piece in yesterday's 'Sunday Life' about the targets for reducing the number of MLAs in the Assembly. Let us see whether we are big enough to vote for a reduction in our own numbers. In 1972, there were 52 Members in this House, and 26 in the Senate. A membership of somewhere in the 60s may be enough. The Government here is far too big. We are all a cost and a burden to the taxpayer, and the Assembly can be made more efficient.

Let us look at the entire role of Government: nationally, across the whole of the United Kingdom, here in Stormont, in local government, in the quango and public-private financing sectors, and let us then make ourselves more efficient. I will make a prediction: I guarantee that the public sector will be no smaller in six months' time than it is now. I will come to the Chamber then to ask the Finance Minister about that. The public sector is a self-perpetuating, growing bureaucracy, and if we experience a recession, it, rather than the private sector, will grow even bigger.

In conclusion, first, I hope that there will be a Programme for Government that will solve the problems in our education system, put an end to the uncertainty and instability that it is experiencing, and defend all that is good in the grammar schools.

Secondly, I hope that the United States/Northern Ireland investment conference will be a great success, but a great deal more work is needed to make it so and to ensure that we use what opportunities we can get in a presidential year. I do not care whether it is the Irish-American vote or the Ulster-Scots vote; let us milk this opportunity as much as we can, and if we can get investment into Northern Ireland, let us try to achieve it in an American presidential year.

Thirdly, let us see whether we really can reform ourselves. I have my doubts, but I would love to see the Assembly vote to make itself smaller in its Executive function and more co-ordinated as a democratic body. As I have said here many times before, there should be weighted majorities, and there should be a voluntary coalition based on policies and agreement, not the post-conflict mandatory coalition that currently exists. We all need to think about that issue. Such changes would make for a better, more democratic and accountable system. Furthermore, our efforts would help to fulfil the overall objective to reduce the size of the public sector and would enable the private sector to produce more wealth to pay for the services that we all want in education and health and to help the other areas that need the support of a successful, wealth-creating sector.

7.15 pm

Ms Purvis: I am thankful for the opportunity to contribute to today's debate. During the debate on 26 November 2007, I stated that the draft Programme for Government was economically unjust, and that it and

the draft Budget concentrated too heavily on the economy and big business, at the expense of the working man and woman. My sentiments were echoed during the consultation process. I am glad that, as a result, the Programme for Government has improved.

On Radio Ulster recently, an economist said that the focus of the final Programme for Government and Budget had moved away from the economy towards the people. That is good news to me, and for the people whom I represent — the working class and the most disadvantaged in society — it is surely a result. The argument that benefits to the general public would trickle down from the top proved unconvincing, and changes have had to be made. The most disadvantaged need more than a trickle to function in our society.

I pay tribute to all those who made submissions during the consultation process and to everyone who, by pressurising and lobbying the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Executive, helped to ensure a better deal for areas in which it is sorely needed. Ministers Empey, McGimpsey and Ritchie should be justifiably pleased, because they have proven themselves to be worthy negotiators for their respective Departments. They demonstrated that even those in tentative positions of opposition can achieve success against the two-party oligarchy.

I am glad that the Department for Social Development has been allocated increased resources to help it to achieve the Executive's goal of providing at least 10,000 new social homes within the time frame laid out in the Programme for Government. I hope that Minister Ritchie will also find enough money in her new allocation to maintain and develop the warm homes scheme and the heating replacement programme, because tackling fuel poverty will continue to save the Health Service money and will undoubtedly save lives.

However, I do not want the Minister of Finance and Personnel to think that I am now in total agreement with him and his colleagues on the Executive. After all, it was he and his colleagues who dubbed me "Red Dawn". If that reflects the fact that I hold the interests of people above everything else, I am guilty as charged. Someone once said to me, with tongue planted in cheek, that politicians are those clever, grey men who talk and talk but do not bloody listen. It seems that some politicians have started to listen, but there is still a long way to go.

Sadly, the criticisms that I voiced in November remain valid. Although positive changes have been made to the draft Budget and the draft Programme for Government, I remain concerned about the Executive's priorities. The draft and final Budgets have looked after big business and the private sector first, while the ordinary working taxpayer has had to beg for scraps from the

Chancellor's table. Social housing and the Health Service should not have had to wait for additional funding.

Why did it require a redraft to recognise the importance of the community and voluntary sector? Why did pensioners who live in freezing conditions have to wait? Why was a rethink required to recognise that people are living in a divided society and need a shared future? Most alarmingly, why are children and young people still waiting for their share of the Budget, with bowl outstretched, as in the scene from 'Oliver Twist'?

Despite the increases in funding to the Department of Education for youth and community services, the Executive continue to ignore children and young people. Huge inequalities run throughout the education system: children from working-class backgrounds achieve less in primary school; they do worse in the 11-plus; they get lower GCSE grades; and they are much less likely to go on to further and higher education.

Too many children in Northern Ireland leave education with no qualifications and, worse still, unable to read and write. Such children benefit from the Executive's children's fund. However, because many projects have not been completely ring-fenced or mainstreamed, a potential consequence is that, rather than our meeting the target of eliminating child poverty by 2020, more children will be forced into poverty.

We need more detail on how many of those programmes and projects have been mainstreamed or allocated funding through the relevant Departments and what exactly has been, or will be, lost. Only then can we better gauge how far off the child poverty targets this Executive will be.

I note with disappointment that, between the draft and final versions of the document, the Executive are only working towards eliminating child poverty, rather than eradicating it. Perhaps that is just as well because, given the focus of resources, the priorities stated in the draft Programme for Government were unreal. If we are serious about taking on child poverty, resources and focus must be directed at the multiple causes of deprivation and not at Invest NI.

The introduction of water charges will seriously add to child poverty in Northern Ireland. My party is opposed to their introduction and, regardless of the outcome of the Executive's review, which was published today, the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in our society are still being asked to pay for one of life's essentials. Depending on whom one talks to, the average family will have to pay around £6 a week. Some Members may think that that is not a lot, but if you are living on a tight budget, that £6 can be the equivalent of almost three meals, half a bag of coal, or a few days' heating and hot water.

Allowing the asset-rich and income-poor to defer payment does not work either. It was introduced in

England and Wales for payment of rates, and the take-up rate was negligible. Why? Because our elderly see it as a debt constantly increasing over their heads. Instead of deferring payment, they go without something else — usually heating — in order to pay for water.

There are other areas in relation to child poverty where action is required. I am aware that the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is producing a report on the sorts of actions that are required. It is up to our Executive to listen to the findings of that inquiry and to ensure that moneys are available to resource the delivery of its forthcoming recommendations.

Gender inequality was almost completely ignored in the draft Programme for Government. Thankfully, during the consultation process, someone noticed that there is gender inequality in Northern Ireland, that there is a gender pay gap and that domestic violence does exist and is unacceptable. However, noticing that those issues exist does not solve them. It certainly does not deserve the plaudits of this House or of the woman on the street. We need action plans and targets to ensure that the situation improves.

One in five women in Northern Ireland has experienced domestic violence. Incident rates are not falling; conviction rates are not increasing. The human costs are considerable, as are the financial costs — £180 million every year. Where is the political will to eradicate domestic violence?

I look forward to seeing the proposals on how the Executive plan to close the gender pay gap — there is little detail in the Programme for Government. I also look forward to the promised gender equality strategy, as I am sure many other Members do also.

Childcare was an issue that went AWOL in the draft documents. Again, thankfully, someone belatedly realised that childcare is vital not only in addressing gender inequalities, but in reducing the numbers of economically inactive people. With that in mind, I suggest that childcare provision be given greater priority. I also call for consideration to be given to ensuring that childcare becomes a cross-departmental issue. It is not a matter solely for the Department of Education. The Department for Employment and Learning should be prioritising childcare to help encourage more parents back into further education and back into the job market.

I remain concerned that environmental issues have still not been given the attention that they deserve and require in order that we can enhance and protect the world in which we live. It is vital that, as a country, we recognise that we cannot afford to continue consuming resources at the current rate and that we have a responsibility to reduce our negative impact on the environment. Although it has been stated as an objective in the Programme for Government, there are no

policies in place to make a significant difference. In fact, other policies seem to counter that stated ideal.

Somewhere between the draft and final versions of the Programme for Government, it was realised that we live in a divided society. Perhaps the First Minister and the deputy First Minister took note of the many submissions, including that of the Community Relations Council.

I look forward to seeing a programme of cohesion and integration for a shared and better future, and I look forward to seeing action plans, targets and resources to implement that. I am sure that those who are involved in parading would like to see that, along with those who live at interfaces and along the border, individuals and families who are subject to racial abuse, and children who are bullied, or worse, because of their sexual orientation.

In closing —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr Ford: I apologise to the House for my missing the early part of the debate, owing to family reasons. Nonetheless, I am here because I believe that it is important to take part in this debate, which is vital to the future of the Assembly.

I understand that the First Minister began his speech by stating that this is a society that was divided by conflict. In fact, the conflict was caused by division. That is why tackling division must be the first priority for every one of us. The Executive's failure to take that obligation seriously is the fundamental reason for the United Community group's opposition to the Programme for Government, and for our demanding a fundamental rewrite of it.

It is simply not enough to manage our divisions — as has been the prevailing policy for some time. We must strive to overcome those divisions if we are ever to create a society and an economy that can make progress. Anyone who is committed to ending the sectarianism, segregation and division that defines this society will surely back our amendment.

The Executive's statement on the Programme for Government was such that the economy was their first priority. Other than tackling sectarianism and segregation, we certainly agree. However, it is action and policy direction that count, not aspirations.

I was interested in the comments of Mr Burnside on matters such as the size of Government. I agree with much of what he said, although I might not reduce the size of the House's membership by quite so much as he advocated. Perhaps 52 Members, plus another 26, would represent a reasonable number. However, the key point that he failed to mention was the fact that we have 11 Departments when, in the past, this society could manage with six. That is a key issue that must be

addressed. That is a matter that is directly within Executive responsibility, but of which they have failed to take any notice.

When the Programme for Government was published in draft form, the Executive briefly had the business sector fooled. The business sector thought that the Executive had made a serious commitment to making Northern Ireland fit to compete with the best in the world. However, in fact, the objectives are merely to compete with the poorer regions of the UK, not the richer ones, and not with the Republic. That is not exactly ambitious.

The Programme for Government is concerned with issues such as free public transport for the over 60s — because that is politically high profile — but not for many others who need it, such as students or those who are seeking work.

There are real problems that face some parties in this Chamber. For example, when Mr Kennedy points out — as he frequently does — that Ulster Unionist Ministers are responsible for half of the Budget, he is absolutely correct. However, the real question is whether, on that basis, his party will accept that it is part of the Executive, or whether it will genuinely become part of an opposition, as my colleague Sean Neeson has said. A zigzag policy characterised by one minute in, and one minute out, is not going to be any more sustainable than Executive plans for public transport.

The underlying vision of the Programme for Government started with the DUP, and has been bought into by other Executive parties. That is a vision whereby we remain divided in silos, whereby we compete only with poor regions, and whereby our public services remain bureaucratic and segregated.

As Naomi Long said, that is not the vision that we share. Divided versus united; weak versus prosperous; defensive versus ambitious; Executive versus opposition — that is where we stand. We want to see a genuine tackling of sectarianism and division, and real action.

It is not just the Alliance Party, as some in the Chamber claim, who are saying that. Neither is it just the five north Belfast clergy who were mentioned earlier. It is the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, which has pointed out the need for shared housing; 81% of parents, who back integrated education; and Church leaders on general social policy.

We must see real movement. The points that are being made by organisations such as NICVA, the business sector and the trade unions on the need for an integrated society to be a prosperous society must be taken account of. That is why I find the type of comments of some Ulster Unionists bizarre. The Alliance Party has adopted the same stance since the time of the first Assembly, when we opposed Programmes for Government twice, not because they failed to mention vague aspirations

about a shared future, but because they failed to provide the means of delivery on a shared future.

Mr Burnside: Perhaps the Member can enlighten us: if the Alliance Party had won enough seats to join the Executive, would it be in the Executive and from where would the opposition have then come?

7.30 pm

Mr Ford: The Member asks an interesting question. However, given that the Alliance Party never gave any commitment to participating in an Executive, and would have been prepared to be involved in an Executive only if a Programme for Government that would genuinely advance this society's needs were implemented, it is a fairly hypothetical question. That said, one never knows. It may be a question that will arise after the next Assembly election. We shall leave it for the Ulster Unionists to decide whether they expect to be in the Executive before, during or after that election. It seems to me that the Ulster Unionist Party has bought the DUP's line that it is simply not moving anywhere on the concept of a shared future.

I agree with Mr Burnside on the structures of government, but we disagree on the point that he has just raised.

I shall deal with two issues that are of particular concern to me. However, allow me first to declare an interest: I am a former social worker, although I doubt whether the Northern Health and Social Care Trust will ever take me back now. In the budget for health, there has been a dramatic increase in funding: instead of there being a 3.8% increase, it is 3.9%. Lip service has been paid in the Chamber on countless occasions to the Bamford Review and to the need to do something about mental-health services, yet we know that those funding levels will not keep up with demands for acute hospital services. The inevitable result is that mental-health, childcare and community-care services will cease to be funded properly, because acute hospitals will always be seen to be the priority.

Members will also know that fundamental problems need to be tackled in acute hospitals. Infections such as MRSA and clostridium difficile arise out of a failure to deal properly with structural and managerial problems. Given my personal circumstances today, I see a certain irony in the fact that I had tabled a question for oral answer earlier about continued palliative care in the northern area, where the supply is totally inadequate.

As a member of the Committee for the Environment, I shall now deal with some environmental concerns. We might welcome the advancement of the sustainable development strategy, but simply developing a strategy is not enough. Rather, delivery must be provided, and there is little sign of that happening. The Programme for Government talks about halting the loss of indigenous species and habitats by 2015, yet the necessary funding

is simply not available. It intends to declare 200 new areas of special scientific interest (ASSIs) by 2016, yet all the non-governmental organisations involved know that many of those ASSIs will be damaged before we even get to 2016. There is real slippage there.

It would be fine to say that the Belfast sewerage project is a key goal were it not for the fact that the problem has existed for years and was being tackled under direct rule anyway. Therefore, for the Executive merely to continue with what was already being dug when they came into power is not much of a claim.

Many Members have talked about public transport, yet we persist with a policy that bizarrely tries to solve Belfast's commuter problems through initiatives such as the widening of the M2 rather than through developing public transport.

What we have is neither a business-friendly plan nor an environmentally friendly plan, and it is definitely not a community-friendly plan. We on these Benches have ambition for Northern Ireland, and we will not settle for the limited vision of the Executive.

Lord Morrow took time to criticise the Alliance Party when he wondered why if four parties can agree on something, a fifth cannot. Other Members, from the DUP Benches in particular, said that if we are to have government at all, we must have a Programme for Government. The suggestion is being made — hinted at in the Chamber and perhaps seriously suggested in the media — that if the motion is somehow not passed tonight, the entire House will collapse. That is simply not the case. The Alliance Party will not agree to the Programme for Government because we have ambitions, and they amount to a great deal more than managing a cosy, sectarian carve-up, much like what was witnessed in the statement on the appointment of the victims' commissioners — plural — earlier today. We want to see a society that is integrated, moving forward and really ambitious. Let me be absolutely clear: if our amendment is agreed, it will represent not that the House will collapse but a simple call to the Executive that they must do better, because the people of Northern Ireland expect better and deserve better under a devolved Government.

The range of consultation responses submitted may have initially included some positive comments on the Programme for Government, but, once they had delved into the detail, people pointed out its social failings, its economic failings and its inability to bring society together. Those views came from every sector of society, and that is why the Programme for Government is simply not good enough for our people.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Although SDLP Members welcome many aspirations in the Programme for Government, we

have strong reservations about the capability of the proposed actions, targets and budgets to deliver the glowing vision that has been presented to us. We also believe that the structure of the documents will make it difficult to track and monitor progress.

There are serious gaps in key policy areas and inadequate treatment of existing commitments. For example, statutory commitments to build good relations are not being reflected in the public service agreements. In addition, there is an obvious disconnection between the Programme for Government and the Budget that is meant to support and implement it. In fact, the Budget is not even structured to reflect, or complement, the Programme for Government.

The SDLP welcomes the stated commitment to work in partnership in and beyond the Executive to rebuild society and regenerate the economy. We believe that a dynamic and meaningful partnership spanning the community and our social partners is required. That is the only way that the major challenges — an underfunded public infrastructure and an underdeveloped private sector — can be tackled.

Better engagement than has been possible, in what has been a restricted timeframe, is required to establish such a partnership, but its benefits will be considerable. Better engagement will lead to broad-based consensus, which will enable strategic long-term planning, stable decision-making and creative thinking. Strategic partnerships can help us to mirror some of the successes of the South, and they will be particularly important during this period of budgetary constraint and proposed efficiency programmes.

Given the restrictions that we face, such as lack of fiscal discretion and being outside the euro zone, it is important for us to be proactive where possible. The SDLP believes that the Programme for Government reflects a shift in emphasis towards a much more right-of-centre approach: indeed, some have described it as Thatcherite political ideology.

Although we welcome the renewed emphasis on growing the economy, the SDLP manifesto is built around interdependent commitments to economic growth, social justice, environmental protection and cultural vitality. We believe firmly that sustainable and sustained growth requires balanced social and economic investments.

Some Members' comments today show that they are moving towards the hokey-cokey of politics — I am not sure whether they are for or against the Programme for Government. In particular, I listened intently to the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. He referred to vague, unchallenging priorities. He also said that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development has forgotten that she has an agriculture portfolio, and that, with a heavy heart, he

could not commend the Programme for Government. Having given such public commitments today, it will be interesting to see how he votes. Then again, that is not unusual for the DUP; I am told that they also vote against Budgets at Westminster.

Mr Wells voiced concerns about water charging and the lack of clarity in the Programme for Government. Ms Anderson of Sinn Féin referred to the need to address social and economic needs in our society, support for the community and voluntary sector, regional development and underpinning equality — almost exactly the words used in the SDLP's amendment, which I hope will be successful. Again, when the chips are down, we will see how she actually votes.

The SDLP is not persuaded that the details in the public service agreements, the Budget and the investment strategy are consistent or can deliver on the warm words of the Programme for Government. That is most notable in the cuts in children's funding, pressures on the Health Service, lack of investment in social housing and the failure to budget for, or even refer to, the reform of post-primary education.

Strangely, despite the shift in emphasis, many of the policies trumpeted as drivers of change remain the same as those initiated during the previous period of devolution. They include a joined-up investment strategy to be overseen by a strategic investment board, infrastructure priorities to be supported by borrowing power and a positive stress on the strategic regeneration opportunities of former military and prison sites. All of those concepts were developed by the previous Executive in the reinvestment and reform initiative, and all of them were opposed by Sinn Féin or the DUP; yet all of them are now centrepieces in the Programme for Government.

Although it would be hard to take issue with the overarching aims, principle strategic priorities or cross-cutting themes outlined in the Programme for Government, it is difficult to see a natural flow or connection between the detailed commitments in the various sections and documents.

That begs the question of whether the identified priorities genuinely drove the —

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

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat. Molaim an leasú. I support the SDLP amendment.

Mr Kennedy: At this late stage in the debate, I am reminded of the old adage about long meetings — everything has been said, but it has not quite been said by everybody. *[Laughter.]*

Many speeches in the debate have been the well-honed and crafted words of Assembly Clerks or party staff. Regardless, the contributions provided by those people and delivered by the Members have been very good.

As part of this long debate, there has been the usual lecture from the Alliance Party representatives on how everyone should run Government, except them. The Alliance Party does not really want to be part of Government, and will never get there because of its electoral strength. It is also a party of high taxation, so heaven help the people of Northern Ireland if they are ever faced with the Alliance Party in control of Government.

Rather than frozen and rigid plans, the Programme for Government and the investment strategy should be living documents — which is the basis of the Ulster Unionist Party amendment. I am glad that our amendment appears to be gaining substantial support in the House. The programme must be subject to continued revision, and be flexible and capable of change in light of altered circumstances. I earlier stated that the Programme for Government and the investment strategy should regularly feature on the agenda of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. If that were the case, the Assembly could create a mechanism for revision and flexible updating, which would involve the Assembly as well as the Executive.

The Assembly must seek ways to bring decision-making to the people, as far as possible. The wider the consensus for a decision, the more legitimate it is and the wider its public acceptance. Many decisions have to be constantly reviewed in public debate on the Floor, which can only effectively take place through a system of OFMDFM Committee referral.

Members must use the opportunity to see what can be done to bring the Programme for Government and the investment strategy into the living rooms of the people that we represent. I ask all Members and the Executive to consider that, because the Ulster Unionist Party amendment ultimately seeks to strengthen the operation of the Assembly and the flexibility and effectiveness of Government in the Province. Therefore, the amendment is proposed in a positive manner, and it is designed for the benefit of all, which is why I commend it to the House and ask Members to support it for the good of the Assembly and the Executive, rather than in any narrow or partisan sense.

Any measure that promotes better procedure, more democracy, better democratic control and a more responsible and flexible system of Government must be welcomed by everyone.

In my initial remarks, I reminded the House that the Ulster Unionist Party is a responsible political party that is used to exercising control and responsibility in Government. We continue to undertake those duties in the Executive and the Assembly, and we do not apologise for that. We will not be sidelined or marginalised, and we will offer leadership. That is why we offer our amendment to the House.

7.45 pm

Dr Farry: We support individual aspects of the Programme for Government, but overall, it is a flawed document. Our amendment sets out three clear reasons why it is flawed and must be reviewed.

The Ulster Unionist Party amendment simply states what is obvious and what will happen anyway. It is a pointless amendment, which, no doubt is the reason that the DUP and Sinn Féin masters in the Assembly are prepared to accept it. Clearly, after the fuss of the past few months, the UUP has thrown in its lot with the Executive. Although the SDLP amendment contains some major criticisms of the Programme for Government, it still endorses a flawed document.

The Alliance Party has been accused of being negative today, but frankly, there is much to be negative about. I am concerned at the lack of respect that has been shown in the Chamber for the concept of opposition and at the lack of acceptance that a document can be criticised in any way. Given what we so-called democrats have fought for over the past number of years, the failure to recognise the importance of opposition in a democratic Chamber is a matter of extreme concern for the whole community.

The Alliance Party is ambitious for Northern Ireland, and that is the reason that we are fundamentally disappointed by the document. It is noticeable that few Members sought to engage with the criticisms that Members of my party voiced today. The only exception was Mr McClarty, who attempted — and I stress the word “attempted” — to criticise us over the cost of segregation. The Alliance Party did not claim that it was possible to unlock the cost of segregation in one fell swoop; indeed, there are areas where it would be undesirable to shift spending. That said, we must make a start.

When we look back at David Trimble’s foot dragging when he was last in office, we can see the Ulster Unionist Party’s record on a shared future. Indeed, the shared future strategy sat on the shelf for an entire year until direct rule Ministers published it.

The Ulster Unionists seem to have bought into the populist approach to taxation, which was voiced by the DUP, when it was chasing a few cheap votes. The price that we will pay for that is an underfunded Health Service.

The Ulster Unionists have been sold a pup by the DUP, and the people of Northern Ireland will suffer in health — *[Interruption.]*

The document has been criticised by Members in all corners of the House, including some DUP Members, notably Sammy Wilson and Willie McCrea. It is strange that those criticisms reflect the inability of the DUP to control the Executive. I understood that the DUP had

negotiated new measures through St Andrews to control everything that happened and to ensure that nothing would ever come out of the Executive that did not have the DUP stamp on it. Now it seems to be the other way around: DUP Members talk about the education and skills authority with which they are not happy, and they have now signed up to promoting Irish-medium education.

Sinn Féin seemed confused about whether the document helps or hinders the need to address equality and balanced regional development. Judging by comments that different UUP Members made throughout the day, that party does not know whether it is for or against the programme. Mr Basil McCrea, the self-styled leader of the opposition in the Ulster Unionist Party, voiced considerable criticisms.

Mr Kennedy: What planet is the Member on? *[Laughter.]*

Dr Farry: I am very much on planet earth; I do not know where he is coming from, mind you.

The Programme for Government represents the lowest-common denominator, and only the issues on which the parties agree are acted on. Major areas of public policy lie outside the document. For example, will nothing happen on the single equality Bill over the next few years, the environmental protection agency, free personal care for the elderly, which was promised by all the Executive parties in their Assembly manifestos — *[Interruption.]*

A Member: That was only a manifesto.

Dr Farry: What does that matter?

There is no mention of post-primary education, which is the most controversial issue facing the Assembly. What are the people of Northern Ireland supposed to make of that? There are no formal action plans for the shared future strategy, which has been marginalised. A list of actions was approved for that strategy that could have easily been acted on, but nothing happened. The goalposts are now being shifted on the economy and on managing our productivity gap.

Other fundamental issues have also been raised, such as lack of funding for transport, child services, the health budget, and funding for mental-health services for which no commitment to implement the Bamford Review in all its forms has been made.

We must take a second look at the Programme for Government with a view to reviewing it. I therefore urge the House to support our amendment.

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. We have had a wide-ranging debate on the draft Programme for Government and investment strategy, covering many different issues. The interest in the documents reinforces

the First Minister's remarks about the importance of functioning political institutions. We must demonstrate that the Executive can and will make a difference.

Although we are a local Executive and Assembly, we know that we must look outside ourselves; we cannot afford to be inward looking or to ignore developments elsewhere. Global and international events can and do affect us.

We must not develop our programmes and priorities in isolation. This twenty-first-century world is moving faster than we could have imagined or thought possible. Technology and modern communications mean that we are interconnected to a vast global network. Our economy is directly affected by developments elsewhere. Economic upturns — or downturns — on the other side of the world affect our economy, and the events on the world's economic stage over recent weeks demonstrate that very clearly.

Similarly, people look to developments in societies elsewhere and expect to see similar progress here. We are influenced by what we know is happening in other areas. We may be a small part of the world, but we are part of the wider picture. There is no reason why we cannot be a world leader, promoting the social and economic rights of all our people.

As we are a small area, it is imperative that we build partnerships with those who are willing to help. When the First Minister and I visited the United States of America recently, we attempted to deliver the message that we were open for business and ready to meet the challenges ahead. That visit was hugely important for our economy, as it provided an excellent opportunity to highlight the benefits of investing here to a high-level audience of senior US business and political leaders. Our Programme for Government, investment strategy and Budget are vital in demonstrating that those are not empty words, but that we have thought out where our focus should be.

Following on from our visit to the US, we plan to host a US investment conference in May of this year. That conference will allow us to position ourselves as a competitive business location for US companies on information communication technology and financial and business services sectors and to showcase what we have to offer. We continue to work with the Barroso task force to explore areas in which our economy could benefit from EU policies and programmes. We are committed to working with Europe to help us to become a more entrepreneurial, a more sustainable and a more innovative economy.

We also need to progress areas where the two Governments on this small island can work together more effectively, and where we can usefully collaborate in areas of common interest to mutual benefit. The Programme for Government gives us an agreed basis

on which to engage with those who wish to help. Our friends in the United States of America, Europe and elsewhere are willing to play a part, and we must be clear about the areas in which we would like that involvement and assistance.

We must also show that we are not just passively looking for assistance from others, but that we want to be in a genuine partnership, where both parties have something to offer. That is the key to building long-term, worthwhile relationships. We have much goodwill and support, both at home and abroad, including the United States and the European Union, to help us to realise the opportunities and address the challenges that we face. We are working to build on that goodwill and support to create a confident, vibrant region and to help to grow our economy.

I will now turn to some of the points raised this afternoon, and I will confine my remarks to matters of a strategic nature. Some of the more detailed points raised will be dealt with by my ministerial colleagues and, no doubt, they will respond in due course.

We have considered carefully all the issues that were raised during the consultation and they have informed our decisions on the final Programme for Government and investment strategy. I am pleased that several Members, including Naomi Long and Mark Durkan, recognised that we have sought to take account of those responses in the documents that we present today. We welcome the largely positive response to our priorities. In our draft Programme for Government we announced that our top priority was to grow a dynamic and innovative economy.

We want to build a successful economy that is characterised by high productivity, a highly skilled and flexible workforce and employment growth that delivers increased prosperity and tackles disadvantage and poverty.

Our economy has performed well in recent years; employment is at a record high, unemployment is at an historic low, and the private sector's contribution to economic output is increasing. However, we still have much to do to build our skills base, increase prosperity and improve productivity. We must also address the problems of economic inactivity and ill health among the working-age population, and we must promote greater employment opportunities in rural areas and disadvantaged communities.

Equality is an important issue for the Executive and for society. Inequalities exist, and we must strive to eliminate all forms of inequality. We are determined that everyone, including the most vulnerable in society, will have the opportunity to contribute to, and benefit from, increased prosperity.

We recognise that economic growth and social progress cannot be taken forward in isolation from action to address poverty and disadvantage in order to build a fairer and more equitable society. I assure the

House that the economy will not be developed at the expense of the disadvantaged members of society. We must take steps to address the needs of the most disadvantaged and the most vulnerable, as well as the communities that experience high levels of poverty, disadvantage and exclusion.

We also recognise and acknowledge the role that the community and voluntary sector has played, and can continue to play. The investment strategy will help us to deliver the infrastructure that will be essential to support our plans for economic development and job creation, as set out in the Programme for Government. We will also work with local industry bodies and the Sector Skills Council for construction to ensure that apprenticeships are put in place to enable people to develop sustainable skills.

It is anticipated that specific guidance on embedding equality of opportunity and sustainability, including consideration of social outcomes in procurement processes, will be issued to public bodies in the near future.

The importance of equality has been raised several times. As previously stated, equality, fairness, inclusion and the promotion of good relations will be watchwords for all Executive policies and programmes across Government. That places an overarching responsibility on us all to proactively change the existing patterns of social disadvantage by using increased prosperity and economic growth to tackle ongoing poverty, to develop new and innovative measures that will address existing patterns of socio-economic disadvantage and to target resources and efforts towards those in greatest objective need.

The Executive are fully committed to ensuring that equality is properly taken into account. As the First Minister confirmed, we will publish tomorrow a draft equality impact assessment carried out at a strategic level for 12 weeks' consultation. In order to assess the potential equality and good relations implications of the Programme for Government, the Budget and investment strategy as a whole, the assessment is focused at the strategic level and aims to consider the overall impact that will be associated with the Executive's priorities and the allocation of resources as set out in the Budget and investment strategy.

The delivery of policies, programmes and capital projects at departmental level will be informed by the outcome of the assessment. In addition, the Executive will seek to ensure that Departments, Government agencies and relevant statutory authorities continue to meet their obligations under section 75, including schedule 9.

The individual policies, programmes and capital projects that Departments will take forward will therefore continue to be subject to equality screening. Where appropriate, and in line with statutory duty, full equality impact assessments will be undertaken by

Departments, their agencies and relevant statutory authorities.

The consultation on the draft equality impact assessment will be an important exercise. We look forward to active engagement with the Committee on that, and we will also seek to engage the wider public actively through widely advertised public meetings and other, more targeted, events. The Executive are determined that the consultation on the draft equality assessment will offer everyone the opportunity to have their say and to influence final decisions.

As the First Minister said, the Executive will take account of the final equality impact assessment carried out at a strategic level in the implementation of the Programme for Government and the investment strategy.

8.00 pm

As for the Budget, the final equality impact assessment will be taken into account in the future allocation of resources, including monitoring rounds.

Several Members have raised the issue of promoting good relations. I assure Members that the Executive are determined to address divisions in our society and to build a shared and better future for all. We have sought to clarify that commitment in a document that has a shared and better future for all as a key, cross-cutting theme.

I assure Naomi Long that we recognise that that goal will not be achieved without a robust policy framework and clear actions. To suggest otherwise fails to take account of our clear commitment, in the Programme for Government, to advance a programme of cohesion and integration for a shared and better future for all.

The issue of child poverty was raised by Danny Kennedy, Dolores Kelly and other Members. That is, rightly, a matter about which we should all be concerned. In the Programme for Government, the Executive have outlined clear commitments to work towards the elimination of child poverty by 2020; improve educational outcomes, particularly for the most disadvantaged children; and to ensure that all our children are cared for, live in safety and are protected from abuse. Those commitments were warmly welcomed in the responses to the consultation, and it is right that we set challenging targets if we are to eliminate poverty, which blights so many lives. We are determined to make real progress on that issue.

We will tackle poverty, including child poverty, by applying Executive policies and programmes, particularly those aimed at giving people the best chance of decent jobs, along with tax and benefit policies. We will use 1998 as the baseline from which progress will be measured; and we know that reductions in child poverty have already been made against that. As for those who challenge our targets as unambitious, or not tailored to

this area's specific needs, we point out that our target to eliminate severe child poverty here by 2012 was widely welcomed as the first of its kind on these islands.

On the issue of regional balance, two of the most fascinating contributions came from Claire McGill and Lord Morrow. The degree of common ground between them on conditions west of the Bann was very striking. Through our Programme for Government and investment strategy, we have clearly set out that promoting regional balance and addressing existing regional disparities are key objectives for the Executive. As Martina Anderson said, that is crucial if we are to realise our objectives of growing our economy and tackling disadvantage and exclusion. Our commitment to promote regional balance and address regional disparities is, by far, the strongest made by a locally elected Administration. That was warmly welcomed during consultation seminars, and I welcome the importance that Naomi Long and Mark Durkan attach to regional balance.

Concerns have been raised as to the priority attached to agriculture and rural development. Those are key issues for the Executive. We recognise the important contribution of the agricultural sector to the local economy and we will work with that sector to improve competitiveness. We have set out in the Programme for Government clear commitments and targets to that end, and, more widely, to improve the social and economic infrastructure of rural areas.

I take this opportunity to correct an answer that I gave during the debate on the draft Programme for Government on 25 October 2007, in relation to the introduction of concessionary fares on rural services. For clarity: bids for that were not successful. Available funding will be used to provide free travel on mainstream public transport for those aged 60 to 64.

Several Members — including Naomi Long, Mark Durkan and Mitchel McLaughlin — have rightly highlighted issues of sustainability. I welcome the importance that they attach to that subject. A key objective of the Programme for Government is to deliver a better and more sustainable future for all our people. Although the economy is our top priority, we recognise that economic growth and social progress must be advanced in a manner that protects our environment and resources for future generations. In the Programme for Government, we give a clear commitment that the principles of sustainable development will underpin the approach to all our activities. That is also reflected clearly in the investment strategy. Building a sustainable future will be a key requirement for our economic, social and environmental programmes.

At a strategic level, we are working on a new sustainable development implementation plan for 2008-11. The new plan will align closely with the Programme for Government. In addition to continuing

to work towards several targets in the sustainable development strategy, the Executive will incorporate relevant targets from the Programme for Government and the public service agreements into the plan. The new implementation plan will, therefore, set out clearly the Executive's approach to sustainable development, along with what we are trying to achieve and how we plan to go about it. It will also set out the specific monitoring arrangements that will apply to all the targets in the plan.

Mark Durkan suggested that the Executive's targets and goals are too focused on cross-cutting areas. I acknowledge his concerns. However, it must be recognised that the key challenges that we face in building a shared, better future for everyone are cross-cutting in nature. It is only right that the Executive's focus is on dealing with those challenges and making a difference, rather than on departmental boundaries. Indeed, some of the criticisms of the previous Administration relate to the lack of a joined-up approach on cross-cutting issues. Nevertheless, we accept that each Department's contribution to the achievement of the targets must be made clear. The Executive have sought to do that through the public service agreements, which set out the actions and targets that Departments will seek to deliver in support of the Executive's priorities.

Another topic in which there has been keen interest is how the Executive will monitor their progress. That is a key issue for the Executive and for the Assembly. We all want to ensure that priorities and programmes are delivered and improve people's lives. In line with the Executive's different approach to the Programme for Government, we have decided to introduce new monitoring arrangements. The Executive believe that we can be most effective by concentrating on the overall delivery of priorities. We will focus on key goals and commitments. Lead Ministers and senior responsible officers will be identified. Progress will be monitored and reported to the Executive at regular intervals.

Individual Ministers will have a key role to play in that. However, they will also separately monitor their own Department's progress against a range of other targets and objectives. Departments will also publish detailed delivery agreements for each of the public service agreements. We will send the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister progress reports on a six-monthly basis. We will also publish an end-year report that sets out progress.

With regard to the investment strategy, Departments will, in the coming weeks, publish their individual investment delivery plans, which will provide more detail about the projects to be undertaken. The Executive are aware that those plans are keenly awaited. We have asked all Departments to ensure that they are published by 31 March. Finally, I emphasise that the Executive are determined to see the delivery of those investment

plans to completion. We will, therefore, put in place robust monitoring mechanisms to ensure that delivery takes place.

Specific concerns have been raised about the review process for the Programme for Government. I can confirm that, although the programme provides a framework for the next three years, it will be reviewed annually. We will, therefore, have an opportunity to streamline it and to make whatever amendments prove necessary as we move through the first year of its implementation. By reviewing and amending the Programme for Government to take account of changing circumstances, the Executive will ensure that it remains up to date and relevant. Although it provides us with a framework, it is not set in stone.

If we are to make improvements on some of the process's features, it will not be long before we must turn our thoughts to the annual review. In reviewing the Programme for Government, we must strike a balance between maintaining the course that we are on and responding to new developments or, indeed, experience on the ground. This year's process was hampered to some extent by the tight time frame within which we were working. The process for next year will be different: there will be no significant new resources available, as this is not a spending review year. Departments already have their allocations in place. Any revision to the Programme for Government must take account of that.

The Executive must consider carefully how best to manage the review of the Programme for Government. However, there are some strong pointers from the current process. We will aim to take the views of the Assembly and its Committees at the earliest possible stage. We will consider how best the Committees, in particular, might be engaged. We welcome Members' views on how that might best be achieved.

The Executive recognise that there is a good deal of expertise and knowledge among MLAs, particularly in Committees. We wish to take full benefit of that, and of their assessment of progress on the ground, against the PSA framework. In light of that, we will support the Ulster Unionist amendment to ensure ongoing review and subsequent necessary revision. Similarly, we support the call from SDLP, Sinn Féin and DUP Members for the investment strategy to best deliver balanced regional development and to underpin equality.

We intend to publish a people-friendly version of the Programme for Government and the investment strategy. It is vital that people on the ground — and throughout the community — are able to connect with the work in which we are engaged and, more importantly, to understand the language.

Many constructive and positive contributions were made during the course of today's debate from Members

of all the parties. The one disappointment has been the Alliance Party. Under direct rule, the Alliance Party was a yes party. Since the direct rule Ministers left, the Alliance Party has become a no party.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mr M McGuinness: No, I will not give way.

Since the direct rulers have gone, the Alliance Party has become a no party. Indeed, it is the most negative party in the Assembly. There is no point in the Alliance Party's yearning for the old days, because the old days have gone and they are not coming back.

Mrs Long: That is good news.

Mr M McGuinness: In conclusion, the debate has been exceptionally wide-ranging. Many of the Members comments will be helpful, as we move forward. Many of the Members — from all parties — who spoke have been positive. The Executive should be proud of their achievement in preparing those documents and putting in place a strong framework for action over the next three years.

Basil McCrea, who sometimes harks back to the direct rule Ministers, commented constructively that:

“vision without delivery is a daydream”.

That is why action must be a key word for the Executive. We are aware of the need to deliver on the policies and programmes that are set out in the Programme for Government and the investment strategy. We must now turn our attention to achieving the goals and targets that we have set for ourselves. We know that that will not be easy. However, we are committed to beginning the task. Today, therefore, marks the beginning of a process. Members, and the wider public, will want to know how we are doing. I fully expect that our year-end report will be subject to much scrutiny and question. That may be a difficult and challenging process for the Executive, but it is important, because it is democracy at work.

Our overall aim is to have a Programme for Government that takes us in the right direction. The Executive believe that the Programme for Government, with the investment strategy that we have produced, gives us a firm foundation on which to plan, develop and deliver our policies. The road ahead will not be easy. We must deal with, and overcome, the legacy of the past. We must work to achieve a shared and better future. There is no doubt that many challenges lie ahead. We firmly believe that those can be overcome.

At the heart of our Programme for Government and the investment strategy are the people who live here. As an Executive, it is our responsibility to build a better and brighter future for everyone. We will welcome the Assembly's support for the motion and the amendment that was put forward by the Ulster Unionist Party. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question, I advise Members that if amendment No 1 is made, all other amendments will fall. If an amendment is made, I will put the Question on the motion as amended.

The Question is that amendment No 1, standing in the names of Mr David Ford, Mrs Naomi Long, Mr Kieran McCarthy and Dr Stephen Farry, be made.

All those in favour say Aye.

Some Members: Aye.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Contrary, if any, say No.

Some Members: No.

Some Members: Aye.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Noes may have it. However, there is some doubt. Clear the Lobbies. The Question will be put in three minutes.

Division Bells rung.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Question is that amendment No 1 be made. All those in favour say Aye.

Some Members: Aye.

Mr Deputy Speaker: All those to the contrary say No.

Some Members: No.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Noes have it.
[Interruption.]

Do we have Tellers?

8.15 pm

Mr A Maginness: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will you rule on whether amendment No 3 will fall if amendment No 2 is passed? I put it to you that amendment No 3 is not incompatible with amendment No 2. If amendment No 2 is passed, amendment No 3 should be put to the House: there is no reason why it cannot be voted on. Amendment No 3 simply adds to amendment No 2, and there should be a vote on amendment No 3. It should not fall.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has made a ruling regarding the order of business and it is that if amendment No 1 is made, all others will fall. Similarly, if amendment No 2 were made, amendment No 3 would fall. Any Member is entitled to challenge the Speaker's ruling, but those are the guidelines that I have been given to work with in tonight's vote.

We will deal with this issue first. Tellers have been appointed: for the Ayes, they will be Trevor Lunn and Kieran McCarthy; for the Noes, they will be Paul Maskey and Jim Shannon.

The House divided.

Mr A Maginness: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I cannot take a point of order in the middle of a Division.

Mr A Maginness: Mr Deputy Speaker, you said that the Noes had it; therefore, no vote should have been taken.

Mr Deputy Speaker: No. I asked for Tellers, as there was a dispute over the Question, then I had to take the vote. I have no option — it is in Standing Orders.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 9; Noes 59.

AYES

Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr McCarthy, Mr Neeson, Ms Purvis, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Lunn and Mr McCarthy.

NOES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Brolly, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Burnside, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Doherty, Mr Donaldson, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr P Maskey, Mr McCallister, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrear, Mr McElduff, Mr McFarland, Mrs McGill, Mr McGimpsey, Mr M McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr P Maskey and Mr Shannon.

Question accordingly negatived.

8.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Question is that amendment No 2, in the names of Mr Danny Kennedy and Mr David McNarry, be made. All those in favour say Aye.

Some Members: Aye.

Mr Deputy Speaker: To the contrary, if any, say No.

Some Members: No.

Some Members: Aye.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Ayes have it. The Question is that the motion, as amended, be agreed. All those in favour say Aye.

Some Members: Aye.

Mr Deputy Speaker: To the contrary, if any, say No.

Some Members: No.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Ayes have it.

Mr Ford: Mr Deputy Speaker, Noes were said, but you did not allow the opportunity for a partial decision. On the basis of precedent, we should have the right to insist on a Division.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Based on the previous vote, and on the Ayes and Noes, I assessed that the Ayes had it.

Mr Ford: You did not say that you believed that the Ayes had it. You said that the Ayes had it, giving no chance — in accordance with Standing Orders — for a challenge to your initial opinion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is the Member challenging my opinion?

Mr Ford: I thought that that was fairly clear, Mr Deputy Speaker. Yes, I am.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The normal way to do that would be to say Aye or No. As no one shouted No, I assumed that Members accepted my decision. However, I will accept the Member's challenge. That means that there will be a vote.

Question put, That amendment No 2 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 59; Noes 24.

AYES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Brolly, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Burnside, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Doherty, Mr Donaldson, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr P Maskey, Mr McCallister, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mr McFarland, Mrs McGill, Mr McGimpsey, Mr M McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

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

NOES

Mr Attwood, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Durkan, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCarthy, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mr McHugh, Mr Neeson, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Gallagher and Mr McCarthy.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 60; Noes 24.

AYES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Brolly, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Burnside, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Doherty, Mr Donaldson, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr P Maskey, Mr McCallister, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mr McFarland, Mrs McGill, Mr McGimpsey, Mr M McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

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

NOES

Mr Attwood, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Durkan, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCarthy, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mr McHugh, Mr Neeson, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Dr Farry and Mr McCarthy.

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the Programme for Government and investment strategy for Northern Ireland agreed by the Executive; and calls on the Executive to ensure ongoing review and subsequent necessary revision.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Standing Committee Membership

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is the motion on membership of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. As with similar motions, this motion will be treated as a business motion; therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mrs Claire McGill be appointed as a member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. — *[Ms Ní Chuilín.]*

Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the draft Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2007

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

The Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee on the draft Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 (Mr A Maginness): I beg to move

That the Assembly approves the Report of the Ad Hoc Committee set up to consider the draft Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2007, and agrees that it should be submitted to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland as a report of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Mr Kennedy: All those in favour say Aye. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Mr A Maginness: I remind Members that the draft Order was referred to the Assembly for consideration by the Secretary of State under section 85 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. If approved, the Committee's report, along with the Hansard report of this debate, will form the Assembly's response to the Secretary of State and the NIO on the draft Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2007.

The NIO has, of course, been conducting a wider consultation on the draft Order, which ends on 31 January 2008. However, the Committee expects the views of the Assembly to carry a lot of weight when the NIO and other Departments consider responses to the consultation.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

9.00 pm

As is usually the case with Ad Hoc Committees, we are working to a very tight timescale on the draft Order and the fact that we straddled the Christmas holidays provided its own difficulties. I acknowledge the time and commitment to the task given by all the Committee members, the Committee Clerk and the support staff. On behalf of the Committee, I thank the NIO officials and the representatives of all the other key organisations who provided the Committee with information and evidence over the past couple of months.

The draft Order is a significant piece of law and order legislation and is, I understand, the largest criminal justice Order ever introduced in Northern Ireland. It covers a wide range of issues, some of which are too often in the news because of the negative impact that they have across our society.

The proposals in the draft Order are designed to increase public protection and confidence in the criminal justice system at a range of levels. The draft Order contains new indeterminate and extended custodial sentencing for dangerous sexual and violent offenders. It also provides for new release-on-licence conditions and the ending of unconditional 50% remission. There will be new curfew powers and arrangements for monitoring offenders electronically in the community and more supervision of offenders following their release from prison. Parole commissioners will take over the role of the Life Sentence Review Commissioners and will have an extended role in advising the Secretary of State on the release of prisoners serving life or one of the new indeterminate or extended custodial sentences.

The draft Order also puts on a statutory footing the arrangements already made for the multi-agency risk assessment and management of sex offenders, and it will extend those arrangements to cover violent offenders as well.

The draft Order introduces new supervised activity orders, which provide a community alternative to custody for people who default on fines — a significant development, as quite a number of people in the prison population are there simply for defaulting on fines. That should remedy the problem. There is also a range of new road-traffic offences and a new power to allow police to seize vehicles such as quad bikes and mini-scooters that are being used to cause a nuisance. There are new powers to address the problems associated with the sale of alcohol to minors and to tackle alcohol-related disorder in public places more effectively.

There is a range of miscellaneous provisions that covers increased penalties for offences relating to knives, the extension of the use of live links to give evidence in court, and proposed changes in relation to ASBOs, youth justice and the proving of arrest warrants in courts.

It will not be possible for me to cover everything, but I will address some of the more important issues in the draft legislation and in the Committee's report. On sentencing, the criminal-justice agencies, such as the Prison Service, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland and Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland, all supported significant changes, including the new indeterminate sentence and extended custodial sentence arrangements being introduced to deal with dangerous sexual and violent offenders.

The Committee heard concerns expressed by others, including the chairperson of the Life Sentence Review Commissioners, that the new sentencing arrangements, which already exist in Britain, had not been based on research or evidence by penologists, but were instead a political reaction to public concern about dangerous

crime and the risk of serious harm to the public. We were informed that the prison and probation services in England and Wales had been initially overwhelmed by the imposition of some inappropriate short-tariff indeterminate sentences. We also received evidence that, when the legislation was being drafted for Northern Ireland, proper account had been taken of those negative experiences in Britain.

I am pleased that that latter point is borne out on examination of articles 4, 5 and 6 of the draft Order: they remove the presumption of dangerousness, which exists in Britain but not here, and therefore must be determined by the prosecution in court; they give courts here more discretion in choosing between an extended custodial sentence and an indeterminate sentence; they provide for a minimum one-year tariff for an extended sentence and a minimum two-year tariff for an indeterminate sentence; and they provide that those sentences would be able to be imposed only on indictment, mostly in the Crown Courts.

The Committee was content that the lessons have been learnt and that our legislation is more tightly drafted as a result of the experience of the equivalent sentencing arrangements in Britain.

In light of all the evidence received and considered, the Committee gave a general broad welcome to the proposals covering the new sentencing arrangements and the ending of unconditional 50% remission. The Committee also supported the new parole and licence arrangements, including the role of the parole commissioners, the curfew and electronic monitoring of some offenders, and the compulsory supervision of all offenders on licence after release.

The Committee also recommended that guidelines and courses should be developed to assist the judiciary in the introduction of those new sentencing measures. I have already mentioned supervised activity orders; they should remedy the problem of fine defaulters.

I have mentioned the proposal to extend risk assessment and management procedures to cover violent as well as sex offenders; we strongly support those provisions and have made a recommendation that the proposal for a co-located public-protection team should be developed and implemented as soon as possible. For the record, the Committee appreciates the excellent work that is already going on in organisations such as the police, the Probation Board, the Housing Executive, Departments, the health trusts and the NSPCC on the sharing of information to minimise the risk to the public posed by some of the more dangerous offenders. We heard evidence that we already have some of the best arrangements in place, but we cannot be complacent, and so the proposed co-located public-protection team is an essential development.

The provisions in the draft Order do not always bite directly on the Probation Board and the Prison Service, but the work of those two agencies, and their partnership in coping with the increased workload flowing from the new arrangements, will be crucial.

The chairperson of the Life Sentence Review Commissioners, the Criminal Justice Inspection, the Human Rights Commission and the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO) all pointed to the potential for legal challenges if prisoners cannot avail of behaviour-change programmes due to lack of resources. A recent court case in Britain — *R (on the application of Wells) v The Parole Board* — has highlighted the problem of non-delivery of programmes for prisoners serving public-protection sentences, and the Committee heard that similar problems could arise here.

The lesson to be learnt, and the recommendation that we are making, is that the Prison Service and Probation Board should ensure that all relevant prisoners have access to appropriate basic-skills training and behaviour-change programmes and that the necessary resources are made available to achieve that. Putting resources into all those changes is vital.

There are other significant matters, such as the alcohol interlock-ignition scheme, which is helpful and creative in dealing with the problem of drink-drivers. There is also the power of seizure of vehicles, such as quads or mini scooters, that cause alarm, distress or annoyance.

There was some discussion in the Committee on the test purchasing of alcohol, and we were minded that there should be strict safeguards on the use of that particular power. The Human Rights Commission expressed concern about that, and we took that on board. There was also considerable debate about alcohol consumption at designated public places, which I do not have time to go into, but the Committee welcomed the powers that would allow the police to confiscate alcohol or impose fixed penalties, initially to be set at £50. The Committee also calls on the Department for Social Development to review that scheme as it is enacted in the coming months.

I commend the report, which was agreed by all the parties in the House.

Mr Weir: On behalf of the DUP, I thank the Chairperson and all those who gave evidence, and the staff who produced the report, because the draft Order is wide-ranging; a lot was thrown into it by the Northern Ireland Office, and, therefore, there was much ground to cover.

It was refreshing to find that, although there were differences of opinion among various Committee members, the overall conclusions demonstrated common sense in an attempt to reach a consensus. There was an

attempt to keep the level of dogma from all sides to a minimum.

On behalf of the DUP, I welcome the general thrust of the legislation and the report on the introduction of indeterminate sentencing. We will see the much-vaunted end to automatic 50% remission, which will bring us into line with the rest of the UK and, as has been indicated, we can take advantage and learn lessons from the rest of the country in areas where matters were not established as well as they should have been. The key concepts of public protection and public safety, particularly in relation to violent and sexual offenders, will be at the heart of sentencing, and it is right that that is reflected in the legislation.

I shall emphasise two notes of caution on the matter of sentencing. First, the evidence that we received time and again from a range of witnesses was that, although the system was generally welcomed by most in the various professions, the strong message came across that if sentencing is to work effectively, it must be properly resourced by Government. That is a key message for Government in respect of implementation. Secondly, the Committee realised that Government must have the maximum amount of public information available on that matter.

There is a danger that public expectations will reach unrealistic proportions. It should be noted that when the provisions are introduced, they will have an effect on any future sentencing. Prisoners who are already in prison will not be affected by those conditions, and it is important that that message be understood. Unless the Government make that clear, there will, at some stage, be public outrage over the release of some violent offender who does not fall under the terms of the sentencing because his or her sentence pre-dates it.

Mr Dodds: In welcoming the provision to end automatic 50% remission, I am reminded of the petition, in which I played a role, delivered on behalf of 'Belfast Telegraph' readers to 10 Downing Street. Does the Member agree that one of the reasons why there may be unrealistic public expectation is due to the NIO's delay in introducing that measure, which has been called for for so long, and which should have been introduced long ago?

Mr Weir: The speed of response from the Northern Ireland Office was disappointing. It is clear that a limited amount can be done in matters such as the *Attracta Harron* case. However, we hope to ensure that if such terrible circumstances occur again, there will be provision to ensure that —

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Member for giving way. Mr Dodds referred to the NIO delay and, although it was regrettable, it was, in some ways, beneficial. The problems that occurred in Britain were highlighted

in evidence sessions, and that helped the Committee's deliberations.

Mr Weir: As in all such matters, we must consider the issue of balance. However, I am not convinced that the NIO got the balance right.

The Chairperson of the Committee referred to a wide range of other issues that are mentioned in the report. We welcome the additional legislation on traffic offences, alcohol interlock-ignition schemes and the scourge of mini-scooters, which I suspect one of my colleagues will refer to later. There was much discussion in the Committee on the issue of test purchasing of alcohol, which caused problems for some witnesses. However, if we are to provide the proper level of protection for our young people, sensible guidelines and sensible constraints are required to ensure that we can combat the scourge of underage drinking.

Concern was expressed on the issue of alcohol consumption in public places. Although the Committee welcomed the additional powers of confiscation and the new fixed penalties, there was concern that the legislation, as currently drafted, replaces current by-laws rather than adding to them. Given the scourge of yobs drinking in public places, there is a need to ensure that the power to clamp down on such behaviour remains. My party feels that that power should primarily be exercised by the police, rather than council officials, and that there must be an examination of a wider ban at a later stage.

9.15 pm

One issue that divided opinion in the Committee, but which the DUP welcomed, was the introduction of emergency antisocial behaviour orders. That was the only issue on which there was an agreement to disagree. I commend the report to the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Like the Member who spoke previously, I thank the Committee, the staff and all the witnesses for their work in compiling the report. Sinn Féin has been working to create a new atmosphere among the local community, the PSNI and criminal justice agencies so that we can all work together in a constructive manner. It is, therefore, crucial that all sections of the criminal justice system fulfil their obligations to uphold the rights of all citizens to live in safety and peace, free from intimidation and threat.

Due process must take its course in the courts, and lessons must be learnt, in practice and policy, on how criminal justice agencies work with the local community to uphold people's rights. Those involved at grass-roots level, local families and local groups are well placed to highlight the way in which the criminal

justice system has failed and, unfortunately, in some cases, is still failing. Those people are often the most inventive in proposing radical and practical changes.

It is well known from studies around the world that making a community stronger makes it safer. Equally, a safer community will be a stronger community. That said, every citizen is entitled to an effective and representative policing and justice system that is community-based, imbued with human rights and democratically accountable. That is what my party is working to achieve.

One aspect of the draft legislation that has been highlighted more than most is the proposal relating to the end of 50% remission. That issue came to prominence after the murder of Attracta Harron, who was sexually assaulted and murdered by Trevor Hamilton — a serial sex offender who had been released and was supposed to have been under strict supervision by the relevant criminal justice agencies.

The draft Justice Order was broadly welcomed in paragraph 62 of the Committee's report, as was the end of unconditional 50% remission for specified sexual offences in particular. However, concerns were raised by the Human Rights Commission and other civil liberties organisations about some of the provisions of the draft Order that are not in the Criminal Justice Act 2003, primarily the minimum two-year tariff and the introduction of extended custodial sentences. The concern is that people who are prosecuted for relatively minor offences could be subject to indeterminate custodial sentences. Sinn Féin shares some of those concerns and intends to raise the issue directly with the NIO, particularly Paul Goggins, and possibly others.

We must deal with the crisis in confidence in the criminal justice system and in the approach to sentencing and punishment of sex crime and the treatment and supervision of sex offenders. The proposed legislation would increase public protection, ensure more appropriate sentences for serious sexual and violent offenders and establish post-release supervision.

Proposals to introduce the use of electronic tagging have raised some human rights concerns. However, they are mitigated to some degree by the proposal that the use of such a provision should be based on the consent of the individual.

As another Member mentioned, the consumption of alcohol in public places is a problem that must be tackled. There is a need for effective preventive and enforcement mechanisms and many community-based initiatives that will work well. However, the expansion of police powers contained in the NIO draft Order is not well explained. In evidence to the Committee, the PSNI stated that policing the consumption of alcohol in public places is not a priority. The PSNI also expressed concerns about the enforcement of such provisions,

stating that councils should be responsible for enforcement. There is much unclear thinking on the matter.

With regard to the use of test purchasing powers, Sinn Féin does not consider it to be in the interest of any child to be used to promote the commission of a criminal offence in an entrapment situation.

My party is concerned that a vulnerable child who is known to the police may be asked to participate in a test-purchase case to avoid caution, prosecution or an ASBO. What, other than avoidance of prosecution, would induce a parent or guardian to consent to his or her child being used in such a manner? That provision requires an equality impact assessment.

Sinn Féin has listened, and will continue to listen, to what others have to say. The Committee welcomed the Order, although on some issues, full consensus was not achieved. Nevertheless, all parties agree that it is in the interests of all that such matters be investigated and legislated on by the Assembly and that the transfer of policing and justice powers to local, democratically accountable authorities must be a priority. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McFarland: I welcome the report. I thank the Chairperson, the Deputy Chairperson, the Committee members, the staff, and all who gave evidence. Colleagues have covered several areas, so I will be a little more precise on some other aspects.

The review of sentencing guidelines is very welcome, especially the removal of 50% remission.

[Interruption.]

A Member: Wishful thinking.

Mr McFarland: That is my other Committee.

I turn to the issue of the licensing system. Interim custody and extended orders require that prisoners come before a parole board before they can be released. That puts an enormous strain on the parole commissioners. The Committee was worried about that, and sought guidance from the NIO that proper resources would be put in place; otherwise, it would not work. As was said earlier, if prisoners have not attended courses in prison, they cannot be released. That was a source of concern to the Committee. Therefore, training must be provided for the Probation Board and for the Prison Service, and financing must be provided for parole commissioners.

The Committee turned to road traffic, on which there were interesting developments. The Order will crack down on yobboes driving badly. The police are now allowed to seize vehicles that are causing alarm, distress and annoyance; they can seize quad bikes and mini-scooters that race up and down the street. The new offences of “failure to stop” and “furious driving” — which particularly appeals to me — will be introduced.

The police can also introduce hospital and roadside breath tests: they can simply stop one and test one’s breath.

A delightful alcohol ignition-interlock device is being trialled. If a person has had a problem with alcohol and has been caught driving over the legal limit, he or she will be required to blow into a machine on getting into the car: unless that person’s breath is clear of alcohol, the machine will prevent the ignition from working. That is interesting.

[Interruption.]

The Committee had a healthy debate on the age at which children should be allowed to purchase alcohol. Clear guidelines are required on that.

The Committee had a major discussion on drinking alcohol in public places. It is disturbing that it is no longer illegal to drink in public, and the Committee was deeply concerned about that.

The Committee had a long debate about whether councils should continue to have to designate areas where drinking is not allowed. There was a degree of pressure: we agreed to revisit, in a year’s time, the question of whether all of Northern Ireland should be dry and councils should then choose where drinking will be allowed. That is a controversial issue, and, luckily, the Committee ducked it in the end; no doubt it will arise again. However, it is an issue for many councils.

The powers in the Order allow the police to order people to stop drinking; seize alcohol from people over 18, which the police cannot do; and move people on.

The Committee’s view is that the prohibition on drinking in public places, which the Order seeks to remove, should be retained. That is important. However, the additional powers that the Order introduces should be kept, as that would provide a much more robust system for dealing with drunken yobboes wrecking places on a Saturday night. That is a concern in all our constituencies.

The Order contains interesting provisions on prisons. There are new caveats and measures to prevent phones, drugs and weapons from getting in. Anyone who has examined some of the material that has been taken out of prisons after recent searches would be amazed as to how it ever got in.

I am particularly interested in the crackdown on knives and on people’s carrying knives when they go out socially at night. There is no excuse for a young person to be armed with a six-inch bowie knife when he or she goes out for a social event. Although the penalties go some way towards tackling the problem, I am afraid that they do not go far enough. There must be stiffer penalties that deter people from carrying knives because they know that the risk will be too great for them.

Finally, I welcome in absentia ASBOs. Whereas previously the little twerp had to be found before he or she could be given an ASBO, now he or she can be issued with an ASBO without being found.

I commend the report to the Assembly.

Dr Farry: I join other Members in thanking the Chairperson, the Committee staff and those who gave evidence. I have no difficulty in endorsing the Committee's report without prejudice to the wider issues of the devolution of policing and justice that have yet to be debated. The manner in which the Committee worked collectively on major criminal justice issues in Northern Ireland is an encouraging sign for the future.

Most focus will fall on the new sentencing framework, which includes the removal of automatic 50% remission. It will certainly be welcomed across the community. However, expectations of that must be managed, given that that removal will not apply retrospectively, and, indeed, there will still be circumstances in which some people are released after having served only 50% of their sentence.

The new sentencing framework represents a change in emphasis. There is now a stronger focus on deciding whether someone's potential to reoffend is a criterion that influences whether that person is released. There has been an interesting debate as to whether the Assembly is continuing to accept the balance of factors that, at present, favour the protection of wider society, or whether it is heading towards a fundamental shift of emphasis into new territory. Only time will tell.

Other Members have mentioned the controversy over the non-evidence based introduction of PPOs in England and Wales. I am glad that with respect to the future application of PPOs in Northern Ireland, lessons seem to have been learnt from some of the mistakes that were made in England and Wales. There will, nonetheless, be challenges for Northern Ireland: resources will be an issue, as will ensuring that sufficient provision is made to allow prisoners the opportunity to prove that they are no longer a threat. Prisoners who serve shorter sentences may be a bigger resourcing issue than those who serve long-term sentences. Obviously, the severity of the offences and the threat of long-term prisoners to society is greater.

The Assembly must be conscious of a much wider resource issue. The legislation will have a major effect on the prison population. At present, it is about 1,500 and rising. The prison population has risen since the Good Friday Agreement's early release scheme, and it is projected to reach somewhere close to 2,700 by 2022. That is a major leap, and the Assembly must be conscious of the implications of that. The current plans to create additional prison places in Northern Ireland deal only with short-term problems. Much more

consideration must be given to how the problem is tackled in the long term. The Assembly must also be conscious of the fact that Northern Ireland's prisons are currently more inefficient than prisons elsewhere in these islands. That may be for good reasons, such as the small size of Northern Ireland and the fact that separate wings are still operated in some prisons. However, it presents a challenge.

It is major indictment of the criminal justice system that 40% of prisoners are on remand rather than sentenced. The Assembly must speed up the justice process. At present, there are too many fine defaulters in prison. There is almost a revolving-door policy for those prisoners, and the legislation will help to deal with that.

When criminal justice matters are devolved to the Assembly, difficult choices must be made with regard to competing priorities in the Northern Ireland block grant. The Assembly must be alert to those issues and plan well in advance.

I am pleased that the Committee recommends that there should be a default assumption that young offenders who are under 18 years of age are automatically referred to the juvenile justice centre at Bangor rather than to Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre, notwithstanding the problems that occurred there at the weekend. That is in the interests of young people.

9.30 pm

There was a lively debate about test purchases of alcohol. I am comfortable with using young people, in extreme circumstances, to undertake the test purchasing of alcohol. The Human Rights Commission has been over-zealous in its arguments. The Scottish guidelines on the matter, which allow for the test-purchase of alcohol, have been proofed against the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. That is an encouraging lesson that can reassure Northern Ireland.

I share other Members' concerns about public drinking. On the one hand, the legislation strengthens the powers on, for example, unopened drinks; on the other, perhaps it adds to the burden of determining the areas in which alcohol bans may be imposed. We must be able to make more blanket designations of non-alcohol drinking areas in order to ensure public safety. I support the report.

Mr McCausland: I support the report. The draft Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 is a wide-ranging piece of legislation that covers a diverse range of issues that are all of public concern. It has already been said that it is a significant piece of legislation. In general, I welcome the legislation — with the caveats in our party's response.

The indeterminate sentences for serious violent and sexual crime and the end of the automatic 50% remission of sentences are welcome; they are issues of genuine, deeply felt and well-justified public concern. That was highlighted by my colleague Nigel Dodds in what he said about the petition that was initiated by the 'Belfast Telegraph' after the murder of Attracta Harron. Too often, culprits have been released only to reoffend in a terrible way.

I wish to raise three matters in the draft Order. The first is the test purchasing of alcohol by minors. I was disappointed by what my colleague Stephen Farry described as the over-zealous response of the Human Rights Commission. That Commission argued that using children to detect breaches in the law would be an infringement of their rights. The evidence is clear that such measures are effective in tackling the problem of the sale of alcohol to children; we have seen that in the past in PSNI operations. There is substantial evidence of the success of such measures in Scotland and England.

I do not believe that any child will be put in a difficult situation or be exploited through his or her involvement in test purchasing alcohol. There are clear guidelines on the operation of test purchasing. Experience suggests that the children of officials — whether of police or council members — are used to make test purchases of alcohol or cigarettes. It should also be taken into account that the number of those operations would be limited; a child would probably not be used more than once for such activities.

The Committee also identified and commended other measures to tackle the problem of the sale of alcohol to minors. The overriding concern should be to address the problem of the illegal sale of alcohol and cigarettes to minors, which is detrimental to all children. If we are interested in the welfare of children, that should be our priority.

The consumption of alcohol in public places also receives attention in the report. We welcome the additional powers on the seizure of alcohol and fixed penalty fines. However, a concern over the proposed legislation has already been identified. The Committee recommended that the draft Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 be amended to retain the prohibition on drinking in designated public places, as is the case in the current by-laws. The proposal that it would become an offence to drink in public only when the police had asked someone to refrain from it is a ludicrous one that we agreed to oppose.

Mr Wells: Will the honourable Member accept that it could lead to a ridiculous situation whereby a pensioner reports a threatening gang of underage drinkers outside her home, but because the police do not arrive in time to confront the gang to ask it to dispose of the alcohol, no crime has been committed? A crime would only be

instigated when the police had instructed the gang to stop drinking.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for his comments, and I agree with him, particularly when one considers police response times. On many occasions, an elderly person could be left for several hours, troubled in that way. Antisocial behaviour, much of it fuelled by alcohol, is a major concern in my constituency of North Belfast, and people are often disappointed with the response of the police, and they want more to be done in that regard.

The draft Order proposes powers for the seizure of mini-scooters, quad bikes and other similar vehicles. Such vehicles are perfectly suitable for use on private grounds, farms and other appropriate places. However, driving them in residential areas, in many cases on the pavements, is totally unacceptable. They are a danger to other traffic. I have seen a number of incidents in which people have been overtaken by someone on a quad bike: it happened to me when I was slowing down —

Mr Weir: That says more about the Member's driving.

Mr McCausland: On one or two occasions, I have been passed by people on quad bikes as I turned into my office on the Ballysillan Road.

They are a danger to other traffic and to the children who often use them. For all those reasons, we should strongly welcome those additional powers, given that the existing powers have proved to be less than effective. Finally, I hope that the problems of alcohol consumption in public places and quad bikes will be met with a commitment from the police to enforce those measures.

The response that the Committee received from the police on alcohol consumption was disappointing; they seemed to be intent on ensuring that it was left to everyone but them to enforce the law.

Mr Wells: I thank the Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee, Mr Alban Maginness, for the way in which he directed us through the minutiae of the draft legislation. If we had had to pay him for his services, we would have had to add several pence to the rates to cover his fees. We were fortunate to have someone of his legal experience in the Chair; he should have a job for life on all future ad hoc Committees on law reform.

The DUP welcomes the draft Order; much of it updates, consolidates and reflects on what has happened in the rest of the United Kingdom. The legislation will benefit from the scrutiny of the Ad Hoc Committee, and I thank all those who gave evidence to the Committee.

We all welcome the end of automatic 50% remission. There was a terrible sense of injustice throughout the community in situations where people

were attacked and murdered by those who would not have been freed, but for the iniquitous system.

The Committee was pleased with the provisions for the seizure of vehicles that are being used in a manner that causes alarm. I do not know where parents get the money to buy quad bikes for their children. I could not afford to buy my children a quad bike for Christmas, yet it never ceases to amaze me that, in working-class estates in our towns and cities, it seems to be almost compulsory that children between eight and 14 have quad bikes. They cause a great deal of disturbance to residents, particularly elderly people, and the provision to seize those vehicles is welcome.

The Committee had a lively debate on what I feel is the single biggest problem facing our community. It is ironic that, this morning, I have been dealing with the press after a serious outbreak of alcohol-related violence in Newcastle in my constituency of South Down. That problem is a major plague on society. Some of the provisions in the draft Order will tackle the problem well, but the Committee had a lively debate, and some doubts, about other provisions.

I hope that we all welcome the provisions for test purchasing. Such provisions have worked effectively in the rest of the United Kingdom and have led to a dramatic fall in the amount of underage drinking for two reasons. First, there have been more prosecutions of those who are responsible for selling alcohol to minors. Secondly, a strong signal has been sent to the licensing trade that those who do that have every chance of being caught. If test purchasing has worked in the rest of the UK, it must be considered for Northern Ireland, with all the safeguards that have been outlined.

I strongly welcome the provisions that would give the police the power to seize and dispose of alcohol. I take the points that were made by the Member for North Down Mr McFarland that the best aspects of the present legislation should be combined with those that are being proposed in the draft Order.

There was a debate on areas where alcohol could be consumed, and witnesses kept coming up with the image of people wishing to enjoy their Chardonnay and cucumber sandwiches on the streets of our towns and cities. Perhaps I am terribly mistaken, but I have yet to find anyone outside a pub in Kilkeel or Newcastle at 2.00 am demanding the right to enjoy their Chardonnay and cucumber sandwiches — it just does not happen. The type of drinking that I witness —

Mr Weir: At least the Chardonnay would be appropriately chilled at 2.00 am at this time of the year.

Mr Wells: The drink that is consumed in Kilkeel square on Saturday nights is much stronger than wine, and it is not consumed as an ancillary to a light meal — it is binge drinking. Therefore, during the Committee

sessions, I argued strongly for a blanket ban on public drinking in Northern Ireland. It would be unnecessary for councils to go round designating areas where alcohol could be consumed, if it were automatically assumed that it was illegal to consume alcohol in all public places in Northern Ireland. Organisations and individuals could apply to opt in, and areas could be designated for the consumption of alcohol. I thought that that was a neater solution.

Down District Council spends a huge amount of money identifying and advertising areas where drink cannot be consumed. Signs are erected on all lamp posts; therefore, those who wish to involve themselves in that antisocial activity simply move down the street, away from the designated area. To some extent, the Committee kicked the issue into touch, and will come back to it; however, the long-term solution is to have a blanket ban on drinking in public places, otherwise our towns and cities will simply become no-go areas on weekend nights. That certainly would not be attractive to inward investors or to the tourism industry.

Mr Attwood: I, too, thank the witnesses who contributed to the Committee evidence sessions and, in particular, I thank those who provided service to the Committee. Without prejudice to any party's view on the devolution of policing and justice powers, the deliberations of the Committee crystallised the need for their devolution. It would be better if we could legislate as we see fit, rather than comment on legislation that the British Government see fit to apply to the North of Ireland, particularly when there is no guarantee that, if we were to dissent from the British Government's view, our view would prevail.

In taking forward the draft Order, the Committee was mindful of what happened in July 2007 in the High Court in England. It found that, in one case, there had been a "general and systemic failure" in the operation of the indeterminate sentence provisions. Therefore, it would be better if we were in control of our own affairs when it comes to criminal justice issues.

In taking forward the draft Order, we must be mindful that we do not duplicate the problems that have been experienced in Britain. Although the legislation protects us from some of what was experienced in Britain, it is important that the Assembly is acutely vigilant about its future operation. Otherwise, we could end up with a new regime whereby sentence provisions would provide a mechanism for holding people in prison for offences that they may not have committed, which is the scenario envisaged by the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders.

I wish to emphasise my colleagues' comments in respect of resources. The Probation Board for Northern Ireland has assessed that, under the provisions of the draft legislation, its workload will increase from 4,000

to 6,000 offenders. Representatives from Criminal Justice Inspection stated in an evidence session that their main concern was not about the legislation, but about the resources to ensure that the legislation applies.

Others, including the chairperson of the Life Sentence Review Commission — which will become the parole commission — emphasised the issue of resources. We acknowledge that Paul Goggins, as the Minister responsible, has provided resources for prisons and the Probation Service under the comprehensive spending review, partly in anticipation of the new regime. Despite that, the Assembly must guarantee that in the event of the devolution of justice and policing, a grab-all attitude does not prevail to budget negotiations, with the result that funds for important provisions such as public protection sentences go to the wall.

9.45 pm

A move towards rehabilitative provisions in and around prisons is a theme that is developing from the legislation, and I welcome that. In their evidence to the Committee, representatives from the Probation Service and the director of the Prison Service in the North, Robin Masefield, said that that was the direction in which they wished to go. If we want to go in that direction, which we should, and if we want to change the culture of prisons, we must move towards having an open prison, as suggested by Peter Smith QC, the chairperson of the Life Sentence Review Commission. When proposals for the new prison are being drawn up, I urge the powers that be to consider an open facility at Magilligan. A completely open or a partially open facility would be worthwhile.

I would like to comment on many other issues, but suffice it to say that the Ad Hoc Committee has fulfilled its public, as well as its political, duty. The conclusions of the Committee's report reflected the views of many of those who provided evidence to the Committee.

Mr Speaker: I advise the Member that his time is up.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. We have had a useful and interesting debate on a draft Order that covers a range of measures that are important to us all given that they address problems that affect society and local communities. Similar to other Members, I acknowledge the work of the Chairperson, the staff, and those who provided written and oral evidence to the Committee.

The draft Order is timely and relevant to the protection and safety of our communities. The Chairperson, Alban Maginness, gave the main reasons why such legislation is required. Communities are concerned with the serious risks that dangerous and violent sex offenders pose, and communities are, rightly, concerned about the illegal sales of alcohol to children and about the increase in knife crime among young people. It is unfortunate that many

parts of our towns and cities are blighted by the nuisance and disorder that are caused by drinking in public.

Several Members raised concerns about drinking in public places. Perhaps, however, they were confused about the matter. The Committee recommends that the draft Order be amended in order to retain the power to enforce the prohibition of drinking in designated public places, and it proposes that new provisions regarding confiscation and fixed penalties be obtained.

We also recommended that the Department for Social Development examines the operation and effectiveness of the new law after it has been in operation for one year. I think that it was Nelson McCausland who said that the PSNI representatives informed the Committee that the councils, rather than the police, should be the lead agency on that.

Everyone agreed that the PSNI and the Policing Board should consider making it a policy priority to address any potential disorder that arises from inappropriate drinking in public places.

The Committee has also recommended that an equality impact assessment be carried out on test-purchase schemes, and I think that Nelson McCausland also mentioned that point. Tight procedural guidelines must control those schemes, and the experiences in England and Wales in that regard should be examined and understood. The Committee also stated the importance of advance publicity of the schemes, so that people will know that they are imminent, with the result that the sale of alcohol to underage children may not be as shocking as one might predict.

Peter Weir highlighted antisocial behaviour orders, which we did not disagree on and can come back to.

We were generally supportive of the juvenile-justice measures, and we proposed that the Order should presume that a 17-year-old male should be sent to a juvenile centre rather than a young offenders' facility — unless there is no room for him.

Other miscellaneous matters — such as legal aid, penalties, some additional police powers and arrangements for proving the execution of arrest warrants — were raised.

Alex Attwood mentioned resources, and the Committee agrees with the view put forward by all the organisations that gave evidence that full and proper implementation of those significant measures will rely, in the short, medium and long term, on the provision of adequate resources.

Stephen Farry and Alex Attwood spoke about open prisons, and the Prison Service faces some challenges there. However, the Committee was reassured by the high level of co-operation between the Probation Board and the Prison Service, and recommends progress on the implementation of good prison courses that will

allow prisoners a proper opportunity for rehabilitation, rather than the piecemeal approach that was adopted in the past.

Mr Speaker, I am sure that you are only too aware of the inappropriate use of quad bikes and mini-scooters, although there are perhaps not as many as some people think. However, they do pose a problem that must be addressed.

The draft Order addresses all those problems and more, and, therefore, the Committee welcomes the majority of its proposals. We have made 22 specific recommendations, most of which are concerned with the Order's practical implementation and the importance of providing adequate resources in order to implement the new measures.

The Committee also recommends that certain parts of the draft Order should be changed or redrafted before it is laid before the British Parliament at Westminster. The Chairperson and others have indicated the importance of informing the general public about those changes in order that there will be little or no room for confusion. That is particularly relevant to the new sentencing practices. As the Order progresses through the legislative process, we expect the British Secretary of State and the NIO to take full account of the Committee's report and recommendations.

I do not intend to speak for much longer on this subject. It has been a long day, and a long trip home to Derry is still to come. Therefore, on behalf of the Ad Hoc Committee, I commend the report to the House and ask Members to approve it as the Assembly's official response to the draft Criminal Justice (NI) Order 2007. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Assembly approves the Report of the Ad Hoc Committee set up to consider the draft Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2007, and agrees that it should be submitted to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland as a report of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Adjourned at 9.53 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 29 January 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Seaport Investments Ltd: Planning Application

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of the Environment, Mrs Arlene Foster, that she wishes to make a statement on the decision that she has taken on a major planning application by Seaport Investments Ltd for a visitor and study centre on land that is adjacent to the Giant's Causeway world heritage site.

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): I am making this statement on the outcome of my consideration of the planning application by Seaport Investments Ltd to construct a new visitor and study centre at the Giant's Causeway world heritage site.

To say that there has been considerable interest in, and comment on, the application in recent months is an understatement. Much of that interest has been wholly irrelevant to my consideration of the planning merits of the application. For that reason, it is important to set out the materially relevant facts of that period, which led me to the conclusion that I am announcing today.

In a public statement on 10 September 2007, I said:

"I have recently received a report from the Planning Service on a planning application by Seaport Investments Ltd for a new Visitor and Study Centre at the Giant's Causeway World Heritage Site. I have given this report my fullest consideration and have also taken the opportunity to visit the site.

Having done so, I have concluded that there is considerable merit in what is proposed and I am of a mind to approve it."

I said that I was "of a mind" to approve the application, not "minded" to do so.

Although Seaport Investments Ltd submitted an outline rather than a full proposal, given the speculation and comment in the media — and elsewhere — during the summer about visitor facilities at the Giant's Causeway, I felt that it was important to make my view public. The proposal attempted to minimise the visual

intrusiveness of what was planned; it had an imaginative design; it provided extensive facilities; and it attempted to resolve access issues by devising new road arrangements.

However, I also stated clearly that I had concerns about some aspects of the proposal. I quote again from my statement of 10 September:

"I have asked my officials to engage with the developer and key local stakeholders on some aspects of the proposal so that I can make a formal decision on it at the earliest opportunity."

The three key local stakeholders were the developer, the National Trust and Moyle District Council. I, therefore, made it equally clear that no decision had been made on the application and, indeed, that a decision would not be made until I had received a further report from my officials. Regrettably, that point was missed by a lot of commentators and, indeed, by Members of the House.

The aspects of the proposal to be further considered were its impact on the world heritage site; its ability to integrate into the landscape; its relationship to other developments in the area; and its relationship to the existing visitors' centre.

My officials' engagement with the key stakeholders has been completed, and I have received their report on the outcome and their reassessment of the application in light of that.

Discussions with the stakeholders revealed a significant amount of common ground. All three valued the world heritage site status; all three agreed on the value of the landscape and the need to minimise development; and all three considered that there should be only one visitor facility at the Giant's Causeway, that it should be world class and that it should be provided as soon as possible.

However, there was no consensus on the way in which those agreed goals might be achieved. Indeed, the possible solutions suggested in relation to the proposal were mutually exclusive and there was no evidence from my officials' discussions with the stakeholders that any of them would be acceptable or that agreement was a realistic possibility.

Against that background, I have reconsidered the Planning Service's report and recommendation on the proposal, which I received in June last year, together with the further report on engagement with the applicant, the National Trust and Moyle District Council, and the Planning Service's subsequent reassessment.

Although I still see considerable merit in the proposal, I consider that that does not outweigh the planning concerns that I continue to have about it and which clearly are not capable of being addressed to my satisfaction. I am convinced that the proposal, as it stands, would have an adverse impact on the world

heritage site, as I believe that it could adversely affect the character of the area. There are serious doubts that the proposed development would adequately integrate into the landscape, and it would add to the spread of development at this sensitive location. I have, therefore, concluded on balance and on further reflection that the application should be refused.

In reaching that conclusion, I have also considered the need for a local public inquiry. However, I am satisfied that all representations on the proposal have been properly considered and that all other materially relevant planning considerations have been taken into account. I, therefore, feel that there are no other issues that would merit or require further examination or inquiry.

In light of that, I have decided that a notice of opinion to refuse the application should be issued to the applicant, and I have instructed my officials to proceed on that basis.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for bringing the matter before the House today. As Members will be aware, the Committee for the Environment has been seeking extensive detail on the planning application for a considerable time. That work has culminated in the Committee's recent decision to apply for full openness and disclosure under section 44 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. I am glad that that course of action may have acted as a catalyst for bringing the matter to the House today.

Will the Minister state what opinions and views were given both in her Department and to her Department that to proceed with the planning application could put the Giant's Causeway's status as a world heritage site in jeopardy? I note that she referred to a lot of commentators and Members of the House missing the point that no decision had been made. Did that apply equally to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who clearly was interpreting her as saying that she was minded to approve the planning application?

In relation to the application for outline planning permission at the site, will the Minister clarify whether her officials have engaged in any discussions with a developer or developers about a further proposal or amended proposal on the site at the Giant's Causeway?

Finally, is the culmination of events today a case of saying, "Junior, this is another fine mess you've got me into"? Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs Foster: I am disappointed that the Committee Chairperson should make such a statement when he knows full well that the decision has been made on planning grounds alone. On 10 September 2007, I said that my initial decision was that I was "of a mind to approve" the application. I stated clearly that it was not

a formal decision but an opinion and that my Department would enter into a process to seek the views of the other stakeholders about the difficulties. The Chairperson knows that when I attended the Environment Committee meeting on 20 September 2007 to discuss the matter, I set out the four issues that I referred to in my statement today. It should come as no surprise to him that the world heritage site is one of those issues.

During the time that the process was continuing between Planning Service and the stakeholders, I took the opportunity to visit the jurassic coast in the south of England, another world heritage site of natural distinction, to see what was being done there to protect the world heritage status. I found that visit very helpful in coming to the decision that I announced today.

The Chairperson asked about the existence of an alternative proposal on the horizon and whether there have been any discussions about that. I have had no discussions about an alternative proposal. I considered the existing application on its own merits, as I am legally bound to do. I reached my decision based on a careful assessment of the views of the Planning Service, of the consultees and the representations received from right across Northern Ireland. It should come as no surprise to the Chairperson that my decision was based solely on the planning application that was in front of me. I have always been very careful and very straight about the issue.

With regard to the responsibilities of other Ministers, I am sure that the Committee Chairperson will have an opportunity to ask them about their position on visitor centre facilities. My concern is the planning issue. It has always been a planning issue, and that will continue to be the case.

Mr Speaker: Although I have allowed the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment some latitude in his questions to the Minister, I have to say to other Members that I expect them to ask specific question on the statement and not to go all around the world. I warn the House about that matter.

Mr Weir: Mr Speaker, I shall try to keep my question rooted in the north coast.

I commend the Minister on her statement. She has expressed a considered opinion and not a knee-jerk reaction, as has sometimes been the case in the House, and taken a decision based firmly and clearly on planning grounds. In light of today's decision and a commitment to release papers once that decision had been taken, will the Minister say whether she regards the decision of the Environment Committee, taken a mere week and a half ago, against clear-cut legal advice, to seek a section 44 application, to be — and to put it at its most generous — premature?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his comments. I have always made it clear that everything would be released once the decision had been taken. That decision has been taken as of today. Therefore, all documents will be made available to the Environment Committee and to anybody else who wishes to view them. I expect a long queue outside Millennium House over the next few days.

With regard to the proposed action of the Environment Committee, I understand that its legal advice was that such action was premature. My legal advice said that it was premature. I was disappointed, to say the least, that the Committee decided to go down a political route to try to get those papers, when I knew fine well that that was not going to be the case.

It was premature, because a decision is necessary to get papers of that kind, and no decision had been made — until today. I reiterate: that decision has been made and those papers will be made available.

10.45 am

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I echo other Members who have spoken in welcoming the Minister's statement. It goes without saying that much of what has happened in the past four months has damaged public confidence in the Planning Service. Today's decision will help to ensure protection of the Giant's Causeway's world heritage status. It is a good decision for the Causeway, and in the eyes of the local community, and sends a clear message that relationships between Assembly Members and developers cannot be used to override the Planning Service's integrity, independence and transparency. I, therefore, welcome the Minister's decision, and move on to my question.

The Minister said that she will make available all the documents requested by the Committee for the Environment. Will she make those available to the Assembly today? Can she confirm that the management board of the Planning Service, early in 2007, recommended that the application be refused?

Mrs Foster: I have already said that the papers will be made available; however, administrative issues must be sorted out. The Member knows well that the file was brought to the Committee for the Environment to allow members to inspect it. I am happy to offer that facility again; I am sure that my officials will bring the file again, should the Committee want it.

I do not accept that people have no confidence in the Planning Service. Today's decision is an indication of the Planning Service working well with key local stakeholders, and the Member had comments to make when that process was ongoing. That process, however, has borne fruit, in the elements that I mentioned — for example, recognition of the value of the world heritage

status is very important to those who live in that area, and I am sure that the Member will acknowledge that.

The Member commented on the advice given to me by Planning Service officials on receiving the report in June 2007. As he well knows, I made no decision until today; therefore, I did not go against advice from Planning Service officials. I considered the advice then, and again, having reflected on the process that I began, and I came to my decision today. When the Member sees the report from the Planning Service, he will know what was said to me, and he may well see the direction that the process was taking.

Mr McFarland: I welcome the Minister's statement. It is good that common sense has, eventually, prevailed. The issue began in 2002 and, since then, Ian Paisley Jnr has lobbied extensively — Prime Ministers, Presidents, or whatever — but we know, because both Ministers —

[Interruption.]

Some Members: Ask the question.

Mr McFarland: Mr Speaker, I need to sort of lead into it —

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I have always allowed Members some latitude in getting to their questions. However, we do not want statements further to the Minister's statement. We expect questions on that statement.

Mr McFarland: Mr Speaker, I agree. However, there must be a context to a question, otherwise no one can understand why it is asked.

A Member: The statement is the context.

Mr McFarland: Right, I shall ask my question. What was the unseen factor that allowed the Minister to make her decision in September 2007, against the advice of the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) and the expectation of her Department, as indicated in a memo? What factor has no one else seen that allowed her to be minded to give that decision in September?

Mrs Foster: There is a couple of issues there, and I am sorry that the Member did not hear the statement. Perhaps he has difficulty with hearing: I am not sure.

I said that a decision was not taken in September — and I repeat, was not taken in September. Moreover, I said that I was “of a mind”; I did not say that I was “minded”. Frankly, one gets rather fed up of being wrongly quoted by other Assembly Members. Really, they must see —

A Member: Deliberately.

Mrs Foster: Deliberately: that is absolutely correct.

In September, I said that the proposal had considerable merit, and I still believe that. I want to

outline that considerable merit, although I have said it in the statement. Clearly, again, Members were not listening to the statement, although they have it in front of them.

Although the proposal was at outline stage, it was clear to me that attempts had been made to minimise the visual intrusiveness of the proposed centre by grassing over roofs and exposed surfaces and by locating part of the car park underground. It had a very imaginative design, as I am sure those who have looked at it will agree. It provided extensive facilities for visitors to the Giant's Causeway, with an auditorium, cafe and library, and attempted to resolve access issues with new road arrangements that were to be put in place as a result of the development.

There are no hidden factors in this statement today. I said what I said in September because I thought that the proposal had merit. I asked people to go away and look at it and to engage with local stakeholders to see whether the four other issues that I outlined to the Environment Committee could be dealt with. Unfortunately, they could not be dealt with, and, therefore, we are in the position where we have had this decision today.

Mr Ford: I am sure that the Minister will be pleased to know that I, too, welcome her statement today, even if it is somewhat belated.

However, is it not the case that her announcement of 10 September totally failed to take account of the concerns of UNESCO, the seven serious grounds for refusal that were laid out by the Environment and Heritage Service and the draft northern area plan — a material consideration at that time? What has changed between then and now that has meant that she has finally announced the right decision, having said that she was of a mind to take the wrong decision? In particular, does this not illustrate that there is a serious environmental protection issue in the way in which the Planning Service deals with key issues such as the Giant's Causeway? This was not simply a planning application; it was a matter of environmental protection policy that needed to be fully discussed.

Mrs Foster: I think that this has been the most discussed planning application in the history of time, so that last point is completely out of order.

In relation to my decision's being "belated", I announced on 10 September that I was "of a mind". A process then took place. That process was completed at the end of November. The Planning Service then reflected and sent me a report in, I think, the middle of January. I then came to the decision that I have announced today. I do not think that I could have done it any more quickly and, frankly, I would not have wanted to, because this is a very important application.

Mr Ford: I did not ask about speed.

Mrs Foster: He did ask about speed; I think that the Hansard report will show that he said "belated".

Obviously UNESCO, EHS and the draft northern area plan are all issues that I have considered, both in June, when I received the initial report, and since receiving the final report from Planning Service today. I have taken them all on board, and they are reflected in my decision.

As for Mr Ford's comments about the need for more independence, he is very creative in his arguments for an environmental protection agency (EPA), but even Members of this House will think that it is a bit tenuous to be arguing for an EPA on a decision —

Mr Ford: I did not mention it.

Mrs Foster: You did mention independence. Again, Mr Speaker, the Hansard report will show that. I listen to people who make comments, unlike some Members of this House who do not.

Mr Ford: Nobody is saying that.

Mrs Foster: I am saying that the EHS has made points to me. Those will be made available so that people can see what they are. The Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside, which is my statutory advisory body, made two reports to me on those issues. That independent statutory advisory committee has also advised me on this matter.

Mr Ross: Although some Members will attempt to make cheap political points, I am particularly disappointed that the Chairperson of the Environment Committee, speaking in that capacity, has tried to do so. It is important to note that since the Minister's statement in September, there has been much discussion about the Giant's Causeway site, which has been slightly rich —

Some Members: Question.

Mr Speaker: Order, order. Minister?

Mr Ross: I have not actually asked the question yet.

Mr Speaker: Again, there would be less trouble if Members would just come to their questions.

Mr Ross: As I was saying, there has been lots of discussion about the site, despite the fact that there had not been for many years before. That is a positive development. We have heard many proposals, even if there is no substance there.

Some Members: Question.

Mr Ross: With that in mind, Mr Speaker, have the proposals that have been mooted in the past weeks and months had any bearing on the decision that the Minister has announced today?

Mrs Foster: I am sorry to say that I did not hear the question. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Ross: We have engaged in a great deal of discussion about the matter over the past weeks and months, which did not happen previously, and we have heard that other people have submitted proposals, even if there is little substance to them. Given that, have those proposals affected in any way the decision that the Minister has announced today?

Mrs Foster: Absolutely not. Since the beginning of the process, I have stated that the decision on this application must be made on its own merits. After 10 September, there were some rumblings about other proposals being submitted, but I have received no other formal applications. Had I received any such applications from other developers, they would not have had a bearing on this application. That is because each must be judged on its own merits.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I was “of a mind” to thank the Minister for her statement, but now I have decided that I will thank her. *[Laughter.]*

Unlike other Members, I will ask my question quickly. The planning aspect of the issue is important for tourism. Given that we need a resolution to this for the benefit of tourists who will come to the North, will the Minister work closely on the matter with her colleague the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment? We must ensure that we proceed carefully and work closely with the other stakeholders, including Moyle District Council and the National Trust.

Mrs Foster: I am only too happy to work on this matter with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who I see has just arrived in the Chamber. In the near future, a planning policy statement (PPS) on tourism will be published. I know that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is looking forward to the publication of that PPS so that we can discuss how the relevant tourism issues pertain to planning.

A great deal was made of the fact that before I made my “of a mind” decision on 10 September, I had actually had the temerity to speak to my Executive colleague about the planning application that we are discussing. That is called joined-up Government; I will continue to be involved in that process, and I will continue to talk to my colleagues about the issues that are relevant to them. On matters that are solely within the remit of my Department, such as planning matters, I will seek my own guidance and that of the Planning Service.

Mr I McCrea: Again, unlike other Members, I will not attempt to make any cheap political points. *[Interruption.]*

Having said that, I will ask my question directly. We know that concerns have been expressed about this application, so will the Minister tell the House whether

she will take that into account when considering similar applications that relate to the location in question?

Mrs Foster: As I have said already, each application that is submitted for a development in any location, including the Giant’s Causeway area, is treated on its own merits. The Giant’s Causeway is a sensitive location in that it is our only world heritage site — although I hope that that will change and that we will have more. I know that certain areas in Northern Ireland are seeking world heritage site designation.

Therefore, any other application that I receive for proposed developments at the Giant’s Causeway must fit the criteria that I have talked about today. Those include, as Mr Ford said, the draft northern area plan, UNESCO’s check list for world heritage site designation, and, obviously, any concerns that EHS has about that environmentally sensitive area will be related to me.

Mr Armstrong: Despite Ian Paisley Jnr’s having lobbied everyone else in the universe on the application for a development at the Giant’s Causeway, will the Minister confirm that not a word passed between her and Mr Paisley Jnr on the matter before September? Does the Minister agree that, had she made a decision on the matter four months ago, she would have spared her party a great deal of embarrassment?

Mr Speaker: Order.

11.00 am

Mrs Foster: I thought that I had made it clear that this issue was not about party-political point-scoring, nor was it about anything other than the planning application that was submitted to me — the only application that was submitted to me in connection with the world heritage site.

As I said on 10 September 2007, I was concerned that since 2000, there have been no visitors’ centre facilities of a world-class standard at the Giant’s Causeway. I attempted to deal with the issues connected to the planning application that had been submitted to me. On reflection, and having received the Planning Service’s report, I have had to turn down that proposal. That means that, at present, no applications have been submitted in relation to the world heritage site at the Giant’s Causeway. I hope that that will change soon.

Mr O’Loan: Like others, I welcome this decision and the Minister’s statement. Three DUP Ministers have dug deep holes for themselves at the Giant’s Causeway; Mrs Foster has, very wisely, stopped digging; the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment can certainly get out of the hole that he created; however, I am less confident about the position of the third Minister.

Will Mrs Foster now agree that her “minded” decision of 10 September 2007 was fundamentally wrong for

two reasons: first, it depended on getting the agreement of Moyle District Council and the National Trust, which had not even been tested, never mind obtained; secondly, she says herself in her reasons for refusal that the proposal:

“could adversely affect the character of the area”

and that

“There are serious doubts that the proposed development would adequately integrate into the landscape and it would add to the spread of development at this sensitive location.”

Will the Minister agree with me that all that information was available before 10 September 2007 and was provided to her by her departmental officials?

Bearing in mind that there is an offer from the National Trust, with the full co-operation of Moyle District Council, to adopt the public-sector proposal —

A Member: It is about time.

Mr O’Loan: It is a very welcome development. Will the Minister give her full support to that project, and will she facilitate, fully and rapidly, a planning application for it? Will she give full support in the Executive to the development of that proposal to ensure that a visitors’ centre at the Giant’s Causeway is built and opened in the lifetime of this Assembly?

Mrs Foster: I hope that the Member is not suggesting that I consider an application other than on strict planning grounds. That is not what I am going to do. *[Interruption.]*

A Member: Favouritism.

Mrs Foster: If a formal application is submitted, I will consider it in the same way and on the same grounds as I would any other. There will be no favouritism for any application.

The Member said that I should not have embarked on the process that the Planning Service embarked on in September 2007 because it had not been tested. However, the point was to test the grounds for agreement. As I said in my statement, agreement was reached on matters relating to the world heritage status of the site and on other issues. The Member claims that the information was available to me at that time, and he is right. A great deal of information was available to me at that time, but I wanted to establish whether there was any leeway on the part of the landowners — the National Trust and Moyle District Council — and whether there was a willingness to develop what the Member so rightly wants to see at the Giant’s Causeway: a world-class visitors’ centre for everyone who visits it.

The Giant’s Causeway is our top tourist attraction, yet it does not have a world-class visitors’ centre. That should concern all of us. It was incumbent on me to find a way through the problem. No other applications have been received to date.

I hope that an application will very soon be lodged that is of a quality that can have the support of the Planning Service and everyone in the House so that we can move forward with this matter.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I want to score some political points this morning. I commend the work of my colleague Daithí McKay. He was referred to in a Committee meeting as a one-trick pony, but he has romped home on this matter; if I were a betting man, I would be in pocket.

I welcome the statement from the Minister. After months of speculation, a decision has finally been made that is based on planning policy, rather than on any outside influence. In the Programme for Government, the Minister —

Some Members: Where is the question?

Mr Boylan: I am coming to the question now. Mr Speaker, you showed some latitude to other Members.

It appears from the Programme for Government that there will be an overhaul of the Planning Service. Can the Minister assure the House that proper measures will be put in place to ensure that, in the interests of the public, applications will be processed and assessed in an open and transparent manner? Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs Foster: There is a little thing called freedom of information. It will come as no surprise to hear that my Department receives more freedom of information requests than any other, the reason being that it has responsibility for the planning system and the Planning Service. People have the right to ask questions about planning applications — and rightly so — and the public and Members have readily availed themselves of that process. I do not see how much more transparent the Planning Service can be.

It is interesting that the Member should mention racehorses, because I placed a notional bet with myself this morning that questions from Daithí McKay — *[Interruption.]*

It was a notional bet — one is allowed to place notional bets. *[Laughter.]*

A Member: You were minded to place a bet.

Mrs Foster: Obviously some Members have not yet woken up and did not hear what I said this morning. One can take a horse to water, but one cannot make it drink.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Storey: What about mules?

Mrs Foster: I have no clue whether one can take a mule to water —

A Member: What about an ass?

Mrs Foster: I will not go there. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. Order.

Mrs Foster: The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee knows fine well that this application was made on planning grounds, and on planning grounds alone. He will have his chance in Committee, if he so wishes, to look at the file. The Member may wish me to appear before the Committee, and he knows only too well that any time the Committee asks me to appear before it, I am there.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Storey: Like other Members, I thank the Minister for her statement. I assure her that, unlike another Minister in the Executive, she will not be abandoned after she has made a decision and left to flounder on her own. She will not be left on her own at the Giant's Causeway, for she will have the support of her colleagues, and we will not behave like the disgraceful party sitting opposite us has behaved.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Storey: I also thank the Minister —

Mr Speaker: Can the Member come to his question?

Mr Storey: I must also point out that this morning's statement was made by a DUP Minister and that it was not made at the behest of a Sinn Féin Member, as was suggested earlier.

In light of the Minister's remarks about stakeholders and others who have been involved in the process to date, can she tell us what discussions there have been with the National Trust and Moyle District Council on any other proposals for the Causeway area?

Mrs Foster: As I understand it, there have been some discussions with planning officials. I have not had any direct discussions with either the National Trust or Moyle District Council. My officials had some preliminary discussions about the alternative proposal before Christmas, and they still await further contact from the National Trust in taking this issue forward.

However, the Member will know that those discussions are completely separate from what has been discussed today, and he will appreciate why I say that. The private-sector application that I decided on today stood alone on its own merits. As I say, my decision today has nothing to do with any other applications that may be forthcoming — and I hope that other applications will be forthcoming.

Mr T Clarke: In her statement, the Minister said that she asked her officials to initiate a process of engagement between the major stakeholders, with a view to arriving at an agreed solution that would allow her to approve an application. Given that only one application was made, why did it not succeed?

Mrs Foster: The Member is aware that I believed that the application before me had considerable merit, and I have set out those reasons in my statement today.

However, on 10 September 2007, I said that there were some difficulties, and I described them in more detail when I appeared before the Committee for the Environment on 20 September 2007.

Those difficulties related to world heritage site status, the requirement to minimise development in a sensitive landscape, and the provision of a new visitors' centre. Given that a visitors' centre already exists, the question of whether a new one was needed was at the forefront of my mind at the time. Any new application to build a visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway must address those issues as well as any others that it may encounter.

Mr K Robinson: I welcome the Minister's statement, and I note the refusal contained therein. However, the Northern Ireland public must be wondering what is next for its only world heritage site. Does the Minister agree that the entire saga is another sorry reflection of the state of the Planning Service? To help Members to gain a greater understanding of what has happened, will the Minister share the nature of her discussions with the Minister for Culture, Creative Industries and Tourism, Margaret Hodge, on the Giant's Causeway, which took place in Downing Street in mid-December?

Mrs Foster: Yes, I am happy to make the detail of those discussions available. As the Member correctly said, my discussions with Margaret Hodge were principally about UNESCO issues and the world heritage site status of the Giant's Causeway.

The Member criticised the Planning Service, but it is only one part of the jigsaw that is the planning system. Much more goes on outside the Planning Service, but it is often the whipping boy for any delays for which it may not be responsible. Delays may be due to difficulties with funding or the applicant, ongoing consultations, environmental impact assessments, and so forth.

The Planning Service does its job as well as it can with its resources. The Member knows that I am considering a fundamental reform of the planning system. That is no reflection of what has gone before, but it is time for an overhaul, and I look to the House for its support when I bring forward reform proposals later in the year.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Durkan: I, too, welcome the Minister's statement, which extricates her from the complete misadventure that was created when she made her "of a mind" decision. Even today, the Minister referred to her statement on 10 September 2007 as a decision, and as an "of a mind" decision. However, in the same statement she says that she had not made a decision — and she wonders why there is concern and confusion.

The Minister referred to the fact that —

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Durkan: The Minister referred to the fact that no other planning application was made. Will she confirm that that was not because of any failure or decision of the National Trust or Moyle District Council, which was what the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment was told? Rather, it was because the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's position was that only an application for full planning permission could be made, and that there was also a precondition relating to car parking at the site.

Does the Minister accept that her decision had implications for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's signature tourism project — given that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment previously made a statement within 51 minutes of the Environment Minister's? We are, therefore, due to hear a statement from him very soon. It damaged the working partnership that had existed between the Departments on that proposal. Given that the issue is a matter of controversy, as the Minister admits, and affects more than one Department, will she tell the House whether she discussed it with her Executive colleagues? I know that the party opposite are precious about adherence to the ministerial code.

Mrs Foster: I found it difficult to hear the last part of the Member's contribution, but I think that he asked whether I have discussed the issue with Executive colleagues. I made them aware that I would be making a statement this morning.

This is a planning issue — a planning issue alone. I am not going to ask my colleagues to get involved in issues that do not affect their Departments. This is not a cross-cutting issue. *[Interruption.]*

11.15 am

Mrs Foster: I made what?

Mr Durkan: You made a political —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor.

Mrs Foster: May I also say — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs Foster: One Member is asking me whether I will co-operate with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment to help to promote tourism and to propose planning policy statements on tourism, yet the Chairperson of that Committee is telling me that I should not be speaking to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. That is a rather strange way for joined-up Government to work. However, it is not strange for the SDLP, given what it has been doing over the past two days.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr P Robinson: They are not even a joined-up party.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs Foster: Mr Durkan made comments regarding the application that never was and that never formally made it to the Planning Service. There were discussions with Planning Service officials, but it never became a formal application.

It is now eight years since the fire at the Giant's Causeway, and we are no further on. I hope that, as Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mr Durkan will force the issue on. That is the issue that he should be considering, instead of interfering in the Department of the Environment.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Neeson: As the Minister is probably aware, in the summer of 2002, in my then role as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I chaired an extensive series of meetings between the National Trust and Seymour Sweeney. It is outrageous that, in January 2008, the issue still has not been resolved.

I am pleased that Minister Dodds is present in the Chamber. I consider him as much a part of this sorry mess as anyone else.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member come to his question?

Mr Neeson: Will the Minister assure me and the House that when a new application is submitted — and one will be submitted sooner rather than later — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Neeson: Will she sit down with Minister Dodds to ensure that this issue is resolved as soon as possible?

Mrs Foster: Any application will obviously have tourism implications. I am happy to speak to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment about that. Those are the issues that I spoke to him about before, and those are the issues that I will continue to speak to him about.

Mr Kennedy: It appears that the DUP has left Mr Sweeney on his tod. *[Laughter.]*

Thank you. I have been saving that one up. Can I ask — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Kennedy: I welcome the Minister's statement. Will the Minister outline the precise grounds for the refusal of the planning application that will be listed when it is referred back — presumably to Moyle District Council? Will she also confirm that the applicant will have the right of appeal?

Mrs Foster: The applicant will have the right of appeal. Any such appeal would be dealt with by the Planning Appeals Commission. I have approved a draft notice of opinion, which includes six grounds of refusal. I am happy to let the Member have a copy of that. It would not be constructive for me simply to read through the six grounds, which are related to UNESCO, integration and the other issues that I mentioned in my statement.

Mr Dallat: Given the underground features of the outline planning application, does the Minister agree that it will be yet another bunker in north Antrim? In future, will she ensure that there is the fullest consultation — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Dallat: Will she ensure that there is the fullest consultation before she is of an opinion to approve any future application?

Mrs Foster: I did not catch the last part of what was asked.

Mr Dallat: Perhaps if Dr McCrea would give me an opportunity to put my question, the Minister would be able to hear it.

Will the Minister agree that, given that there were underground features in the planning application for the Giant's Causeway that she proposes to refuse, it would have turned out to be yet another bunker in north Antrim? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I have given Members some latitude. I have asked the Member to put his question to the Minister, and I will now ask him to repeat it.

Mr Dallat: Will the Minister accept that because of the international aspect of the Giant's Causeway, she will undertake the fullest consultation before she is "of a mind" to approve any planning application there?

Mrs Foster: I do not know whether the Member was present when we talked about the bunker last Monday, but I said then that it did not have planning permission either, so I will not go there.

I am very much aware of the international aspect of the Giant's Causeway, and I took the opportunity to go to the south coast to see how another of the United Kingdom's natural world heritage sites is being dealt with. There is a panoply of ways being adopted, such as community, private, and publicly owned visitors' centres. The Member knows that I met Margaret Hodge, and I took on board what was said in the management plan that was approved by UNESCO in 2005.

We are rightly very proud of our world heritage site status at the Giant's Causeway, and, obviously, that consideration was one of many that were at the forefront of my mind when I took that decision.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Education and Skills Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I beg to move:

"That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of provisions of the Education and Skills Bill dealing with the functions of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, which are contained in clauses 137 and 139 of that Bill as introduced in the House of Commons".

The provisions in the Education and Skills Bill that relate to Northern Ireland concern changes to the remit of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). Clause 137 of the Bill amends section 24 of the Education Act 1997 in order to provide the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority with a new function to develop and publish criteria for the recognition of bodies wishing to award or authenticate qualifications.

Clause 139 extends the powers of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in Northern Ireland to cover the regulation of vocational qualifications currently excluded from its scope. In Northern Ireland, most qualifications are regulated by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). Those are general and vocational qualifications and are provided for school pupils or persons in full-time attendance at an institution of further education. The only exception is national vocational qualifications (NVQs), which are regulated by the Qualification and Curriculum Authority. Clause 139 adds other vocational qualifications to the regulatory remit of the authority.

Under the review of public administration, and as part of the streamlining of education administration in Northern Ireland, CCEA should be abolished and its functions transferred to the new education and skills authority. The proposed date for the transfer of functions is April 2009, and although most of the functions will transfer to the education and skills authority, it would not be appropriate to transfer CCEA's regulatory function for vocationally related qualifications (VRQs) to the education and skills authority. As that regulatory function will not be transferred, it is imperative that steps are taken to ensure that continued regulation of vocationally related qualifications is maintained when CCEA is subsumed by the education and skills authority.

As the issue falls within the area of transferred matters under the provision of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, consent for the proposed Northern Ireland inclusions in the Bill must be sought from the Committee for Employment and Learning, the Executive and the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Committee for Employment and Learning and the Executive have considered the matter, and both

have given their consent to proceed with the proposed amendments to the Education and Skills Bill.

The Assembly must now consider the principle of amending the Bill in order to extend the regulatory functions of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in Northern Ireland. The proposed change to the legislation would close the regulation gap that would be left once CCEA had been dissolved and would ensure the continued and necessary regulation of vocationally related qualifications in Northern Ireland. The change would also guarantee that those students who are studying for vocationally related qualifications when the council ceases to exist can be confident that regulation will continue.

I hope that Members will agree with me and support the motion, which has been designed to ensure that there will be no period during which students can doubt the currency of the qualifications that they attain. I request that the Assembly endorses the principle of extending to Northern Ireland the provisions in the Education and Skills Bill that deal with the functions of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. Those provisions are contained in clauses 137 and 139 of the Bill, which was introduced in the House of Commons on 29 November 2007.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I support the motion. The Minister has already explained the need for and purpose behind the legislative consent motion, so I will not repeat what he said. However, I will make a couple of points on behalf of the Committee.

I thank the Minister for the extensive consultation that he undertook with the Committee. I am conscious that he did not wish to bring the matter to the Assembly without the Committee's support. The Committee was fully briefed on the matter on 26 September 2007 and on 9 January, which was its first meeting after the Christmas recess. Those briefings were important for members because, first, for the first time, they were asked to deal with the concept of a legislative consent motion, and secondly, the matter in question is complex in its own right.

The Committee's primary concern is that people who are studying for vocational qualifications that are regulated by the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment are in no way disadvantaged by any reform of that regulatory body, should that occur as planned in April 2009. There is, therefore, a need to ensure that cover is in place to protect those important qualifications.

The Committee was satisfied that the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority is an appropriate body to provide regulation, if required. It was also satisfied

that QCA's current role in the regulation of qualifications places it in an ideal position to extend those regulations. That experience is strengthened by the fact that QCA maintains a local office, which it has been operating successfully for 10 years.

Although I support the motion, I have written to the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Education to ask that they keep the situation under review during what will be a period of difficult administrative reform. During the departmental briefings, officials stated that the Minister had been assessing the most appropriate regulation process for our local needs. I have written to the Ministers to urge them to continue to work together and to keep the process under review as the review of public administration rolls out.

The Committee considers that any regulation of critical vocational qualifications should be sensitive and aligned to local requirements and circumstances. In further ensuring that local needs are fully recognised, the Minister has also assured me that the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families in England cannot enact any part of the legislation that relates to, or has an impact on, local issues without first seeking the approval of the local Minister. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Lo: I support the motion. It makes sense to extend the remit of QCA to cover VRQs as well as NVQs.

Does the Minister envisage there being any scope for the QCA to examine ways of combining the NVQ and VRQ as one qualification? Students are often confused about the differences between them.

11.30 am

Sir Reg Empey: There is confusion, as Anna Lo said. A review of qualifications is under way. It is a terribly complicated system. Members will have heard the debate yesterday on other matters, which we will not go into today. However, I assure the Member that the Department is examining the matter closely. We do not want people to spend time and energy to get certificates that have no currency with employers. If people work for a qualification, they must be assured that employers around the country will recognise it as a thing of substance, that the qualification means something and that it has a quality-assured standard.

There is a temptation for further education colleges, employers or others to create their own qualifications, and that is a risk. That may not be wrong in itself, but I am concerned about people working, and spending their time and energy, to gain certificates that have no value. That is no use to them or to us, and it is a waste of the student's time. Therefore, I assure the Member that the matter is important to the Department, and we will not embark on anything that will reduce standards. That is why we do not want to leave a vacuum when

the CCEA is absorbed into the education and skills authority.

I assure the Chairman of the Employment and Learning Committee, as I have already assured the Minister of Education, that we are not doing anything today that will in any way inhibit the Assembly from passing further legislation in the future, should it decide to do so. The Assembly is free to create new regulations and arrangements. This legislation will merely prevent a vacuum from developing when the CCEA is absorbed into the education and skills authority. As I told the Committee for Education, the Assembly can take whatever action it wishes and will not be inhibited in any way by this Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of provisions of the Education and Skills Bill dealing with the functions of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, which are contained in clauses 137 and 139 of that Bill as introduced in the House of Commons.

Budget

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to six hours for this debate. The proposer will have up to 90 minutes in which to propose the motion and make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have 10 minutes.

Two 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 wind up.

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

That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2008-09 to 2010-11 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 22 January 2008.

Last Tuesday, I presented the Executive's revised Budget proposals for the three years to March 2011, following a period of consultation on the draft proposals, which were originally published in October 2007. Today, I seek the Assembly's approval for those plans, which were unanimously agreed by the Executive. When I launched the revised Budget last week, I provided comprehensive details of the consultation process and the Executive's response to it. I do not wish to take up an undue amount of the limited time available today by going over all of those issues or going through the Departments' allocations again.

However, I will emphasise a few key points regarding the Executive's proposals for Members to consider as we commence the debate and before we vote on the motion. I will also announce how the Executive plan to create and maintain a strong focus on monitoring delivery of their commitments as they use the financial allocations proposed in the Budget.

I turn first to the consultation exercise conducted on the draft Budget proposals published last October. In my statement last Tuesday, I acknowledged the key role played by the statutory Committees of the Assembly in reviewing and reporting on the departmental and cross-cutting implications of the draft Budget proposals. I believe that the Committees must also have an ongoing key role in monitoring and reporting on the delivery of the objectives and targets for which Departments will be responsible and accountable over the next three years, and beyond, as they use the resources proposed for them in the Budget. I will say more on that later.

In addition to consideration of the draft Budget in the Assembly, there was also a public consultation exercise. Over 9,500 written submissions were made during the 10-week consultation period. That number vastly exceeds the level of engagement on any previous Budget consultation.

Let no one say that the Executive have not taken seriously the views of the Assembly or the wider community. We have listened to what has been said, and we have responded to it, with additional funding for the arts, children and youth services, mental health and social housing — all of which were key issues of concern during the consultation process. Those additional allocations build on the position set out in the draft Budget, which included: a freeze on domestic regional rates in cash terms, meaning a real-terms reduction for households; non-domestic rates frozen in real terms; clear prioritisation of economic growth, with associated benefits for all in the community; the largest-ever budget allocation for the Health Service; and the largest-ever programme of investment in public-service infrastructure. The proposals allow for increased support for businesses and funding for schools, as well as improved access to hospital services and additional resources for key public-health matters, such as suicide prevention. In addition, there is funding to enhance the rural economy. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will receive extra funding to deliver a comprehensive approach to victims, as well as resources to embed the rights of older people.

As I have indicated, the final Budget proposals were agreed unanimously by the Executive, providing a clear recognition by all parties that the approach adopted represents the best overall package of measures — within our affordability limits — for all the people of Northern Ireland. There will always be scope to develop further the Budget allocations, and we will revise our spending plans if that becomes necessary.

However, I have been more than saddened, though not unduly surprised, by the approach taken by some who appear to be disappointed that issues raised by Ministers have been resolved. Unfortunately, that has been reflected in the Chamber and outside, where criticisms have been put forward by some who appear to be more interested in opposition for its own sake, to boost their presence in the media, than offering realistic alternatives to improve the Programme for Government or the Executive's spending plans.

Worse, there are those who place a greater priority on engaging in party-political positioning than on addressing the needs of the people of Northern Ireland. The finalisation of a Budget by the Executive is about making difficult choices. The choices made are in the best interests of Northern Ireland, but, of course, in a democracy, others will differ, and it is right that they should be allowed to say so.

For the Alliance Party and the SDLP, the choices are very different. The Alliance Party is not an Executive party, so it is proper that it should take every platform that our democracy provides to state its case and to challenge ours. I would not inhibit that right. However, the SDLP is in an entirely different position. It is an

Executive party. It is in the Executive; it is responsible for making its case in the Executive and contributing to the formulation of the Programme for Government, the investment strategy, and the Budget.

If the SDLP wanted changes made to any of those documents, it should have put forward amendments in the Executive.

I regard it as a considerable achievement for the Executive that we managed to reach unanimous agreement around the table, with Ministers from all four Executive parties signing up to the Programme for Government, the investment strategy for Northern Ireland and the Budget. It is a sign of the political maturity of the Administration, and the parties involved in it, that we managed to balance Departments' various needs in a way that satisfied everyone. Although no Department achieved all that it would have liked, everyone was prepared to sign up to the sum of the agreed parts.

Let me make it clear: Ministers did not merely agree to their portion of the family of key documents — they agreed to them all as a whole. The Programme for Government and the investment strategy for Northern Ireland are not the property of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister; the Budget is not just mine. All three documents are owned by the Executive. I hope that the Assembly will also identify itself with them.

In order to reach agreement on the Budget, many hours of discussion and negotiation took place with Ministers and officials. That was the opportunity for Ministers to influence the process, and they did so. By the time that the Budget came to the Executive, all Ministers were content to approve it. I must say, therefore, that I find it bizarre that at the eleventh hour and fifty-ninth minute, one party, whose Minister signed up to all of those documents, now seeks to make amendments. That is cynical political opportunism at its worst; politics that is devoid of principle. The public will, however, see through it as a low political stunt. It is made worse by the fact that no amendment was ever made by the Minister for Social Development in the Executive, yet it has been bounced at all of us in the Assembly. That approach is not designed to get the right outcome; it is merely intended to grab a headline and position that party for the future. It is opposition for opposition's sake. It is an absurd approach from a party that is in Government. It is bereft of any principle and exposes the SDLP as a party that is more interested in short-term political expediency than in good government.

People will want to know whether the SDLP Minister signed up to the Programme for Government, the investment strategy and the Budget in the clear knowledge that her party intended all along to vote against it. Such an approach would pose the most fundamental questions about the good faith of the Minister for Social Development. On the other hand,

has the SDLP cut the legs from under its own Minister at the last moment? In that case, how can she remain in office when she lacks the confidence of her own party?

What kind of party has its Minister sign up to the Executive's key policy instruments and spending plans without ever once proposing any kind of amendment in the Executive, to then vote against the Executive in the Assembly? The SDLP leader said that his party's approach was no different from that taken by the DUP during the last Assembly. What nonsense! During the last Assembly, the DUP's goal — *[Interruption.]*

I have the transcript if the Member wants to read it.

During the last Assembly, the DUP's goal was to bring down the Executive and to create new political institutions. Is that currently the SDLP's goal? Moreover, the DUP did not sit on that Executive or endorse its Programme for Government and Budget. The SDLP has had the opportunity to seek amendments to any of those documents at the Executive. It was cynically determined to stay silent in the Executive and to ambush us at the Assembly. The SDLP has embarked on a strategy that deserves nothing more or less than the contempt of the Assembly and the disdain and derision of the public.

It is important that people understand that there are no easy options and that alternative choices have clear implications. Spending cannot be increased in one area without a commensurate reduction somewhere else or an increase in local taxation.

11.45 am

I now turn to the position of the Alliance Party.

A Member: Is it worth it?

Mr P Robinson: Oh yes, it is.

The Member for North Down Dr Farry is quite open about the Alliance Party's agenda, which I have costed. I applaud him for his honesty. Although his proposals are fiscal folly and fundamentally flawed, I pay tribute to him for telling the people of Northern Ireland that the Alliance Party wants to impose more taxes on them. I thank him for that insight, although his constituents, probably, will not. Sir Humphrey would have called it "courageous".

Last week, on the BBC programme 'Hearts and Minds', Dr Farry agreed with Noel Thompson's description of the freeze on regional rating as "capitalist populism." Dr Farry also called for an increase in industrial rating. To meet the cost of the additional funding sought by the Alliance Party, it would be necessary to triple the amount of money that people are paying in domestic rates — that would be the outcome of the Alliance Party's proposals. I fundamentally disagree with that approach. The Northern Ireland householder

deserves a break, given that there have been regional rate increases of 60% over the past five years.

In a difficult international environment, it is important that we give local manufacturing base whatever support that we can — especially when one of the Executive's priorities is to encourage economic growth. Rather than place a greater burden on householders, we should accept that Government must deliver more.

We should also be careful not to exaggerate the significance of the Deloitte report 'Research into the financial cost of the Northern Ireland divide'. It is not a panacea. Although it may offer some long-term opportunities, it is not a short-term solution. It will certainly not have the impact suggested by the Alliance Party during the course of the Budget period. The Alliance Party talks about the matter as if there is a pot of money that we can dip into at any time. That, of course, is not so.

As a citizen of Northern Ireland, I sincerely want an end to the wasteful division in our society. As Minister of Finance and Personnel, I welcome any opportunity to reallocate resources to a more productive use. However, the reality is not that simple. The £1.5 billion cost of a divided society quoted in the Deloitte report is an upper limit — and an unrealistic one at that, as there is an implied assumption that the higher level of public expenditure in Northern Ireland is entirely due to division. We all know that that is not the case.

Such an assumption is patent nonsense and ignores the impact of factors such as demographic structure, rurality and deprivation, which also explain why there is a greater need for expenditure in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, I share the view that savings could be made from that source, and I have asked my officials to examine the findings of the report, with a view to identifying those elements that can be addressed in the short term.

Perhaps, rather than hissing from the sidelines, the Alliance Party will engage with me in that exercise.

Some Members: Hiss.

Mr P Robinson: Yes. I said "hissing."

I invited Alliance Party Members to meet me and discuss the issue — I am still waiting for a response to that invitation. I encourage all Executive Ministers to make as many savings as possible from the cost of division, because they have made it clear to me that the efficiency savings expected over the next three years are equivalent to almost one tenth of current budgets and will represent a significant challenge for them. Thus, all scope for savings needs to be vigorously pursued.

Many Members have commented that the Executive's agreement of the Budget, the Programme for Government and the investment strategy represents a significant

achievement in itself. That is true. However, agreeing proposed departmental budget allocations will not, by itself, deliver the Executive's objectives which they have set for themselves. They have set those objectives clearly in their Programme for Government and their investment strategy. The mere fact of agreeing the Budget, the Programme for Government and the investment strategy will not, in itself, make the difference. They are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions to create the type of society and economy that we all wish to see.

To make a real difference for all the people of Northern Ireland, we must ensure that we deliver on the commitments that we have made, using the resources that have been allocated in the Budget. That is the challenge that now faces Executive Ministers, their Departments, public bodies and public servants across the length and breadth of the country. I repeat that in three years' time people will not ask Ministers about the allocations that they received; they will ask them what they delivered.

The Executive have set targets such as: the extension of free public transport to everyone who is aged 60 and over; improvements in mental-health and learning-disability services; the movement of 70,000 working-age benefit clients into employment by March 2011; a 25% reduction in the amount of red tape in the agrifood sector by 2013; the growth of the tourism industry by over 40% by 2011; the alleviation of fuel poverty in 9,000 households each year; the completion of an additional 10,000 social and affordable houses by 2013, representing a 60% increase on the annual figure for 2006-07; and a reduction to nine weeks of the maximum wait for treatment for outpatients and to 17 weeks for inpatients.

The latter target highlights the scale of the Executive's ambition. We have set a target of 17 weeks as the minimum wait for inpatient treatment. That compares to the target of 78 weeks that the previous Executive set; even that deplorably low ambition was not achieved.

Those are just some examples of the testing targets that the Executive have set. Our focus must now be on delivering those targets, which must be acted on in partnership with local business, the trade unions, and the community and voluntary sectors. Government should not, and cannot, have sole responsibility for delivering improvements to the quality of life. As I pointed out in my Budget statement on January 22 2008, in a global environment, a local Administration can have only a limited impact on economic growth, even in Northern Ireland.

However, listeners to BBC Radio's 'Evening Extra' programme last Tuesday might have thought that the impact of the Budget was being felt far beyond Northern

Ireland. The presenter who read the news headlines announced, in one breath, that Peter Robinson delivered his first Budget to the Assembly and that the US Federal Reserve cut its key interest rate by 0.75%. I am concerned at what the global implications might be when I return to the Chamber to discuss the outcome of the February monitoring round.

The key objective in delivering against the Executive's targets is to develop a culture of robust performance management and delivery that underpins the highest standards of financial management. With more money than ever allocated for the next three years, we must recognise that local people demand and expect public services to have a meaningful impact on, and bring tangible benefits to, their lives. Those benefits will be realised only if the emphasis is on getting the most from the money that is invested in those services. Financial management in the public sector is about the cost-effective delivery of Government priorities, with due regard being paid to risk and opportunity. It is also about safeguarding money that has been entrusted to us by the taxpayer. An effective financial and governance framework that facilitates the delivery of the plans that are set out in the Budget is an essential component in the process.

My Department has an important role to play in and responsibility for providing advice on — and ensuring the delivery of — improvements in the overall standard of financial management, building on the examples of good practice that are already in place. My officials are actively working with Departments in helping to improve financial management and accountability. New systems and processes, such as account Northern Ireland, are being implemented. Along with the Centre for Applied Learning, better training and development opportunities are being made available to staff. New international accounting standards and more timely production of accounts will assist all parts of the public sector to actively improve financial management standards.

Of course, spending the money is only one aspect of delivery. It is equally important that the resources be used efficiently and effectively. The public service agreements to be published shortly will set out in detail how Departments will work together to achieve the targets and outcomes identified in the Programme for Government. The delivery agreements will set out roles and responsibilities, lines of accountability, performance measurement methods and risk management strategies.

The Executive will also put in place monitoring arrangements at a strategic level to ensure that the key outcomes from the Programme for Government are delivered. The model here is a risk-based approach where the degree of scrutiny varies depending on the extent to which progress is being made. Ministers will play a more interventionist role where the delivery of

outcomes and targets falls short of expectations. For example, if a Department is not delivering on its key objectives and commitments with the resources that it has been allocated by the Executive, the Executive will have to question whether those resources should remain with that Department or be reallocated elsewhere.

Statutory Committees will have a key role to play in monitoring the performance of their Departments in delivering on the targets and commitments in the Programme for Government and investment strategy. That is one of the conclusions and recommendations in the report on the draft Budget from the Committee for Finance and Personnel. The Committee has also noted that, as we move into a period of more constrained public expenditure growth, there is an even greater onus on Departments to manage public finances in a way that achieves the highest possible level of spend within authorised limits and maximises the impact from available resources. The Committee has recommended that all Statutory Committees should include budgetary and financial scrutiny as an integral part of their work programmes. I strongly support that recommendation.

The performance and efficiency delivery unit will have a vital role in supporting the Executive and Departments in achieving improved outcomes from investment in public services. If the Executive are to achieve the challenging objectives that we have set for ourselves, we must create a new focus on performance, efficiency and delivery across all areas of public-sector activity.

One of the main responsibilities of the Department of Finance and Personnel is to monitor how efficiently Departments spend their money. Therefore, the new unit in my Department will identify and work with specific areas of public-sector activity where there is scope for improved delivery or efficiency, and will seek to secure better levels of performance. It will also identify options for further efficiency savings in specific areas, over and above the targets already set out for the next three years. There will be a small number of core staff in the unit. That will provide plenty of scope to involve others in specific pieces of work that the unit will carry out — individuals from other Departments and public bodies, staff working in front-line public-service delivery, audit staff and staff from private-sector organisations can lend specific expertise and experience in particular areas.

I also wish to have access to advice on how best to achieve significant and sustainable improvements in the performance and delivery of large and complex organisations. Therefore, I will establish an advisory panel consisting of individuals who have a strong track record of managing and leading successful and strategic organisational change, involving the delivery of better-quality services and greater efficiency.

Many people will be involved in ensuring that the improved outcomes identified in the Programme for Government and the investment strategy are delivered for the people of Northern Ireland. The starting point is the financial allocation made to each Department in the Executive's final Budget proposals. Those allocations will provide a solid basis on which all the Executive Ministers can now begin the task of ensuring delivery on our commitments to everyone in our community.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

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

"calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to lay a revised programme of expenditure proposals for 2008-09 to 2010-11 before the Assembly, as the Budget currently before the Assembly does not properly address the deep divisions in this society and the need to build a shared future; does not make meaningful changes to balance the regional economy; and fails to provide for sustainable and integrated public services."

I oppose the Budget. However, the Alliance Party does not oppose the Budget for the sake of it. There will be times when the Alliance Party backs actions from the Executive. We support elements of the Budget.

The Alliance Party opposes the Budget because it is flawed, and there is an alternative way forward. Although we congratulate the Finance Minister on getting the Budget to the Assembly and recognise that it is a major piece of work, the Minister must respect the Alliance Party's entitlement to put forward its alternative views — but, I think, we have that respect.

12.00 noon

Last week, the Minister said that everyone should put their shoulder to the wheel in this new Northern Ireland. However, some people have doubts about the direction in which we are going.

There are flaws in the substance of the Budget. First, there is a lack of reference to a shared future, and not enough effort has been made to address the savings that have been made from no longer tackling the costs of a violent society. The Minister has made some rhetorical references to that in his Budget statements, but it is not a central theme in the Budget. Efforts to identify efficiency savings from tackling division are referred to PEDU for longer-term consideration, but we want to make a start.

The Minister referred to the report from Deloitte, which is a well-established consultancy firm that is respected around the world. That report must be given serious consideration, and the Alliance Party is concerned that it has been shelved by the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

The Alliance Party went into the election stating that the costs of a divided society amounted to £1 billion — not £1.5 billion. We have tabled a motion for future discussion, so that Members can air their views on the

contents of the Deloitte report. The report is strong in its tackling of the direct costs and opportunity costs of a divided society, but its addressing of the embedded costs of duplicate goods, facilities and services — particularly in education, which I will talk about later — is weak.

There is no new investment into shared services, such as better public services for the entire community. Change will take time, but we must make a start. The Executive's emphasis on economic development is welcome, but there is little appreciation that meaningful and sustainable growth is not possible without the tackling of divisions in society and the promotion of a shared future alongside it. Divisions have an impact on labour mobility, and they deter inward investment.

There are clear international lessons that the most successful societies in the world tend to be those that are most open to new ideas and those that are most tolerant.

Secondly, the Budget is a recipe for a low-tax society rather than for genuine investment in economic growth. The Finance Minister has taken an already tight comprehensive spending review settlement from London and made it even tighter. Contrary to the impression that was given last week, there is not universal support for the taxation and spending framework. The approach taken to taxation has been questioned by such organisations as the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland (ERINI), the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) — diverse organisations.

A low taxation approach, at the expense of investment in public services, is regressive. The benefits will disproportionately benefit the more affluent elements of society and hurt those who are less well off — particularly those who depend on public services and, perhaps, do not pay as high rates as others. The approach is populist and not based on evidence. Furthermore, the claimed benefits of £1,000 per household have been questioned by Oxford Economics.

Much of the Budget depends upon the 3% efficiency savings being achieved. The Alliance Party has no doubt that efficiency savings of 3% are possible, and such annual savings in the private sector are routine. However, we are concerned about the narrow ground over which those savings are being sought. There are big questions about how public services are being delivered, and they are not targeted in the Budget. The most obvious area in that regard is education, particularly through the policy on sustainable schools.

There are huge inefficiencies in the school estate, and, so far, a policy for area planning and collaboration between schools has not been produced never mind incorporated into the documents that the Assembly is

discussing this week. The wisdom of attempting a considerable amount of capital-assets sales at a time when the property market has slowed down is not entirely obvious either.

Much of the control of the economy lies outside the control of the Assembly. That is reflected in the fact that many of the targets before the House are ambitious — something we welcome — but aspirational, without clear evidence of the means to deliver them.

We also have to reflect on the British Government's regional policy — if that is what it can be called — in which the interests of London and the south-east of England are prioritised at the expense of the rest of the regions, thus leaving us in a dependency situation.

It is unfortunate that targets for measuring economic conversions have been changed.

Rather than comparing our performance with the UK average, we are now to be compared to the UK average minus the south-east of England. Although I understand the desire to remove distortions that arise as a result of real growth in the south-east, rather than simply considering the overall balance of the national economy, we are now reduced to a regional dependency culture and to fighting over the scraps from the table.

Having said that, there are other factors that are in our control, and the investment in the four identified economic drivers is welcome. However, an obvious point that has been made by the Confederation of British Industry and others is that, rather than adopting populist taxation measures, more resources could have been poured into those drivers.

In addition, rather than truly embracing globalisation, we are still focused on an old-fashioned approach to economic support. For example, money is to be poured into modernising agriculture — and I will probably lose the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development on this point. However, agriculture is a shrinking element of the overall economy. From such investment, other sectors could have benefited more and achieved a greater leap forward in productivity.

Much of our inward-investment strategy still depends on the grant-making approach of selective-financial assistance. A properly informed debate —

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: I am sorry, but I have a lot to get through.

There must be a properly informed debate on the relative merits of investing in selective financial assistance compared with greater investments in the economic drivers.

The one fiscal tool that the Minister has at his disposal — industrial derating — is, effectively, anachronistic, and was first introduced in Northern Ireland in 1929 — the year of the great depression. By contrast,

England banned industrial derating as far back as the 1960s. The Minister has ignored the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland's evidence-based approach, which states that, rather than keeping industrial derating at 30%, it would be safe to increase it to 50% and, as a consequence, raise some lost revenue. Hence, rather than being governed by evidence, our overall approach has been governed more by populism.

It is not necessary to match funding allocations in the rest of the United Kingdom. Devolution is about setting different priorities. However, we should make informed choices, and the Alliance Party has already highlighted the imbalance between roads and public-transport expenditure. The arts sector, which was the most vocal sector during the consultation period, has received an additional £2 million per annum, and that is useful. However, clearly, that does not bring arts funding into line with at least the UK average. Given that Northern Ireland is comparatively advantaged by its artistic talents, that should be an area in which we should invest.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Dr Farry: Finally, I will concentrate on health. The Minister has acted like the grand old Duke of York — marching us to the top of the hill and back down again — in his campaign for proper National Health Service funding in Northern Ireland. For the sake of a facade of unity in the Executive, he seems to have settled for much less than what is required to maintain a level of healthcare that is on a par with the rest of the United Kingdom. In order to keep pace with funding in the rest of the UK, Northern Ireland requires a health budget of at least £4.4 billion, and, to maintain the same level of service, the revised Budget leaves a health funding shortfall of £200 million. The DUP can talk all it wants about record Health Service funding, but the simple fact is that we are not keeping pace with the rest of the UK.

In the revised Budget, there is little genuine new money for health. The efficiency savings are simply reprocessed existing money, and the moneys that come from monetary rounds will have no effect on the underlying baselines. The £10 million per annum for mental health is the only genuinely new money, and that is barely sufficient to address the serious underfunding in that critical area of healthcare. We spend a measly 8% of the health budget on mental health, compared to the UK average of 12%.

All around the world, health costs are rising — people are living longer and the price of drugs and new technologies are rising. Sadly, compared with the rest of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland continues to have a much higher per capita needs base. It would be good if the Executive were to suggest that we tackle and reduce that needs gap, but that is not the case.

Clearly, efficiency savings in the Health Service are necessary.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Dr Farry: However, they must not come as a result of cost cutting and denying funds. Such savings are necessary in order that money can be reinvested into new services. Rather than addressing the population's evolving needs, the new money — in so far as we have any — is barely enough to keep up with inescapable pressures.

Mr Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr O'Loan: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert:

"calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to lay before the Assembly a revised programme of expenditure proposals for 2008-09 to 2010-11, as the Budget proposals currently before the Assembly do not provide clear budgetary lines for key policy developments, including the anti-poverty strategy; fail to set out funding commitments in respect of proposed reforms in post-primary education; abandon cross-cutting funds, including a fund for children and young people; and are unclear in their implications for householders in terms of future charging for water."

Mussolini made the trains in Italy run on time, and the responsibility of the Finance Minister — through the Budget — is to have the same effect on the literal and metaphorical trains in our society. As Members know, the literal trains in our society often do not run on time — sometimes not at all. There are many trains in our society that do not provide the service that they should. The SDLP's approach to the Budget is influenced by its principles; the SDLP is a social democratic party and is committed to an inclusive society that tackles disadvantage — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Loan: A society that provides equality, is socially just, and sustains the environment. The SDLP believes in a balance of economic and social investment — we are committed to economic development but regard economic and social development as inter-dependent. That is not adequately reflected in the Programme for Government or the Budget, which are too short term. Social spending now will produce economic benefit in the future.

The Budget cannot be considered without looking at the overall context: Northern Ireland is in long-term relative economic decline, which — one could argue — began at the time of partition. However, that is a debate for another day. Our infrastructure is obsolete, and we have a deeply divided society that was created, and exacerbated, by more than 30 years of conflict. Some Members have a lot to answer for in relation to that conflict. Therefore, the Budget has a major job to do.

There is, of course, some substance and value in the Budget, as we stated in the debate on the Programme for Government yesterday. However, we have concerns

about the Budget. One concern is about our divided society; I am holding a Northern Ireland Community Relations Council journal, which has a picture of a beautiful park in Belfast with trees, grass, paths and everything else that one would expect. However, running through that park is a corrugated iron fence between eight and 10 feet high, which separates the Catholic side from the Protestant side. Sometimes a picture says more than a thousand words.

Some Members: That is a shame.

Mr O'Loan: It is a shame, but there is nothing in the Programme for Government or Budget that directly addresses that issue. There is a danger in creating, or attempting to create, a separate but equal society. That would be doomed to failure but might suit the two largest parties in the Assembly. The Alliance Party must not claim sole ownership of the issue, because it is built into the founding principles of the SDLP. The Alliance Party should not claim to be the sole party of opposition. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Loan: We claim our ministerial position as a right, but also assert our right to oppose what we think needs opposition in any area of Executive policy. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, the Member has the Floor.

Mr O'Loan: It is clear that our tactics and strategy have caused discomfort for some Members. Our party is totally united on its tactics and strategy. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Ford: I am pleased to hear Mr O'Loan talk about the necessity of building a shared future, which the north Belfast park he mentioned clearly demonstrates. Why does the SDLP amendment not mention a shared future?

Mr O'Loan: We made our stance clear in the debate on, and our proposed amendment to, the Programme for Government — the two are closely linked.

Our Government is not joined up enough; a perennial problem in government is trying to get Departments working together. Important issues requiring two or more Departments to work together often fall by the wayside because neither Department takes the lead. One clear example of that can be seen in the children's fund. There must be more strategic focus on that key issue, which is a vital one if we are to tackle child poverty. Children in poverty are handicapped in life's race, and they inevitably fall behind. Creating a separate fund for children would give the issue more focus and would provide the option for bids to be made for more funds in-year. The SDLP believes that that is the better way forward.

12.15 pm

Members have been told that the reform of secondary schools will be the biggest change in 60 years, yet, remarkably, it is not referred to in the Programme for Government and it is therefore not budgeted for. The reform has been referred to as being cost neutral. However, the Minister of Finance and Personnel has indicated that he would be uncomfortable about such an assertion. The SDLP sees that as a major weakness in the Budget.

There is also lack of clarity in the Budget. The public service agreements have no clear budget lines attached to them, therefore one cannot know how much will be spent on each one. There is also the uncertainty about water charging. The Executive have taken no decisions on how water will be paid for. The strand-two report has just been published, and all proposals will, in due course, be issued for consultation. SDLP Members will not be hung out to dry on water proposals that we have not seen and approved.

There are other areas in which the SDLP feels that the Budget's success is being predicated on uncertain propositions. For example, are the efficiency savings going to be real? The Minister of Finance and Personnel knows the answer to that — or if he does not know, I am sure that he will soon receive a piece of paper from his officials telling him that close to one half of the efficiency savings posited for his own Department come from a mere accountancy adjustment whereby an already-received receipt is transferred from one column to another. There is an element of smoke and mirrors about the Budget.

We can be sure that accounting officers throughout the public service, taking their lead from the Department of Finance and Personnel, will be exerting themselves to find manoeuvres in which efficiency savings such as these can be found. However, in some places real changes will be made in order to meet efficiency demands, and those may damage front-line services, particularly in Departments and agencies, such as the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Social Security Agency, in which such services form their core business.

The area of asset sales is very problematic. Workplace 2010 is designed to deliver an upfront payment in the order of £170 million. That sum, given the present state of the property market becomes very questionable. The general issue, having identified assets for sale, is when to sell those assets and how much might be realised from selling them — that is a very problematic area.

The SDLP recognises the gain of £205 million for social housing that has been made between the draft Budget and the final Budget. I commend the Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie for the

effort that she had to make to obtain that money. It was money that should have been in the draft Budget in the first place. However, she has also made it clear that the revised figure will still not be enough for her to meet the Executive's targets.

In his statement, the Minister of Finance and Personnel referred to £1,000 in savings per household. I say to people: do not book your holidays on the strength of that. I would not even book a weekend in Castlereagh. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr O'Loan: People should not suppose that it will be an annual saving. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Loan: The sum is not even being calculated over the three years covered by the Budget. If the figure is to be meaningful then it is to be calculated over a four-year period, which was what the Minister said in his statement on the draft Budget. The fact is that people will never see that money in their hands. If water charging is introduced, either through rates bills or household bills, people will not see any reductions or money being returned when those bills land on their mats.

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

Mr O'Loan: They will see instead an increase of the order of 25%.

I hope that the Minister, when he sums up, will confirm —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Loan: — that there is funding for the Giant's Causeway visitors' centre in his Budget proposals.

As a party, we have presented sound reasons for our amendment.

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I take this opportunity to commend the Minister and his officials for accomplishing the very challenging task of co-ordinating and compiling the Budget on behalf of the Assembly.

The Budget that we are debating today aims to support and deliver the strategic priorities set out in the Programme for Government, including: growing our economy; investing in infrastructure; modernising public services; environmental protection; and promoting tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being.

I thank the Minister also for his acknowledgement of the role that the Committee for Finance and Personnel and the other Assembly Committees played in the process. That culminated in the Committee publishing a co-ordinated report on the draft Budget on

8 January 2008 on behalf of all the Assembly departmental scrutiny Committees. The report set out 21 overarching conclusions and recommendations that aim to influence the Executive in its future work.

With regard to the Executive's strategic priorities, the Committee recognises the pressing need to raise productivity and living standards in the North and therefore welcomes the increased focus on economic growth. The Committee considers that the new emphasis on the economy necessitates the early publication of a new and revised regional economic strategy that sets out how the Executive's high-level goals will be realised. That should include a cross-cutting implementation plan for the four productivity drivers — skills, enterprise, innovation and infrastructure. I believe that a new regional economic strategy takes on even greater significance and urgency in the context of the very disappointing Varney report and the global economic challenges ahead.

The Committee is also mindful of the importance of the Executive's other priorities regarding infrastructure, health, equality, public services and the environment. We all recognise that there are only finite resources available to meet many of the demands in terms of maintaining and improving public services. The focus is therefore on ensuring that the resources available to the Executive are deployed strategically and fairly, with the emphasis being on activities and programmes that support the delivery of key priorities.

In its report on the draft Budget, my Committee acknowledged the constraints within which the Executive have to operate. The outcome of the comprehensive spending review means that real-terms growth in public expenditure here over the next three years will average only 1.2% a year. The Committee also recognises that the Executive have had to address a range of legacy issues inherited from the direct rule period, including water and domestic rating reform, which were the cause of mounting public concern.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Durkan tax.

Mr McLaughlin: My colleague reminds us of the legacy of the disastrous deal that Mark Durkan and David Trimble struck with the British Treasury.

As a consequence, the revised Budget places a strong emphasis on efficiency and value for money. The Committee responded to that positively in its report by examining a range of strategic and cross-cutting budgetary issues with a view to identifying ways of maximising the impact from limited resources. In particular, it recommended a range of specific measures aimed at supporting the efficiency drive, eradicating the culture of underspend and raising the performance of Departments in managing public money for the delivery of front-line services.

Mr O’Loan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I understand that when you called Mr McLaughlin to speak it was as the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel. He has expressed political views, making reference to Mark Durkan, that are certainly not the determined views of the Committee. They are clearly party-political views. Mr Speaker, I ask for a ruling on that matter.

The Speaker: Order. Mr McLaughlin had already indicated that he would make remarks as Chairperson of the Committee and as a Member of this Assembly.

Mr Storey: Point of order, Mr Speaker.

The Speaker: Order. We saw an example this morning of a Chairperson of a Committee who dwelt on political issues.

Order, Members. Order. I normally give the Chairpersons of Committees some latitude. Unfortunately, some exceed their position. However, Mr McLaughlin came to the Table and indicated clearly that he wished to speak as Chairperson of the Committee, but that he would make some personal remarks. That was absolutely clear.

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker, if the honourable Member asks for a point of order — although that is consistent with SDLP inconsistency — will you also make a ruling on the issues to which you referred, regarding Patsy McGlone’s disgraceful comments when he spoke as Chairperson of his Committee? Those were political comments; therefore, the SDLP cannot pick and choose.

Mr Speaker: I will take no further points of order on the issues. We shall move on.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Even as Chairperson, I believe I have the right to speak on matters of record, and this matter has, on many occasions, been addressed, not only by members of my Committee, but by Members of this Assembly.

Mr Durkan: Mr Speaker, the Member —

Mr Speaker: I said that I would take no further points of order on this particular issue. I ask the Member to continue.

Mr McLaughlin: The Committee considered a range of key financial management issues, including the planned reduction in overcommitment; the new requirement of the Executive to negotiate with the Treasury each year for access to end-of-year flexibility; and the level of annual underspend by Departments, which is unacceptably high in comparison with other regions.

The Committee concluded that those issues combined to place a heavy onus on Departments to manage public finances in a way that achieves the highest

possible level of spend within authorised limits, and maximises the impact from available resources.

A further cross-cutting theme in the Budget is the reform agenda, in which the Department of Finance and Personnel will have a key role. The Civil Service reform programmes are expected to realise a range of benefits and value-for-money savings across the 11 Departments. Those benefits will be measured by a series of key performance indicators that will be integrated into departmental business planning. Again, the Committee will continue to review and monitor the work of the Department against targets set for each of the relevant programmes.

I have addressed only some of the issues covered in the Committee’s co-ordinated approach, particularly the importance of the financial management agenda, together with the drive to reform the public sector and to deliver value for money and efficiencies, all of which will enable the improvement to front-line services that our people deserve.

Those areas will require ongoing monitoring and scrutiny by the Committee for Finance and Personnel, together with the other statutory Committees and the wider Assembly, over the next three financial years of the Budget period.

The period 2008-2011 will present the Executive, and all of us in the Assembly, with both a challenge and an opportunity to prove that devolution can make a real difference to people’s lives, and that locally accountable, elected representatives and Ministers can take a much more sensitive approach to the nuances and the realities of social and economic life in the North.

I conclude with some remarks in respect of my party role as spokesperson on economic — *[Laughter.]*

My remarks concern the use of public finance initiatives (PFI). A considerable weight of evidence confirms Sinn Féin’s belief that PFI and PPP represent poor value for the public purse. Local examples include the car park project at the Royal Victoria Hospital and at Balmoral High School. Public Service provision under PFI will create problems for the Executive in future years. The net result of setting PFI contracts will be —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr McLaughlin: I am sorry.

The net result of setting PFI contracts will be that the Executive will progressively take on more and more long-term debt, and, in future, a greater proportion of the total Budget available to Ministers.

Sinn Féin will argue, as will its Ministers, that PFI contracts are not the preferred option of the Executive. Civil servants, and others responsible for designing projects, should be instructed to put equal, or greater,

effort into alternative funding models, instead of PPP or PFI projects.

12.30 pm

On investment, Sinn Féin welcomes many of the commitments in the Programme for Government, the Budget and ISNI II. However, it will be important that those commitments be turned into reality and that they deliver for the most disadvantaged in society. Sinn Féin welcomes the £18 billion that is to be invested in the next 10 years. In particular, we welcome the explicit commitments to the promotion of social inclusion and equality in the procurement of infrastructure programmes.

Furthermore, the reviews of water reform, domestic and industrial rates and Civil Service reform — as well as the systemic efficiency programmes across all Departments — will, Sinn Féin expects, demonstrate again the benefits of having a locally accountable Assembly.

On regional disparities, Sinn Féin is concerned that the commitment in this Budget and in ISNI II to promote regional balance does not go far enough and may not effectively address the legacy of the past, which has led to institutionalised disadvantage west of the Bann and in deprived areas such as north and west Belfast. Sinn Féin will continue to address that issue as we go forward.

Sinn Féin will continue to press the Executive and the Assembly to ensure that a commitment to the eradication of structural regional inequalities over a timetabled period is accomplished. Furthermore, we want to see the maximum decentralisation of public-sector jobs to redress historical disparity and imbalance and to support balanced regional development.

Finally, there is obvious confusion within the SDLP. I presume that I have some time, as a result of the interruptions?

Mr Speaker: No, you have 10 minutes.

Mr McLaughlin: OK.

The Minister for Social Development should consider — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. The Member has the Floor.

Mr McLaughlin: The Minister for Social Development should consider making a statement to this Assembly and to a bemused public. Did she seek and receive support from her party leader and colleagues? Is endorsing the Programme for Government, ISNI II and the Budget compatible with the party's policies? Last week she and Mark Durkan were proclaiming that their hard-line negotiating skills were a rationale for voting for and supporting the final documents at the Executive's meeting. Perhaps the Minister will explain whether she proposed any amendments — the Minister

of Finance and Personnel has challenged that. Did she propose any amendments during those discussions? Did she change her mind and betray her commitment to her ministerial colleagues, or did her party wobble when hardy came to hardy and, effectively, abandon her?

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension today. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.32 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr Storey: I should say in the first instance that I will make my opening remarks in my capacity as an Assembly Member, and I will make my final comments in my capacity as the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

It is right and proper that we place on record that we are debating a Budget at a time when one party in our four-party mandatory coalition does not seem to know what being part of that coalition means.

Declan O'Loan, who is one of my North Antrim constituency colleagues, said earlier that he would not allow a situation to develop in which the SDLP would be hung out to dry. It is obvious that he was not referring to one of his colleagues, Margaret Ritchie, the Minister for Social Development. The SDLP has done exactly what it said it would not allow: it has hung the Minister out to dry.

No press conference in this Building today and no attempt at unity by the SDLP will be able to mask the problems that now exist in that party. It has a Minister whom it has abandoned and does not support. We will probably see its Members again this afternoon in the political theatre of voting against the Budget. That is an issue for their electorate and on which that electorate will undoubtedly pass comment.

Therefore, having made those points, which reflect my personal perspective on the political charade that is going on with the SDLP, I will move the debate on to discuss the issues that have been of interest to the Committee of which I am the Deputy Chairperson. At the outset, I thank the Minister for his remarks.

Mr P Robinson: We are currently seeing the spectacle of the Minister for Social Development being present in the Chamber alongside her party leader.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to please address his remarks to the Chair. When Members turn towards others, as the Minister is doing, the volume disappears somewhat.

Mr P Robinson: That might be a blessing for some, Mr Deputy Speaker. It will certainly be a blessing for the SDLP. Since both the Minister for Social Development and her party leader are present, I wonder whether they would answer the question that was asked earlier: if there were something inherently wrong with the Programme for Government, the investment strategy or the Budget, why did their Minister table no amendment to those in Executive meetings? Alternatively, did they shaft their Minister at a later stage?

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his intervention. I remind him that earlier, the leader of the SDLP

commented in the House that his Minister had expressed reservations. There is a vast difference between expressing reservations and coming up with ideas, proposals and amendments to a Budget and a draft strategy. Obviously, the SDLP does not really know where it is going on this issue.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: No, I have already given up some of my time, and I want to get to the substance of the issues that concern the Committee of which I am the Deputy Chairperson.

I thank the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his remarks and for his opening comments on the revised Budget. His comments explain the key challenges, pressures and priorities that lie ahead for the Executive.

The work that the Committee for Finance and Personnel has done on strategic budgetary issues has already been mentioned. I will focus my comments on DFP's own Budget allocation and its importance in helping the Department to achieve the targets that have been set for it in the Programme for Government and the investment strategy, for which it takes lead responsibility.

In its response to the draft Budget, the Committee noted that DFP allocation for current expenditure between 2008 and 2011 represents a significant reduction in the Department's share of departmental expenditure limit funds. That reflects a pattern of reduced funding for DFP; even the current year allocation is 17.1% lower than that of 2006-07. Although the Committee has concerns about the impact that that reduction could have, it is particularly uneasy about the Department's capital allocations.

The Department of Finance and Personnel submitted a bid for approximately £94.2 million over the three financial years from 2008 to 2011 but was allocated £68.7 million.

The Committee has particular concerns over whether the capital allocations to Land and Property Services will be sufficient to allow the agency to alleviate the difficulties associated with its IT systems, especially those that deal with rate relief. Moreover, Land Registers of Northern Ireland and Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland will merge with Land and Property Services on 1 April 2008. Those changes will present a real challenge to an agency that is responsible for the delivery of important front-line services. The Committee will continue to pursue the matter, and it has scheduled a scrutiny of that area of concern into its work programme over the coming weeks.

The Committee has already produced a report on Workplace 2010, and it continues to scrutinise the future progress and direction of that project. That major accommodation project will affect all Departments and

is expected to generate approximately £175 million in capital receipts during the Budget period.

The Committee has also expressed concerns to DFP about the apparent delay in the implementation of Workplace 2010. That delay came to light when the Committee considered the Department's input into the revised Programme for Government. The Committee will investigate that matter further tomorrow, when it will also examine the findings of the evaluation of the Workplace 2010 pilot project at Clare House. The potential consequences for the Budget of any significant delay in implementing Workplace 2010 will be of particular concern.

The Department of Finance and Personnel has lead responsibility for other key reform programmes, such as NI Direct, which will ultimately provide a single telephone point of contact for public services and the various shared-service centres, including HR Connect, Account NI and Records NI. The Committee recognises that those reform programmes underpin the Budget, in that they will contribute to achieving wider efficiency targets and will allow accrued savings to be redirected into the delivery of key front-line services. However, the Committee has recently been informed that the reform programme, including NI Direct, is to be funded out of future monitoring rounds. Consequently, the Committee is concerned that that approach attaches some uncertainty to funding for those important projects, and that, in turn, could result in delays and affect the wider efficiency drive. Such important, high-profile programmes, particularly in the case of NI Direct, will require priority.

The Committee was also concerned about the Department's allocation for improvements in the energy performance of Government buildings and for measures linked to the sustainable development strategy, because those allocations run contrary to the prominence that the Executive afforded sustainability in the Programme for Government. I have pointed to the relative decline in the resource available to DFP, and it is intended that that will be supplemented through efficiency savings.

The Department has a target to deliver cash-releasing efficiencies of £5.7 million, £10.3 million and £14.8 million respectively over the next three financial years. Such efficiency targets will present DFP, and other Departments, with a considerable challenge. The Committee will continue to scrutinise regularly DFP's progress in achieving its efficiency delivery plan, and it has recommended that the other Statutory Committees do likewise.

As was mentioned earlier, one of the major strategic issues that has arisen from the Committee's investigation is the unacceptable level of underspend across Departments. Such moneys could be used to tackle a range of

ongoing needs rather than be left to accumulate at year-end. The Department of Finance and Personnel has a key role to play in leading the drive to minimise underspending, and the Committee will monitor the progress that the Department makes in driving the financial-management agenda and the way in which it leads by example, by ensuring the efficiency forecasting and monitoring of its own expenditure, and thereby minimising its underspend.

To conclude, the Committee will also continue to monitor the impact that the resource and capital allocations proposed for the Department of Finance and Personnel in the revised Budget will have on delivery, and how the Department plans to manage with allocations that are significantly below the amount sought. I support the motion.

Mr McNarry: I wish to make it clear from the outset that I welcome the Minister's assurance that there will be scope to revise spending plans if necessary. That is an important commitment to record, particularly given the restrictions within which his Department has had to work in preparing the Budget.

Buzzwords have bounced around the Chamber lately. Expressions such as "we are where we are" and "it is time to move on" are, no doubt, meant to encourage a feel-good factor and demonstrate that devolution is working. However, last week, the Minister of Finance and Personnel sounded a cautionary note in his foreword to the Budget document:

"Recent years have seen above average rates of growth in public spending which will sharply decelerate in the coming three years. This will undoubtedly cause difficulties and challenges in terms of the need to prioritise resources on where they will result in most benefit."

Ulster Unionists recognised that warning. Indeed, we first sounded it some time ago.

The Minister may recall grimacing as he said hello to me last week after his Budget statement. I recall that because I am more used to the grimace than the hello these days. He will remember that when I passed him, I said: "That was all right." That is true; his statement was simply that — it was not brilliant or great, it was just as I told him: it was all right.

This Budget represents a weak cocktail mix — it has no fizz. Why is that? The Minister knows what we all know: that this Budget lacks the sparkle of the promised financial package from Gordon Brown, on which there was no delivery. So tight is the Budget that it is close to imploding. It squeezes spending out of the efficiencies to such an extent that no one knows for certain whether the 3% efficiency targets can be met.

However, we know that if only half the savings are made, a shortfall of £435 million will mean a large hole in the Budget. This is a high-wire Budget, and if it has a safety net, perhaps the Minister will tell us how far he can fall before he ejects himself from office, or

runs for help. I am rather caught between two stools on that matter. On one hand, the very thought of the Minister ejecting himself from office is most appealing. On the other hand — perhaps I will leave that for another day.

I shall outline the Ulster Unionist Party's position from this secure premise: its Members are in Government as of right, and they are there to assert the mandate that has been given to our party. That mandate has led to our taking on more financial responsibility than any other party in the Executive. Those responsibilities see two Ulster Unionist Ministers controlling over 56% of the revenue allocations. Contrast that with the percentages for the parties that control the votes in this House: the DUP, with its four Ministers, is responsible for only 8% of the revenue allocations; and Sinn Féin, with its three Ministers, musters 30%. Not even the combined score of those two parties' seven Ministers gets close to our 56%. Therefore, we will not vote against the Budget, which was agreed by our Ministers.

I am proud of the stand that was taken by our party's MLAs and Ministers when first declaring our resistance to the draft Budget. Today's final Budget agreement justifies our stance. If our Ministers had rolled over and bowed the knee to the spurious accusations that were levelled at them — which, in one instance, led to the suspension of the Chairperson of the Health Committee — the Budget would not have been agreed, nor would it have been inclusive of the entire Executive.

The fact that Ulster Unionists hold responsibility for over 56% of the revenue allocation signifies our commitment to real responsibility, none of which we will walk away from. However, the party's concerns and reservations also illustrate responsible thinking. We will monitor every decision that is taken. We will not tell the electorate that it is acceptable to wait 40, 50 or even 100 years before a road can be repaired; or that child poverty will be eradicated by 2010, when it will not; or that the poorest of our families will have to pay for water when they cannot afford to; or that there is a "live now, pay after death" system for fixed-income pensioners in respect of water charges.

How can we drum up support for a capital spend on sport of £111 million when £70 million of that is to be set aside for a stadium for which there is, as yet, no business case? Who knows when or where it will be built, or, indeed, whether it will be built at all? Remove that £70 million, and the remaining balance of £41 million leaves little to go around for sport in the next three years.

2.15 pm

Education is in a total mess, with parents, pupils and teachers up in arms about the policy efficiencies of a rudderless Department that badly needs a new Minister and a change in policy direction. Who can guarantee that

any money that is given to that Minister will be properly spent for the benefit of children in Northern Ireland?

In essence, the Budget is reliant on efficiency savings of 3% being made. Any slippage could cause serious chaos or freefall. Independent economic analysis suggests that it will be virtually impossible to achieve 3% savings. However, in a rather bullish statement that was reprinted in last Saturday's 'News Letter', the Minister boasted that as a first step, domestic regional rates will be frozen for three years. He went on to say:

"the average household... will be £1,000 better off."

Last week, Graeme Harrison, a leading economist with Oxford Economics was quoted in 'The Irish News' as saying:

"Northern Ireland is likely to face pressure to balance its books as domestic rates bills are much lower than in Britain. If this time comes, rates may rise quite significantly which will be a bitter pill to swallow."

It would be a bitter pill indeed for average householders should water charges tap into their household income and leave them £1,000 worse off.

Is the Assembly being somewhat reckless in overstating a Budget, the delivery of which is built on speculation? What will happen if crucial efficiency targets are not met? What contingency plans are in place should efficiency savings fail to materialise? How will the Departments distinguish between cuts and savings? What happens if the efficiencies unravel and the Executive are forced to increase rates bills substantially to balance the books?

My party's contribution to today's debate will be constructive and penetrating. Our participation in the House is the same as in the Executive: we act in good faith, with the aim of reaching as broad a consensus as possible. However, make no mistake: we will retain our serious reservations about the Budget until we are satisfied that they are no longer valid.

Those who attempt to browbeat the UUP Ministers, or any of my colleagues, and who once chided members of my party as being pushovers, should take a good look at themselves. Perceived dominance is a kidding machine. Those people should take some friendly advice from me: they, not the UUP, are responsible for making the daily headlines that do not cover them in glory. Commentators, columnists and the letters pages are pulling their parties — not mine — to bits.

The Ulster Unionists have moved on: we are reinvigorated, and we relish the challenges that lie ahead in the Executive, the Committees, and in building our relationships with the public. Ulster Unionists will step up to the mark on the Budget: where it succeeds, and we hope that it does, we will applaud it. Where it fails, and our reservations point to the probability of some serious failures, we will denounce it. For now,

the Ulster Unionist Party joins its Ministers in approving the Budget.

Mr Hamilton: I congratulate the Minister and all his Executive colleagues on agreeing the Budget, which is a significant document for any legislature. In today's Northern Ireland Assembly, it represents a major milestone on the road away from direct rule. The four parties that are in power represent 90% of the population. For those four parties — the DUP, Sinn Féin, the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP — to agree unanimously to a three-year Budget would have been unimaginable a year ago. It is a positive Budget for Northern Ireland, and it marks a distinct departure from direct rule.

I particularly welcome the continuing focus on growing a vibrant and dynamic economy for Northern Ireland — our number one priority. However, having that as our number one priority does not mean that investment in public services is not required. In the Budget, there will be more than £4 billion worth of spending a year on health, an additional £400 million a year for education, and ambitious public capital investment in infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, public transport and other public services, to the tune of some £2 billion a year. That is significant, and it is needed to help achieve the goal of growing Northern Ireland's economy.

Freezing the domestic regional rate, capping the industrial rate, and the clear focus in the Budget on much-needed efficiencies and on performance are recognition that the people of Northern Ireland have paid enough and have not received the outputs that their inputs have deserved.

However, in spite of all of those positives, and I could mention many more, there are doom merchants, naysayers and nit-pickers who have pored over the document and have suddenly — compared to others who have been consistently opposed to it — become eleventh-hour converts to opposing the Budget. I refer, of course, to the SDLP.

It is worth remembering that as far as the current Budget process is concerned, all Ministers must agree to every aspect of the Budget. It is not sufficient for Ministers to agree only to their individual departmental allocations — obviously, they will have a particular interest in those. Ministers must agree to every single piece of the Budget, every line, every pound and every penny.

Serious questions have to be posed about what has been written in the press and what has been said in the Chamber today. First, is the SDLP riven with division? Did Margaret Ritchie defy her party's directions? Did she fail to deliver on what her party asked her to achieve in the Executive? Those questions need to be asked, especially given that the Minister of Finance and

Personnel has said that Minister Ritchie proposed no amendments to the draft Budget.

The only other possibility, which is much more serious, is that Margaret Ritchie's approval of the Budget in the Executive — and her likely endorsement of it this evening, if she wants to remain in office — was deliberately dishonourable. That is the serious issue that she has to address.

I look forward to seeing her in the Lobby later — I am sure that I will. However, her party colleagues who will trot through the other Lobby at the same time will be holding what is tantamount to a vote of no confidence in her ability. That is an issue that she needs to seriously reflect on, and she should watch her back. Perhaps she needs to get her retaliation in first. I am not sure what the SDLP's role is — its Minister will be voting for a Budget that her Assembly colleagues will be voting against. Perhaps its role will evolve over the course of the day.

I do know what the Alliance Party's role is. However, they are not effective in fulfilling it.

Mr Ford: Is that the best you can manage, Simon?

Mr Hamilton: I am just starting, David. In all seriousness, I find it curious that a party, which for decades piously pronounced that it was time for people to get together and work together for the betterment of Northern Ireland, is now taking such a position. In many ways, it is opposing its *raison d'être*; it is opposing what it has been proposing for years.

Alliance Party Members may think that they are the tough guys and that they are talking tough; however, I honestly do not think that their supporters will appreciate what the party is doing, especially given what it has been selling them through the years. *[Interruption.]*

I hope that it is not because of anything that I said.

The cost-of-division argument has been wheeled out as the main fiscal argument once again. However, the Alliance Party has another argument, which I will address later. It knows that its alternative is unrealistic. The Alliance Party's arguments on the cost of division have been derided by UNISON — which has been no friend of the Minister of Finance during the consultation on the draft Budget — and in its submission on the draft Budget those arguments have been called “delusions”.

It is important to examine the matters that are included in ‘The Cost of Division — A Shared Future Strategy’, and I would love to be able to click my fingers and make the actual cost of division disappear overnight. The maximum potential figure of £1.5 billion that is cited in the report includes various costs, such as responsibilities of the Northern Ireland Office and aspects of security, which would not automatically come back to the Assembly in any case. I heard your contribution to the Programme for Government debate

yesterday, Mr Deputy Speaker, when you excoriated the Alliance Party quite effectively on that point.

The report also included the funding of the Historical Enquiries Team, and the Alliance Party must be asked whether it would like to see that body disappear.

Dr Farry: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it appropriate for a Member to refer to comments that were made by the Deputy Speaker when he was speaking from the Benches as a private Member, and then refer to him as the Deputy Speaker during a subsequent debate?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not relevant to today's business, Dr Farry.

Mr Hamilton: You are very wise, Mr Deputy Speaker: two good comments in two days — you are on a roll.

The report also suggests that if bonfires were eliminated, we could save thousands of pounds every year. Perhaps the authors of the report do not attend many bonfires, because even if division in society ended, I suspect that bonfires would not disappear for ever. Perhaps we will have guys.

There are potentially quite significant savings to be made in education, but the Alliance Party, when presented with an opportunity in the House to vote against the Irish-medium club bank to stop the inappropriate further disintegration of education, voted for it. That will further entrench division in our education system.

The Alliance Party is not a one-trick pony any more — it now has two tricks on fiscal matters. The Alliance Party is telling the people, the households and the businesses of Northern Ireland that it wants to see their taxes rise, and, if it has its way, they will rise significantly. Under the last five years of direct rule, the people of Northern Ireland faced a 60% domestic regional rate rise, including a 19% rise in one year.

The Alliance Party characterised this as a low-tax Budget. That is a label that the DUP and I would be very happy to pick up and wear with immense pride. After enduring years of double-digit rate rises, the people have made a large enough contribution, and it is time for them to receive the performance that they deserve. A Budget that will freeze the domestic regional rate, effect an 8% cut over the three-year period and cap the industrial rate is to be welcomed, not criticised. A Budget that means that the average household in Northern Ireland will be around £1,000 better off over the three-year period, compared to direct rule, is best for Northern Ireland.

The Alliance Party has bashed householders and manufacturers, and has now turned its attention to bashing farmers. I wonder when they are going to bash little old ladies, because it seems that no one is immune when it comes to from whom the Alliance Party will

take taxes. The Alliance Party is in opposition, the job of which is to propose attractive policies so that people will vote for them. If that is the type of policy that the Alliance Party believes people are going to vote for, it may as well get used to its role, because it will be in it for a very long time.

This Budget marks a significant change for Northern Ireland, and it represents a move in the right direction. The agreement of a unanimous Budget is to be wholeheartedly welcomed by everyone in the House. I give it my support, and I look forward to seeing the now-departed Minister for Social Development supporting it too.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thankfully, she has departed only temporarily.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the debate on the Budget and the opportunity to take part in it. One of the most positive elements of the Budget is that local, accountable political representatives are setting the priorities and Budget allocations, rather than direct rule Ministers.

The Budget is by no means perfect, but it is a first step in delivering real change to the people living in the North of Ireland.

2.30 pm

The fact that there is such a high level of public interest in the draft Budget, which was shown by the number of people who responded to the consultation process, indicates that people have high expectations of local political representatives to deliver the changes necessary to make our quality of life better.

It is important to build a dynamic, innovative economy, but it is equally important to ensure that poverty, disadvantage and inequality are addressed. The economy in the North of Ireland is characterised by unacceptable and unsustainable levels of poverty that expose the extent of discrimination and disadvantage in our society. Some 31% of 16- to 60-year-olds lack paid work; 22% of the workforce is low paid; and nearly 25% of households are unable to afford adequate home heating. Nearly 100,000 children and 50,000 pensioners are living in income poverty, and 3,000 people die prematurely each year as a result of disadvantage and poverty.

In the past, we have had no control over our resources, which has resulted in an economy with patterns that have, year after year, produced alarming evidence of intensifying inequality and disadvantage.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: No.

We must correct the huge infrastructure deficit resulting from successive failures to invest in essential services, such as water, the sewerage system, transport,

hospitals and education. It is our commitment to address discrimination and disadvantage that is at the very source of our opportunity to overcome what is morally and economically unsustainable. For example, by looking at how all public procurement expenditure can integrate economic and social requirements, along with ring-fencing projects that directly impact on discrimination and poverty, ways can be found that can begin to challenge those patterns of disadvantage.

There is a huge budget for procurement, and we need to agree measures, such as local labour, clauses that will ensure that procurement meets equality conditions. For example, companies that receive contracts should meet base conditions, which would include good wages and employment of apprenticeships, and thus they would contribute to local economic welfare and growth.

Unfortunately, the British Government have ignored repeated cross-party representations to make special provision for the North of Ireland as a society emerging from conflict, with all the social and economic disadvantages that that brings. Instead, we are faced with an unfair Barnett settlement — the outworking of which can be seen in the draft Budget — and a drive to privatise public services.

The block grant from the British Government is inadequate and does not allow the Executive to challenge fully the years of underinvestment by successive British Governments. Notwithstanding the context of that financial shortfall, as well as the absence of a developed all-Ireland economy, until we have control over our own fiscal powers, we will continue to carry the burden of trying to match limited resources with increasing needs.

There are, of course, several areas where it will be necessary to examine and to continue to lobby for resources in different Departments.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: No.

Public service provision under PFI is an area that needs to be examined and its shortfalls challenged. PFI and PPP contracts require public bodies to enter into long-term contracts that involve them borrowing money at a higher rate of interest than normal. Government can borrow at a lower interest rate than the private sector. Therefore, PFI and PPP contracts —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members, please allow the Member to continue.

Ms J McCann: Therefore, PFI and PPP contracts can cost the taxpayer more in the longer term.

The social economy is another area that deserves special recognition. We must recognise the important and significant contribution of such local economic activity, which promotes social objectives and

sustainable community development. That industry has already created sustainable jobs. The development of the social economy should be actively promoted by the Assembly and the Executive.

The community and voluntary sector has been starved of core funding. An ongoing lobbying process must take place to ensure specific Departments allocate the resources necessary to core fund those front-line services delivered through the community and voluntary sector.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: No.

Moneys could be ring-fenced, particularly in the Department for Social Development. Many services, including the Youth Service, are due to finish in March and June of this year. Many are losing Peace II funding, with no alternative measures in place to sustain their projects, even though they have been central to delivering opportunities for community training and development, education, promotion of good relations, and initiatives for children and young people.

The Department for Social Development must be creative and imaginative in finding ways to retain the skills and expertise that have been acquired in that sector and that have helped to promote and sustain citizenship and peace. Many communities in west Belfast, other parts of the city and across the North of Ireland have serious concerns about the future of the community sector. Therefore, it is unacceptable that a report on the future of that sector, which argued for mainstream long-term funding for community organisations, has still not been acted upon, despite being presented to the Department for Social Development several years ago.

The revised Budget, alongside the Programme for Government and the investment strategy, should be a vehicle to empower communities through economic initiatives. Departments should commit to building social capital through funded, participative community-level initiatives that lead to sustainable economic projects, which would be beneficial to all in the community.

I am disappointed that the Budget does not mention women as a specific group that faces inequality and discrimination. I expected the Budget to reflect the commitment, which the Executive made in the Programme for Government, to tackling the remaining gender inequalities in society. That commitment was written into the Programme for Government at Sinn Féin's insistence, and I intend to ensure that all Departments honour it.

In the Programme for Government, the Executive make a commitment to implementing the cross-departmental gender-equality strategy and to work towards the total elimination of the gender pay gap. The Executive are also committed to developing

effective programmes and strategies aimed at eradicating all forms of violence against women and to ensuring a significant increase in women's participation in political and public life, which will be helped by ensuring that women have access to affordable, quality childcare.

Although all those gains in the Programme for Government are welcome, it is important that financial support and resources are made available to deliver on those commitments. Sinn Féin intends to use the agreed mechanisms for delivering equality, including the equality impact assessment process.

In conclusion, as I said at the outset, the fact that local political representatives, rather than direct rule Ministers, have set the priorities and Budget allocations that will affect local people's lives for the next few years must be seen as a positive step forward. It is a positive first step, but much more work must be done to ensure that inequality, discrimination and disadvantage are rigorously challenged and tackled. All people in the North of Ireland are entitled to a much better quality of life. It is the responsibility of local representatives, along with others, to ensure that that is delivered. We must take the process forward, because people are expecting their local politicians to deliver. There is much goodwill out there, but people expect a lot from us. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I commend the Member for Upper Bann Mrs Kelly for taking rejection very well.

Mr Weir: Like Ms McCann, I support the Budget. However, unlike her, I might manage to make some positive comments about it to justify my going through the Lobbies. I look forward to seeing Ms McCann, and others, in the Lobbies tonight in support of the four-party Budget that the Executive approved unanimously.

The Budget marks an important departure for Northern Ireland in three crucial respects. It stands in sharp contrast to the direct rule Budgets that were imposed upon us in the past. First, the draft Budget went out to consultation, and today we see the finished product. As local politicians, we are used to seeing the Government consulting on various proposals. Responses and strenuous arguments for changes might be made, but they always seemed to fall on deaf ears. As the revised Budget shows, the Executive have been listening, and they have considered genuine concerns and met genuine pressures without diverting the Budget from its central purpose. The Executive have shown flexibility, while retaining the Budget's strength.

Many words of praise have been heaped upon the Minister of Finance and Personnel for organising the Budget and the consultation process. However, praise must also go to the hard-working special adviser and officials in the Department who successfully aided the Minister in producing that excellent work.

I highlighted three areas where a departure from the past was merited. The second of those is the opportunity to be responsive and listen.

The economy is at the heart of the Budget, in both the draft and the final versions. Here is a challenge to all of us to shift away from our mindset. In the past, the tendency has been to concentrate on how the cake has been carved up. When we were faced with problems, we asked for more cake. Ultimately, however, the long-term economic success of Northern Ireland will be based on a strong economy. The Budget shows the way. In achieving that strong economy, it is not a question of redressing the balance between the public and private sectors by reducing the size of the public sector. Examination of the Budget shows record levels of commitment to the public sector. For example, the vast growth of the allocation to the Health Service and the additional money for social housing that has been found in the final Budget will make a major contribution to society. It is not so much reducing the public sector that is vital, but creating economic conditions that make for growth in the private sector. The Alliance Party has thrown at us the accusation that we have been trying to create a low-tax economy that will allow the private sector to flourish. That is a badge of honour that I am happy to wear.

Consider the regional rate. We have seen massive increases, driven, in part, by the agreement on the reinvestment and reform initiative. That meant that taxpayers and ratepayers in Northern Ireland have, in recent years, been bled dry. Now, however, the domestic regional rate has been frozen for the next three years; and the business rate will be kept in line with inflation. The Executive have responded to requests from the manufacturing sector to hold down the level of derating, which will give a much-needed boost to our economy.

The third area in which there has been a departure from past practice, is one on which the focus will fall in the future. The Budget concentrates, not simply on the levels of allocation given to various Departments, but — as was shown in the Minister's statement last week — on delivery. Northern Ireland's citizens will expect that. That is what matters to people: not that we have a more expensive system, or that we have one that is better-funded, but that delivery makes a difference to their day-to-day lives.

Consequently —

Mr Gallagher: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that, in future, local government will have an important part to play in service delivery? Since local government and central Government have co-operated in preparing the modernisation agenda, does the Member agree that it is disappointing that no money has been identified in the Budget for the next three years for taking that forward?

Mr Weir: Money will be made available for modernisation. It is hoped that, in the near future, the Executive will make decisions on the review of public administration. Matters will flow from that. The Budget has been put in place for the next three years; there needs to be modernisation of local government, and that requires investment. However, the sums required can be dealt with through in-year monitoring, and focused on activities that will be of benefit.

There must be much greater co-operation between local government and central Government to ensure that there is proper delivery. All Members can point to parts of the Province where, in the past, Government buildings, one after another, have been put side-by-side and there has been no efficiency of delivery. However, the Budget concentrates on delivery. Performance and efficiency delivery units (PEDU) will lead to savings.

Indeed, it is hoped that the pressure on Departments to generate efficiency savings of 3% will result in resources being targeted to where they are most needed — the front-line delivery of services. Therefore, there is much to commend in the Budget.

2.45 pm

Through its amendment, the Alliance Party has taken a rather predictable path. It maintains that recovering the cost of division is the silver bullet that will cure all social ills — it is as though a wave of that magic wand will produce immediate savings. I am reminded of the idea that the Liberal Democrats had in the 1980s of increasing income tax by 1p. The plan was that, as time went by, that increase would pay for more and more services. It seems that some think that finding an immediate cure to the cost of division is the magic solution to every social ill.

I look forward to the Supplementary Estimates, when the Alliance Party will actually put some meat on the bones of its proposals and make suggestions. If money is to be diverted to other activities, let us hear where that party wants to make changes, what schools it wants to close and what roads it does not want to be built. Let us hear what concrete proposals it is prepared to make.

Although the Alliance Party is wrong in its assertion that recovering the cost of division is the magic solution, at least it deserves credit for its consistency. It might be consistently wrong, but at least it is consistent. Indeed, the party has sounded like a stuck record throughout the lifetime of this Assembly.

However, at least there is a little bit of logic in its position, unlike that of the party opposite, the SDLP, whose Minister agreed with the Budget. Not only did she agree with the elements of the Budget that affect her Department, she agreed with the Budget in its entirety. Like a family pet that is adopted at Christmas and abandoned on Boxing Day once the children are tired playing with it, Margaret Ritchie has been abandoned

by the Members opposite. She will cut a lonely figure when she walks through the Aye Lobby.

It is clear that the SDLP is playing games with the Budget. It is trying to have its cake and eat it. It is trying to be part of the Government, trying to claim whatever successes emerge from the Budget, particularly those that emerge from the Department for Social Development, while saying “nothing to do with me, guv”, as though it had nothing to do with the Budget. In fact, the SDLP has demonstrated political immaturity on the issue. It has pretended, Pontius Pilate-like, to wash its hands of the Budget while allowing its own Minister to traipse through the Aye Lobby in its favour. That shows that its stance is fundamentally flawed.

The people of Northern Ireland will welcome the Budget. It is a Budget for business and economic growth, and it will deliver for everyone.

Mr Beggs: I am amazed at the Alliance Party’s amendment, which calls for a revised programme of expenditure to be developed at this late stage. The amendment does not even mention specific financial amendments that ought to be made to the Budget.

There seems to be a complete lack of understanding about how late the Budget is already. It is normally completed in December, but it has been delayed until January because of the comprehensive spending review. It must be understood that the process involves not just finalising departmental budgets. For example, once the education budget has been finalised, the Department of Education must cascade its allocation to the various boards. When will schools find out how much money they are getting? It takes time for money to be cascaded down through Departments. Therefore, there are dangers in delaying a final judgement on the Budget.

If the Alliance Party is dissatisfied with issues in the Budget, why did it not propose specific amendments that could have been debated? Is it merely copying the DUP of old by tabling token amendments just so that it can vote against the Budget? Some people might call that grandstanding.

The Ulster Unionist Party contributed to the draft Budget by giving constructive criticism and by seeking further information. The Finance Minister and me have been involved in some toing and froing on the lack of evidence of a financial package. The contentious nature of the Budget shows that it is obvious that there is little evidence of a £1 billion financial package. The Assembly was promised that the outcomes of the Varney Review would boost Northern Ireland’s economic prospects. However, Varney I failed to deliver anything of note, and that has spawned Varney II.

Earlier, Mitchel McLaughlin criticised the achievements of David Trimble and Mark Durkan during their engagements with the Treasury. However, they gained access to reinvestment and reform initiative funding,

and many valuable former army bases were to be given to Northern Ireland's Executive to benefit the local economy. By comparison, the "Chuckle Brothers" seem to have gained little from their solo visit to London.

I wish to return to some other remaining areas of concern.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Yes.

Mrs D Kelly: Success — it just goes to show that one should try, try and try again. I thank the Member for giving way. Will he agree that it was the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP who set up the Strategic Investment Board — a point that has been forgotten by the DUP and Sinn Féin? They voted against having the board; yet it now forms the core of their economic development and investment strategies.

Mr Beggs: It is amazing how some parties can do speedy U-turns when they realise their errors.

There is no agreed method for water charging and for ensuring affordability, and I ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Minister for Regional Development to state why it is taking so long to formulate detailed financial proposals on what is facing the people. Budget proposals will impact on water charging, and it is disappointing that, nine months after devolution, no firm proposals are available. Clearly, those who are responsible for finance and water must answer for that.

Although I accept that the Northern Ireland public has been paying for water through the rating system, and will continue to pay for water, I would like to make it clear that the Ulster Unionist Party does not support water payments that will be based solely on the value of houses. Aside from the inequality of such a proposal, it also fails to address the EU water framework directive, which requires water conservation measures to result from the charging mechanism.

Northern Ireland Water and the water regulator have expressed concerns about the achievability of the 40% efficiency target, and I understand that it has been reduced to 35%. Is the target achievable in the short term? What will happen if it is not achieved?

Much of the capital investment discussed in the Assembly concerns releasing existing capital and reinvesting it, and more work needs to be done in that area. However, the Assembly is still blind as far as the report that was passed to the Minister of Finance and Personnel in December is concerned. As that report will have major implications for capital funding proposals, when will it be published, and why has it been withheld prior to the debate on the Budget? When will the assets be sold, and will they reach their true value?

Significant sums of money are contained in the Budget to redevelop land formerly used by the Northern Ireland

Office and the Ministry of Defence and to assist in improving sporting infrastructure prior to the 2012 Olympic Games. I hope to see the full business case for the proposed stadium at the Maze soon, and I hope that details have not been withheld deliberately so as to enable funding to be included in the Budget.

Mr S Wilson: This is a totally new revelation from the Ulster Unionist Party. Did the Member say that he was looking forward to seeing the business case for a stadium at the Maze? Is this one of the Ulster Unionist Party's new policies?

Mr Beggs: Would the Member allow me to finish my point? I urge that full infrastructure costs are included in such a business case because there is potential for much folly in talking solely about a stadium. It is important that the full implications of creating an efficient transport system to, and from, such a stadium are included. I suspect that when that is done, it will put a huge question mark over the proposals.

Significant capital underfunding has resulted from delays in the planning system in Northern Ireland. Will that continue to happen, or will it be possible to ensure a six-month turnaround of capital investment proposals to ensure that we, in turn, will not incur underspending and mismanagement of public funding?

I share the views that Declan O'Loan expressed on domestic rates. The Finance Minister claims that the Budget will make households in Northern Ireland £1,000 better off. On 23 January 2008, in 'The Irish News', Graeme Harrison, a leading economist with Oxford Economics, challenged that claim. He said that it was difficult to pin down:

"exactly how civil servants arrived at their figure of £1,000".

Householders will not feel better off by £1,000 when they experience the full cost of water bills, the charges of which are lined up for significant increases in future years. We would be better off without the spin.

During the run-up to the Budget, I asked a number of written and oral questions to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on departmental funding and North/South bodies. One question has not been answered and remains of concern to me: what is the purpose of the huge increase in funding under the heading of "Support for Government and other services"? In 2001-02, £9.273 million was allocated under that heading, and in 2006-07, that allocation was £13.529 million. In the Budget for 2007-08, the NIO conveniently increased that figure by 40% to £18.93 million, which is more than double the amount that was allocated during the last period of devolution. I continue to seek further information on that matter, and I will continue to monitor that situation and to seek an assurance that money is being well spent — but I have considerable concerns that it is not.

In the past, the DUP has conveniently used paltry sums — for example, its removal of approximately £1 million from funding for North/South bodies — to justify an amendment and to vote against a Budget as a grandstanding, spoiling mechanism. Along with my Ulster Unionist colleagues, I do not wish to adopt a spoiling mechanism, although we could justifiably do so. We do not want to spoil, but we will continue to monitor and question expenditure.

We accept that we have a role to play in giving stability to the critical Budget process, and, therefore, to the stability of Northern Ireland, which will enable economic progress. We would not be thanked if, during the run-up to the economic conference that is planned for May 2008, we were to expose Northern Ireland as fragile. Therefore, it is important that we all take difficult decisions. From that point of view, I support the Budget.

Mr P Ramsey: It is a pity that Peter Weir and Simon Hamilton are not in the Chamber, but in response to their comments, I point out that the SDLP has made no eleventh-hour conversion on its position on the Budget or Programme for Government. We have been clear about the need for a consistent, constructive and responsible approach in the Chamber, outside the Chamber, and at Committee level. The SDLP amendment highlights the areas of the Budget that we are concerned about. We will not be censored or silenced, and we will certainly not be bullied into submission by any other party. We are a democratic party, and we have the right to raise issues that are of concern to us.

As the SDLP spokesperson on culture, arts and leisure, I will focus on sport and the arts. The SDLP places a high value on sport at individual, community, regional, national and international levels. Sport contributes to the physical and mental health of people and communities; it helps to build community cohesion and esteem; it helps to build regional and national recognition and reputation; and, internationally, it has an ambassadorial role to play through sports people, teams and supporters. When those factors are considered, the benefits of sport represent a strong return on the investment that is made.

The SDLP also recognises the immense contribution that volunteers make to sporting and community bodies across Northern Ireland.

3.00 pm

Sport probably attracts more voluntary effort than any other sector, and that effort provides immense added value to Government spending. We are concerned that sport has not been allocated the necessary funding. The investment strategy for Northern Ireland states that the Executive:

“will invest in a range of new, and improved sports facilities to a standard comparable with other similar UK regions, providing world

class facilities and places for playing and watching sport that are accessible to all.”

That worthy aim will prove difficult, given the capital allocation to sport over the next three years. The SDLP is concerned that sport will be under-resourced in capital and revenue allocations. That will have a negative impact on our ability to implement the draft strategy for sport and physical recreation, which went out to public consultation in October 2007. The Government will be unable to deliver the stadia safety programme, and the ability to deliver 10 Olympic centres of excellence will also be seriously jeopardised. No money will be made available from central Government to build community sports facilities, and there will be no money for local rugby, soccer or Gaelic football clubs. Although officials from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure tell us that if the Maze project goes ahead, the Department of Finance and Personnel will receive £80 million, some of which may be ploughed back into sport, that is a nonsense.

The draft sports strategy is wide-ranging, covering sport from community to international level. Although many groups are critical of aspects of the strategy, there is no doubt that its scale and potential benefits are ambitious. The capital that is required to deliver the strategy from 2008-2011 is £260 million. Those are not my figures. Only £112 million is allocated in the Budget, leaving a shortfall of more than 50%. The draft sports strategy requires revenue funding of £101 million, but the Budget allocates £34 million, which amounts to a shortfall of almost 70%.

There are serious concerns about the ability to deliver on important areas of the draft sports strategy, such as the sports stadiums safety programme, Olympic centres of excellence and community facilities. Over the past seven years, the stadia safety programme has delivered health and safety improvements at major sports grounds across Northern Ireland. The Budget makes no provision whatsoever for a continued programme of investment in our major sports grounds. Whether those grounds be Windsor Park or Derry City's Brandywell Stadium, there is no money in the Budget for them.

The Scott Report of 1997 established that investment of £30 million was required in order to bring our sports grounds up to standard. Inflation and increased standards have now overtaken that figure, but, to date, the Government have only invested £6.3 million, through Sport Northern Ireland.

As a result of historical failures of Government to invest properly in sports grounds and the absence of funding in the Budget, grounds will fail to meet the standards that The Safety of Sports Grounds (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 and the Green Guide imposed. In order to comply with statutory health and safety requirements, grounds will be forced to reduce greatly their

capacity, and, in other instances, they may have to close down. That will have obvious implications for Northern Ireland's ability to market itself as a region of sporting excellence. It will limit our ability to host international sporting events, including our ability to host football matches during the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Under direct rule, £53 million was set aside for centres of excellence in the elite facilities programme. That programme is intended to ensure that Northern Ireland benefits from, and contributes to, the legacy of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. A target was set to attract 10 international teams to Northern Ireland for acclimatisation and pre-Games training. That will involve building 10 new, world-class sporting facilities and attracting world-class coaches and other sports-related specialists to Northern Ireland. However, the Budget reduces that commitment from £53 million to £35 million, and, out of that £35 million, £15 million has been committed to the provision of a 50-metre swimming pool in north Down. That leaves only £20 million to build the other 10 centres.

From my discussions with Sport Northern Ireland, I understand that there will be no money available for the construction of community facilities between 2008 and 2011. If new or improved facilities are to be made available locally, they will have to be built by the local authorities, and the increased pressures on ratepayers will be significant.

The Budget's allocation to sport falls short of the requirements of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's draft sport strategy. That will have a number of negative effects. We will not achieve the target participation levels in sport across the demographic groups and will, therefore, miss opportunities to improve health and well-being and to target social need at individual and community level. The people of Northern Ireland will fail to achieve the potential sports legacy of the 2012 Olympic Games. Furthermore, the international competitiveness of Northern Ireland athletes will be disadvantaged.

The Minister will be aware that, during the consultation process on the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget, almost 50% of those who contributed talked about the lack of money, funding and leadership in the arts and sports fraternities. The allocation of £1.5 million to the arts is a minimal approach.

It is an indictment of historical governance that the arts have fallen so far behind, compared to other regions. The arts are considered important in the Republic of Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England. They contribute to a region's attractiveness as a place to invest, and they contribute significantly and directly to the economy through many creative industries and product design. That is why Governments in Scotland and the Republic

of Ireland spend twice as much per capita on the arts as we do. When will we invest properly in our historical and excellent culture? Why are we not doing so already? We know what investment is required, so why are we not investing in our own people and heritage, as other regions are doing?

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland said that for an extra £10 million pounds a year, it could raise spending to a level similar to that of the Republic of Ireland and Scotland. For that sum, the Arts Council could have levered in additional millions of pounds and put the region on the map. There was an opportunity to deliver that in the Programme for Government. It has not happened in this Budget — we are still the poor relation, and our performance will continue to be substandard and second-class. It is not too late to change that situation, and I hope that in his review — whatever its duration might be — the Minister will decide to make the required and proper investment in all communities.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat. Although there has been support from most of the parties for the Budget and the departmental increases that the Executive has endorsed, Members must keep their feet firmly on the ground. While the revised Budget appears to have delivered the resources required for most Departments, it once again highlights the serious deficiencies in the infrastructure inherited from direct rule Ministers and shows up the underinvestment that existed for many years.

Serious problems have been stored up for us in the area of housing. In every survey that has been carried out on these islands, housing has featured as one of the top three issues of major concern. The serious problems in the housing sector are not a new phenomenon; they have been with us for many years. The lack of investment or any type of strategy to tackle the housing crisis is an indictment of those direct rule Ministers who held the relevant portfolio over the years.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: No, I have not got enough time.

The housing crisis is real, and it affects everyone, from the very young to the very old: those who have been priced out of ever owning a home because the market was speculator-led, which put the price of houses well out of their reach, and those who have been on housing waiting lists for years with no hope of getting a house because not enough social houses were being built. I am glad that the argument about the Budget is coming to an end, because it is hiding a real question about housing: how will we end the housing crisis? What strategy will be brought before the Assembly that will lead us out of the nightmare?

Although the Minister of Finance has said that there will be increases in the Budget for the Department for Social Development to allow the building of 1,500,

1,750 and 2,000 new, welcome, social houses over the lifetime of the Budget, there is still a gap between what is required to deal with the housing crisis and what is detailed in the Budget.

If we are to make a difference to — and an impact on — the ever-growing waiting list, at least £200 million a year will be required for the foreseeable future. However, that does not necessarily mean money from the Department of Finance. In fact, the way is now clear for the Minister for Social Development to tell Members what she will do. For months, she has hidden behind the Budget and accused her Executive colleagues of not giving her the necessary money. She cannot hide behind that excuse any longer, but must explain how she will spend her departmental budget, in addition to providing the House with information about the further measures that she will bring to the table. There can now be no excuse for not producing an effective strategy to provide the required housing. For months, we have listened to the Minister telling us how, given the money, she would deal with the housing crisis.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: No. She has been given the money — let us see what she can deliver. Sinn Féin's, the DUP's and other parties' Ministers — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker, is there any chance of some order?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr F McCann: By providing the required finance, Sinn Féin, DUP and other parties' Ministers have delivered on their promises to prioritise housing, and Margaret Ritchie signed off on that commitment. We await the result of that commitment in the form of her action plan.

Members must remember that 21,000 people a year declare themselves homeless, and that rate has been growing each year. The stark reality of the problem is that the waiting list stands at upwards of 36,000 people.

Housing shortages are cross-cutting and impact on every aspect of people's lives. Being homeless can affect people's mental well-being, their employment prospects and their — and their children's — education attainment. Having a home allows one to grow as a person and gives one the dignity and confidence to build for the future.

Across the state, Members can see the legacy of previous Administrations and the extent of the job that must be done. Department for Social Development housing statistics from 2002-03 to 2006-07 show that 10,832 people have faced actions to repossess their houses because of mortgage arrears.

For the past several years, the social-housing new-build programme has had little impact throughout the North. Between 2004-05 and 2006-07, six new social

houses were built in Omagh; three were built in Magherafelt; none in Ballymoney; one in Limavady; none in Moyle; 27 in Strabane; and five in Cookstown. Those are some of the shocking statistics that illustrate the housing mess that we are in.

Members must ask how they can make a difference for the person who is sleeping on the street because he or she has nowhere to go; for people who have been in hostels for years because too few houses are being built; for people in private-rental accommodation that is unsuitable for their needs and who are paying over the odds; for young people who cannot afford to get a mortgage; or for couples whose mortgage payment accounts for two thirds of their monthly income. Those are the realities that the Assembly must face, but what is the solution?

All Members share the responsibility of bringing our people out of that crisis, and that is why it is crucial that the Minister for Social Development brings her strategy to the table. We must know what has been done in the eight months since she took office. What are the results and recommendations from the review group's deliberations?

We argued that article 40 of The Planning Order 1991 should have been tackled first and should have been a key element in providing a steady flow of social and affordable houses. Is the Co-ownership Housing Association to be the only option in the affordable-housing sector, or will the Minister take on board the necessity of broadening the sector in order to allow different approaches for different situations?

In the provision of social-rented houses, can we expect, as has been suggested, a wider remit for the private-rental sector — an uncontrolled sector with few real restrictions on how business is conducted, and which is paid huge amounts of money by the Government? Has the Minister approached the construction industry to ascertain how it can deliver, as it did in England? The benefits are twofold — the Assembly invests huge sums of money in various projects, and the bartering of land for houses has been widely used. It will be interesting to see what the Minister has done to encourage that industry to be a partner in the provision of social and affordable housing.

That would also give a much-needed lift to the wider community through the creation of new jobs in a renewed construction sector.

In her press statement yesterday, the Minister said that the Budget is much better than the original; it is better for those on waiting lists, the homeless and those who want to reach the first rung on the ladder. The time for talking is over — let us see what the Minister can deliver. Go raibh maith agat.

3.15 pm

Mr S Wilson: In case anyone interrupts me during my speech, I want to make it clear that I am not speaking as the Chairperson of the Education Committee. I intend to be totally partisan and party political and to address some of the issues that the Alliance Party and SDLP have raised.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr S Wilson: To avoid any unnecessary points of order or interruptions, I want to make that clear from the start. The amendments — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order.

Mr Dallat: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. How will Members know if Mr Sammy Wilson is being partisan?

Mr S Wilson: The Member will find out in a minute or two. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order.

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is the Member minded to give way if an interesting point arises during his remarks?

Mr S Wilson: Provided that time is added on, I am happy to give way. Members will welcome that. I will examine the Alliance Party amendment first. Members are used to regarding the Alliance Party as the eccentric party, which almost invites people to poke fun at it. However, Dr Farry excelled himself today; when it comes to establishing the Alliance Party's role as a haven for political crackpots or to developing the art of kamikaze politics, he has done his party proud. Let us look at the Alliance Party's policies for Northern Ireland.

Mr Cobain: Why does the Member look at me when he says that?

Mr S Wilson: The Member is getting very close to the Alliance Party. Dr Farry lamented that the Budget is a low-tax one — the message to taxpayers in Northern Ireland is that, if they vote for the Alliance Party, they will have their pockets picked through more tax. That is a great policy, and the electorate will be very happy to vote on it at the next election. Dr Farry even took on the CBI; although the CBI called for a reduction in business rates and provided good justification for that, he says that it is the wrong direction to go in. Dr Farry says the Government should tax people and spend more.

The next remark, which the leader of the Alliance Party may not have heard, was that farmers get too much — farmers in South Antrim will not be pleased to hear that. All I ever hear is that farmers do not get enough, and that they have a hard time. Those are the type of groups that the Alliance Party will appeal to. The Alliance Party wants to get its hands deeper into taxpayers' pockets and cut the Budget allocation to farmers. Its representatives then have the cheek to say

that they want to spend more money in 15 areas such as health, the arts, sport, public transport and the environment. However, they do not want any assets to be sold to facilitate that. The Assembly does not have any tax-raising powers, and Mr Ford may want to address that later. Perhaps he wants income tax powers here, as well. To finance that spending wish list without selling assets, we will have to dip into ratepayers' pockets.

Members have had only a 10-minute glimpse of the Alliance Party's economic strategy. After hearing from the both the Alliance Party and the Minister of Finance and Personnel, I guarantee that the voters of Northern Ireland have not been left with much of a choice.

It will be very easy to see which Budget the electorate will vote for — and it will not be for Alliance voodoo economics, but for the real compromises that have been found in the Budget process by the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

I now move to the SDLP amendment. It is clear that the SDLP is embarrassed about its stance. When I have done wrong by somebody, it is usually by damning them with faint praise. I notice that when the Member for North Antrim Mr O'Loan was making his speech, he did the same by making six references to the great job that Margaret Ritchie had done — before adding, as an afterthought, that he was going to vote against everything that she had talked about, agreed, and voted for in the Budget process. The SDLP did the same to her yesterday.

I went through the Lobby with the Minister last night, and she looked rather forlorn. I could have been wrong, but I thought that I heard her mournfully humming the tune to the words, "Sometimes it's hard to be a woman". I have to say that given the type of leader she has, it must be very hard. She was rather more cheerful this morning, mind you — she must have been singing that Cliff Richard song, "We Don't Talk Anymore" as she was walking down the corridors.

I heard the SDLP leader defending the Minister on the radio this morning, and I was wondering whether he should be called "Brutus" Durkan rather than Mark Durkan because it did not seem to be much of a defence. Yesterday, the SDLP praised the Minister but lamented that there was not enough money for social enterprise and voluntary groups. Most of the finance for that comes from the Department for Social Development, therefore the Minister must not have fought hard enough for funding. I know that the SDLP has to find some excuse, now that it has decided to be in Government and in opposition. However, today its amendment talks about there being no budgetary line for key policy developments including an anti-poverty strategy.

The leader of the SDLP, who has also been Minister of Finance and Personnel, knows full well that one cannot have a budgetary line relating to an anti-poverty

strategy because such a strategy embraces a number of Departments. It embraces the Department for Social Development, as regards fuel poverty, the warm homes scheme, and the actions being taken on urban regeneration and in deprived areas. It also embraces the Department of Education as regards early-years provision and the extended schools programme. It embraces the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, which is trying to get people back into work — surely the best way to get people out of poverty. It will embrace the Department for Employment and Learning, which is helping to train people who are finding it difficult to get work in order to get them on the route to a job. There is not going to be an anti-poverty line.

Mr Durkan: I do not see an anti-poverty strategy either.

Mr S Wilson: I hear the Member speaking from a sedentary position. The work will be cross-departmental. All of the things that I have mentioned are being financed by the Budget and have been included in the Programme for Government. It is a fairly weak and transparent argument to say that, just because one doesn't see something, it must not exist. I do not think that that message has gotten across to the rest of the SDLP — and I do not want to embarrass the party's education spokesman, who is sitting behind his leader.

Some Members: Go on.

Mr S Wilson: OK, I will.

SDLP Members lament that there has been an abandonment of cross-cutting funds for young people; for example, the children's fund. That was a fund that one could delve into, and make funding applications for, and get money for programmes that lasted two or three years — and then when that time was over, the programmes fell flat, and there was no continuity.

In the Education Committee, the SDLP —
[*Interruption.*]

I see that the Minister for Social Development has entered the Chamber — she must have heard me talking about her. Let me assure the Minister that I was saying nice things about her and upbraiding those cruel people who have abandoned her. I do not know whether she has her arms around her colleagues' shoulders or around their necks. [*Laughter.*]

In the Education Committee, the SDLP supported other members of the Committee's view that the kind of one-off funds for programmes that last two or three years and are then abandoned when they are just starting to work are not the best use of financial resources. It is better to mainstream much of that money, and that is exactly what the Budget seeks to do. Rather than using those other means of expenditure, the money is put into mainstream Departments so that they can plan, project

and ensure continuity. For those reasons, I support the Budget and oppose the amendment.

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

Members, in case you are not quite sure, Mr Wilson was not speaking as Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I notice that you did not give Sammy Wilson extra time for being entertaining, Mr Deputy Speaker. He needed it.

Sinn Féin supports the Budget and does not support the amendments. Our response to the Budget is not, and cannot be, made in isolation from the political and financial realities that confront the Executive and the Assembly. We welcomed the debate yesterday on the Programme for Government and the ISNI strategy, and the watchwords for all of the Executive's policies have been, and will continue to be, "fairness", "inclusion" and "equality". Notwithstanding, there are a number of major obstacles to the progressive development and delivery by the Executive of a new social, economic and political reality.

At an overarching level, Sinn Féin believes that there must be a redistributive dynamic in the Executive's financial and political policies that recognises that economic sovereignty, economic prosperity and economic equality are all linked. It is a collective responsibility. A united response from all the political parties to the economic realities and financial limitations that confront us will have much more effect on the national and international stage than narrow political posturing.

Sinn Féin has a number of concerns, but that will not stop it endorsing the Budget today. It will not support PFI/PPP arrangements in education and healthcare. Private partners can have no say in the management of schools and hospitals, and they have no power to affect levels of public-service provision. All employees of PFI/PPP projects should be retained in the public sector and civil servants instructed to find appropriate ways of achieving that — for example, by defining them as "clinical staff". All PFI/PPP contractors must comply fully with the legislation and promote equality. Sinn Féin has insisted on the fullest and deepest application of the section 75 equality duty by the Executive in relation to any of those projects.

Currently, the community and voluntary sector is starved of funding. That difficulty is exacerbated by many groups having to wait on decisions about Peace III funding, with no alternative measures to sustain their projects, even though those have been central to delivering opportunities for community health programmes, training and development, education, and the promotion of good relations and initiatives for children and young people.

The ongoing grief and trauma experienced by survivors and victims of political violence must be recognised and resourced on an equal and equitable basis. That is particularly important in relation to addressing the legacy of the conflict through inter- and intra-community initiatives. Yesterday, we heard about the funds that will be allocated to victims' and survivors' groups for services and support. That is most welcome. All members of the Executive must be imaginative and creative about resourcing and retaining the skills and expertise that have been acquired in the community and voluntary sector and that have helped to promote and sustain citizenship and peace. That contribution must not go unnoticed.

The health budget, in particular, has been the subject of much debate. As stated previously, we are faced with a number of financial realities and constraints. We highlighted that the health and social-care provision, which suffered from underinvestment for decades under successive British direct rule Administrations, must be challenged.

The Health Minister has challenges ahead, as do all Ministers. Those challenges must be met in a constructive and innovative manner in partnership with patients, health professionals and trade-union representatives.

I welcome the additional money that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will receive, particularly the priority given to additional resources by monitoring rounds.

3.30 pm

Sinn Féin will support further investment in the Health Service throughout the lifetime of the Executive. Such investment must target front-line services, including community and primary-care services, and not just acute services.

The health profile of those in the North is a disgrace. Discrimination, poverty and social exclusion are the legacy of consecutive British direct rule Administrations.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ní Chuilín: No, I will not.

To bring an end to unacceptably poor health statistics, we must reach a balance in how we invest in, and deal with, ill health, and how we invest in the eradication of social and economic issues that cause so much ill health.

Mr Durkan: Go with the flow.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The long-term improvement in the population's health can be achieved only by tackling the root causes of discrimination, poverty and social exclusion, and that must be done. Sinn Féin calls on all Departments to set about ensuring that investment for health becomes the cornerstone of their work. Failure

to do so will condemn future generations to a continuing environment of ill health.

Health is an area of co-operation under the Good Friday Agreement. It is intended that all people should benefit, and that co-operation should be exploited to its maximum potential, especially in those communities that straddle the border.

There must be ongoing commitment in the Assembly and the Executive to delivering equality, above the European and domestic legal requirements, for those with disabilities.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ní Chuilín: No, the Member will not.

One in five people in the North has some form of disability, and one in four families is directly affected by disability. Sinn Féin will continue to demand equitable health service provision across the full range of services.

All areas of the health service are worthy of mention; however, we wish to emphasise a few. Sinn Féin supports the full implementation of the Bamford Review for Mental Health and Learning Difficulties. Sinn Féin has consistently called for proper funding for suicide awareness, alongside proper family and community support in those services.

It is time that the role of carers in our society was recognised, and Sinn Féin welcomes the action that has been taken; however, we must all do more. There is an urgent and compelling case for the development of North-West cross-border cancer care, and for a radiotherapy facility to be established in conjunction with the Department of Health and Children.

Sinn Féin will continue to engage with the various health sectors and, through membership of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, to demand delivery of those services.

Sinn Féin secured the commitment on language for equality, and, specifically, the commitment to allocate resources, which will now be based on the outcome of equality impact assessment.

Sinn Féin has written equality into the heart of not only the Programme for Government investment strategy but into the Budget. While others grandstand and play juvenile party politics, when they step away from the demands of political leadership, we have secured demands that can be seen in this and future Budgets. I support the motion.

Mr McQuillan: It is with great pleasure that I support the Budget. The last year was one of historic proportions, and the delivery of a Budget that targets Northern Ireland's most important and historically underfunded sectors in receipt of public finances — and by a Northern Ireland Finance Minister — should not be underestimated.

Funding has always been, and always will be, required for public sector services, and, in Northern Ireland, the priorities were never fully recognised under direct rule. We now have tangible proof that locally elected politicians understand the people that they represent and their priorities. An extensive commitment to social housing; the freezing of the regional rate; new water mains and sewerage systems; funding to attract and encourage new business in Northern Ireland; 13 new trains and 200 new buses are only some of the priorities identified, and only some of what has been achieved in the eight months since devolution. What makes that more incredible is the fact that it has been achieved by a four-party Executive.

No Minister has been given all of the funding he or she desired. That will never happen, because the Executive pot has a bottom and, no matter how the Finance Minister may try, he cannot make money appear that does not exist — although I am sure that he wishes he could. The Budget, therefore, entails the Minister's having to do his very best with the funding at his disposal. That means that every penny spent must produce more, as well as greater savings being made in Departments.

This Budget will result in businesses receiving more encouragement to establish in Northern Ireland, which will be of immense benefit to people who are not presently working — a situation that is relevant to my own constituency.

Funding for rural transport will ensure that services will be maintained for those who live in country areas of Northern Ireland. However, the biggest impact for rural residents, especially the older population, will be felt in the lowering of the eligible age for free public transport to 60 years of age. Those are most important steps in ensuring that rural populations do not suffer social exclusion due to poor access to public transport and lower incomes that restrict their ability to use the transport that is available.

The welcome announcement of additional funding for social housing covers rural and urban areas. That is a most encouraging start in making sure that all who need a home will have one. It will take time to achieve that aim, but the money that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has allocated is a great start.

I congratulate the Minister of Finance and Personnel on achieving so much with so little. The Assembly is delivering for the people of Northern Ireland, and I hope that the Budget will be unanimously supported by all Members.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain): The Committee for Regional Development, like other Committees, has spent considerable time discussing the Budget over the past few months. On behalf of the Committee for

Regional Development, I thank all those individuals and stakeholder organisations who generously placed their time and expertise at the disposal of the Committee during its deliberations.

With the exception of £40 million in additional funding for roads investment in year three, the final departmental budget remains largely unchanged from the levels that were allocated in the draft Budget stage. The development allocation for the Department in the final Budget remains insufficient to meet the infrastructural, economic, social and environmental needs of Northern Ireland.

The allocations for structural maintenance in the Budget period are £125 million short of the £110 million per annum identified in the structural maintenance funding plan. The Committee is concerned about the road safety consequences of continued underfunding in that area. Those risks were highlighted in the most recent Roads Service annual report and accounts.

The Committee's view is that supplementing inadequate Budget allocations with bids from in-year monitoring is not a viable long-term strategy for funding structural maintenance programmes, although funding from any source is welcome. The Committee will be urging for additional funding for structural roads maintenance through the in-year monitoring process and through future Budget rounds. Investment in road infrastructures is essential to the social and economic well-being of Northern Ireland.

A good quality road network is crucial to improving journey times in Northern Ireland, connectivity to and from our ports and airports, and facilitating business, tourism and balanced regional development. In addition, a substantial amount of our public transport is road-based, and access to health and social services, employment, education and training and cultural and sporting activities depend on an adequate, sustainable, safe and effective roads network.

The Committee remains concerned that the final Budget allocation of £608 million for roads capital is significantly below the "low scenario" of £1 billion in year one to year three in the draft investment strategy programme. The Committee notes that a welcome addition of £40 million has been allocated in year three of the Budget period, allowing Roads Service to progress a number of schemes in that year. However, the Committee will continue to press for increased roads allocations in light of the importance of connectivity and free-flowing road networks to continued economic development in Northern Ireland.

Like roads infrastructure, a good-quality integrated network of bus and rail transport services is a key element in underpinning economic development and access to education, employment, leisure and social

services. Investment in public transport also brings environmental benefits in the form of reduced carbon emissions and reduced landscape, air and noise pollution.

Investment in buses and trains in recent years has made public transport a more attractive option, and has helped generate an increase in passenger journeys. However, there has been a persistent underspend in public transport infrastructure in the past. In addition, less than half of the public-transport bids that were submitted were successful in the final Budget, despite the fact that we heard support in the House last week from all parties for increased funding for the public-transport network.

The Committee is determined to address a number of other issues. Members are aware that provision for preparatory work on the Belfast to Londonderry rail line has been made in the Budget. The Committee recommends that urgent action be undertaken on that line as soon as possible. The Committee is also keen to see the extension of concessionary fares to people with a disability and those returning to work after a period of long-term unemployment; improved provision for those with disabilities, especially those in rural areas, in accessing concessionary fares or free public transport; and hourly bus services in more of Northern Ireland's towns and villages.

The Committee will continue to press for additional funding for public transport, including rural transport services.

I turn to environmental concerns. There is little evidence of the radical rethink of policies that is needed to deliver the 60% to 80% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050, which was the target identified by the Prime Minister in his speech of 19 November 2007. Given the impact of public and private transport on levels of carbon emissions and on air, environmental and noise pollution, the Committee is worried that DRD's role in that area has not been recognised at all in the Budget.

The Department is finalising plans to deliver efficiency savings of £22 million, £44 million and £65 million over the three-year Budget period. The Committee's view is that efficiencies must not be achieved at the expense of public services, public and road safety, and progress on planned infrastructural investments.

Finally, the Executive have yet to make a number of decisions on the outstanding issues that arose from strand one of the review report by the Independent Water Review Panel, as well as those that arose from strand two. Those issues include: the level of efficiency targets and their achievability; the level of the affordability tariff and its tenure; the financing of Northern Ireland Water; the funding of roads drainage; and the partial waiver of the dividend. The budgetary implications of those decisions should not fall to DRD's budget, but should be funded directly by the Executive.

I wish to make a few personal points. I want to reiterate my strong opposition to the way in which rates and water charges are being handled. In his Budget statement of last week, the Minister of Finance and Personnel said:

"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." — *[Official Report, Vol 26, No 7, p314, col 1]*.

I can tell the Minister that tens of thousands of pensioners, working poor, near-benefit-level families, and people with disabilities who rely mainly on benefits will have to pay a water tax for the first time, and they will certainly not be £1,000 better off. The new tax will have a substantial and damaging impact on their already fragile living standards.

However, at the same time, we are faced with the unedifying spectacle of an affordability tariff for the rich, such that millionaires whose homes are worth over £400,000 will get their rates and water charges subsidised by the poor. Thus, the poor will pay more, and the rich will pay less than they should. It is disgraceful and obscene that burdens are being lifted from those who are best able to pay, while heavier burdens are being placed on the poor, who are least able to pay. That is morally and politically reprehensible. We are witnessing Thatcherism reborn, whereby the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, and that is opening up deep social inequalities that have never properly healed. Those measures are being carried out under the guise of being business friendly, but that is no excuse. The Assembly must also be about social justice. The transformation of our society will never be achieved by exploiting and disregarding the poor and the less well off.

The new water tax will have knock-on effects. The list of those in need of social housing grows ever longer. Although I welcome the additional £205 million that the Minister for Social Development received in the revised allocation that the Finance Minister announced last week, I must sound a note of caution. That additional money is insufficient to meet the growing demand. The targets set by Sir John Semple in his review of affordable housing of 2,000 new social homes a year will not be met. In year 1, the target in the Budget is 500 short, in year 2, it is 250 short, and it reaches the Semple review level only in year 3.

How can the Executive claim that they subscribe to the targets set by Semple, particularly given that the Minister confirmed yesterday that there are currently 38,000 people who are classified as being in housing need, of which 21,000 are officially classified as homeless? Those figures will be further exacerbated by the introduction of a water tax. Many of the tenants in the private sector are already subsidising their housing benefit in order to pay their rent.

Any further increases in the form of a water tax will pass directly from the landlord to the tenant by way of a rent increase. There is little doubt that the figures quoted by the Minister yesterday can only increase and exacerbate an already desperate housing situation.

3.45 pm

Mr A Maginness: I was surprised by the Finance Minister's brutal honesty, but shocked by his statement that when he was a Minister during the previous mandate, his aim, and that of his DUP colleagues, was to bring down the Northern Ireland Executive and ensure its destruction. He clearly revelled in that most reprehensible strategy, and it is alarming that the DUP adopted such an approach at that time.

However, Members are grateful that he has been so blunt and honest. The SDLP has been accused of attacking, or undermining, the Executive, but it supports the political architecture of the Executive and the Assembly and will fight to maintain it. The SDLP is a member of the Executive as of right and agreed to a system of government in which everyone shares power. The SDLP will not be marginalised in any Executive: it will share power with everyone else, but will not be excluded from power by two parties that want to steamroll and press-gang the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP into a minority role, in which they will have virtually no say.

The SDLP will continue to fight for the rights of ordinary people in society. That is why the SDLP is opposed to the Budget, has tabled an amendment and is an honest party. The Back-Benchers in Sinn Féin and the DUP have rolled over and accepted the Budget, but the SDLP rejects it. It is not a people's Budget; it is a Thatcherite Budget. The Finance Minister is aware that Margaret Ritchie made that perfectly clear to the Executive when they were discussing the Budget.

Mr P Robinson: If members of the SDLP were beating their chests in the way the Member now describes, will he please explain to the House why its Minister did not put to the Executive any of the proposals that the SDLP says are essential? Why was there not a single amendment?

Mr A Maginness: Perhaps the Finance Minister does not understand that there are two —

Mrs I Robinson: Perhaps if the Member were to speak in French —

Mr A Maginness: The Member must wait for a moment.

There are two elements to this political set-up: the Executive and the Assembly. During the debate on the draft Budget, I said that the DUP, and indeed some Sinn Féin Members, wanted to turn the Assembly into the Supreme Soviet. It now appears that the DUP and

Sinn Féin want to turn the Executive into the politburo, because they want neither discussion nor dissent.

The SDLP will maintain its independent line in the Executive and the Assembly. As a party in the Assembly, the SDLP will not be bound by the dictates of Peter Robinson or anyone else in the Executive.

Mr P Robinson: Did the SDLP table an amendment?

Mr Durkan: The SDLP did table an amendment.

Mr P Robinson: The SDLP has not tabled an amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Continue, Mr Maginness.

Mr A Maginness: I am sorry, Peter, get some therapy in relation to all of this.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member should address his remarks through the Chair.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I ask that the Member withdraw his remark. If he does not, Mr Deputy Speaker, I ask you to consider the issue. It is up to you whether you do it now or whether the Speaker does it. That remark has to be withdrawn, or the Member should be withdrawn.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I was calling "Order", so I did not hear the remark. I will check Hansard and refer the matter to the Speaker, who will make a ruling at a later date.

Mr A Maginness: As I was saying, perhaps the Minister of Finance and Personnel does not understand that this is a democratic Assembly in which Members discuss and debate issues. I know that members of Sinn Féin do not take any interventions during their speeches, but this Assembly is a democratic institution in which Members debate things and table amendments. Members should not be shocked by amendments. Minister Ritchie expressed the SDLP's reservations at the Executive meeting, as Mr Robinson well knows. Therefore, nothing comes as a shock or a surprise to the Minister of Finance, any other Minister, or, indeed, any Member of the Assembly. We have clearly stated our position throughout this process.

On one hand, the Minister prides himself on receiving all sorts of submissions from the public asking about all sorts of changes to the draft Budget. However, when the SDLP makes reasonable propositions and reasonable criticisms of the draft Budget, they are dismissed. He says that we should not suggest such changes.

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: I will. However, I hope that I get more time.

Mr S Wilson: I hope that you do. If these amendments are serious —

Mr A Maginness: I have to finish.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member refused to give way. Extra time is granted only when the speech is of five minutes or less. Any speech over that length gets exactly the time that has been given, which in this case is 10 minutes.

Mr A Maginness: I hope that I am given extra time because of all the interruptions.

This is clearly not a people's Budget. It is a Thatcherite Budget. It is clear that no provision has been made for the children's fund. Incidentally, it is interesting to read Sinn Féin's submission on the draft Budget, which calls for an Executive fund for children. There is silence from Sinn Féin today on that issue. The SDLP is backing that call. Why does Sinn Féin not come into the Lobby with us and back us on that issue?

There are no clear lines of funding for an anti-poverty strategy. We have heard about post-primary education; however, the Budget makes no provision for that. The present Minister of Education — I emphasise the "present" — has said that post-primary education is cost-neutral. I want to see her assessments of that.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member will recall that on 4 December 2007 the Minister of Education announced that:

"We now have an opportunity to truly transform our system into one that is world class and fit for the twenty-first century."
— [*Official Report, Bound Volume 26, p7, col 2*].

As the Member has said, and, indeed, as the Minister of Finance has said, those reforms are to be cost-neutral. However, the three-year Budget does not provide any line for key policy developments, including the reform of post-primary education. Does the Member agree that it is difficult to build an education system that is world class and fit for the twenty-first century when the money is not available to do so, and when it was not even bid for?

Mr A Maginness: I agree entirely. I also agree with Mr Cobain that there is no clarity on water charging in the Budget. What is being planned? A water tax is being planned. They are going to sneak it through, despite all of the protests from the Sinn Féin Benches. Sinn Féin will simply bow down and accept that, because they are pushovers.

The Finance Minister has provided money for social and affordable housing, but it is not enough. As Mr Cobain rightly pointed out, the Semple targets will not be reached, because the Minister has not provided sufficient funding. There has been a good improvement, but not good enough.

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

There has been much talk about asset disposal, but too many eggs are being placed in one basket. What will happen if the bottom falls out of the market, or if

the international volatility continues and the entire strategy is undermined?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): I am going to be rather boring and mundane, because I shall stick to health issues. I do not apologise for that.

The proportion of overall Executive expenditure on health and social care is highlighted in the Budget, and the Health Committee concurs with the view that one of the most significant issues facing the present and future Executives will be the priority that should be given to health and social services, compared to other public services.

The Health Committee devoted considerable time and energy over a five-week period to examining the proposals in the draft Budget in some detail. In addition to departmental officials and the Minister, the Committee took evidence from representatives of the four health and social services boards, and the Mental Health and Learning Disability Board. The Committee recognises that the achievement of significant efficiency savings by the Department is absolutely essential if it is to be able to provide vital health and social-care services.

The Committee welcomed an unequivocal commitment by the Minister that he will deliver those efficiencies and meet the target of £343 million over the next three years. The Committee expressed very serious concerns about the ongoing delay in reaching a decision on the new structures that will replace boards as set out under the review of public administration. That is causing uncertainty, frustration and a loss of morale among existing staff, as well as absorbing valuable resources that should be directed to other key service developments. However, I welcome yesterday's indication from the Minister that a decision on the way forward is imminent.

The Committee concluded that, even allowing for any increased efficiencies above the required 3%, the outcome of the draft Budget would not enable the Department to implement some much-needed new service developments. In particular, the Committee reaffirmed its total commitment to seeing the recommendations of the Bamford Review into mental health and learning disability implemented in full and without delay.

Therefore, the Committee wholeheartedly welcomes the extra funding for health that was announced in the Budget statement last week. That additional funding has the clear potential to make a very significant difference over the next three years, but it must be used efficiently and appropriately.

An additional £10 million per year was allocated in response to strong views expressed during the consultation period about the need for extra resources for mental-health and learning-disability services. However, as the

Minister of Finance and Personnel made clear during his statement, it is a matter for the Minister of Health, Public Services and Public Safety how that will be used.

The Committee welcomes the indication from the Department through a statement and a press release that:

“an extra £50 million for mental health and learning disability will double the resettlement of long-stay patients, double the previous provision for community mental health teams and significantly improve respite for carers”.

However, the Committee calls for that money to be ring-fenced specifically for mental-health and learning-disability services. That will not only provide an assurance of the priority being given to mental-health and learning-disability services to those working in that field, but would ensure that the money could not be diverted when pressures arise in other areas, as has happened so often in the past.

The Health Committee also took evidence earlier this month from Professor John Appleby, Chief Economist at the King's Fund in London.

Professor Appleby, who carried out an independent review of health and social care in Northern Ireland in 2005, highlighted areas where the Health Service here is much less efficient than in other parts of the United Kingdom. He said:

“In 2005, we found almost 20% lower output per staff than the UK average — that is nearly a fifth. ... We looked at hospital activity per bed and found that that was around 26% lower than in England.”

4.00 pm

I mentioned earlier the significant efficiency savings that the Department will have to make over the coming three years just to reach the required 3% level. In its report on the draft Budget, the Committee concluded that there may well be scope for further efficiency savings above the required 3%, and it had sought an assurance that the Department would be able to retain any additional savings achieved in that way. The Committee is pleased to note the announcement last week by the Minister of Finance and Personnel that the Health Service will be able to retain any further efficiencies that it can deliver beyond the existing 3% target for immediate reinvestment into front-line services to patients.

I will conclude on behalf of the Committee by saying that the draft Budget has now been decided for the next three years. The Minister and the Department must deliver an efficient and effective health and social care service, and the Committee will continue to play its part.

I will turn now to more party-political matters. Some people have mischievously tried to claim that I, the DUP health spokesperson, did not want to see further resources directed towards health — a ludicrous allegation. Clearly, that is not true. Believe me, there is no limit to the sums that I would devote to health, were

they available. I welcome every extra penny added on since the draft Budget was presented.

There is much more to ensuring a good Health Service than the sums allocated. Productivity and what the public gets out for the money that it puts in are essential. Resources must be put to the most effective use. It is unrealistic to expect more and more money to be ploughed in endlessly, with double-digit percentage increases in Budget after Budget. In order to illustrate that point, the funding proposed for health over the three-year period is more than twice that provided by the previous Executive.

We will always be able to use more money, but we must ensure that performance and productivity improve. The recent Wanless review report confirmed that, despite massive investment year on year, the same failings of the NHS persist across the water. It is only by promoting innovation and increasing productivity that progress can be made. That is why there was such frustration at the lack of movement on the RPA reforms. Thankfully, we can at last look forward to some progress, with the news of a ministerial statement next week.

Local commissioning groups, comprising general practitioners and other health professionals, have been in place since February. Individuals have agreed to give up their time to serve their local communities, and they have the opportunity to improve and influence services in their areas. They must be permitted to get on with that work without further delay.

Incentives must be introduced to maximise performance, outcomes and cost-effectiveness. Inefficiency and inertia must be driven out. Merely meeting efficiency targets may get us through the next couple of years, but without reform, the Health Service will be in little better shape in three years' time, come the next comprehensive spending review. Overhauling the way in which we commission services is vital. The formation of a single health authority is about much more than a simple matter of rationalisation. The most important consequences concern performance management and the financial management of health services across the Province.

The single health authority was to be the commissioning organiser, maintaining the local commissioning groups, and itself commissioning regional services — a single bureaucracy to support local groups and reduce duplication. Its performance-management role would be the key to holding local commissioning groups and trusts to account — something sadly lacking, previously.

The average cost of prescription items is 10·3% higher in Northern Ireland than across the water. The number of administrators here has increased by 37% since 1997. Those are examples of issues that we can begin to tackle.

Mahatma Gandhi said:

“It is health that is real wealth and not pieces of gold and silver.”

An investment in health is an investment in the very heart of the nation, and the additional £10 million year on year for the next three years is very welcome. How the Executive balance the needs of health and social services with the other public services will demonstrate their maturity and wisdom. Those decisions will demonstrate that we understand that health is a foundation stone in the building of a new society in Northern Ireland.

As the Royal College of Psychiatrists states, there is no health without mental health. Mental health is an important area of need, and we must reassure the public that the additional funds, when taken with the 3% efficiency savings that are to be made, will not result in any decrease in service delivery. Even though the elderly population is increasing, mortality rates are decreasing, so attention must be paid to the mental-health needs of those who are aged over 65. Conditions such as Alzheimer's disease and dementia have a significant effect on the quality of life of people in that age group and on the health of their carers. Hopefully, the Minister will reassure us that any moneys that are released from efficiency savings in the mental-health sector will not only remain in that sector, but will be age blind.

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

Mr Lunn: I oppose the Budget, as it has been presented, and I support the Alliance Party's amendment. Mr Weir is not in the Chamber, but if I sound like a stuck record, so be it.

The issues of tackling sectarianism and segregation, rebalancing the economy and delivering integrated and sustainable public services apply not only to the Government's policy programme but to the funding that they allocate to it. The Alliance Party opposed the Programme for Government, and it opposes the Budget on the basis that neither tackles those issues head on.

We are sorry that the debate has degenerated, at times, into one where the Minister of Finance and Personnel and others have chosen to lambaste parties rather than arguments. In a democracy, there is nothing wrong with dissent or discussion. There is nothing wrong with debate — even angry debate — but the focus should be on issues, not on personalities or parties. At the start of the debate, the Minister graciously gave us permission to oppose the motion. Our dissent will not be stifled when we feel that it is appropriate —

Mr P Robinson: I did not give you permission to oppose the Budget; I supported your right to do so.

Mr Lunn: All right. I do not know whether that was an intervention.

In its opposition to the Budget, the Alliance Party would gladly have considered building consensus with the SDLP. I congratulate that party for tabling an

amendment that is even more complex than ours. However, in this context —

Mr Durkan: It is more precise.

Mr Lunn: It is more precise, if the Member prefers that terminology.

Declan O'Loan's remarks this morning were somewhat unfortunate. Given that we agree with much of the SDLP's amendment, we would have been prepared to have given that party the benefit of the doubt, despite feeling that its amendment misses the main points. It does not refer to the cost of division or to a shared future. That omission is surely not accidental, as it would have made the SDLP amendment almost indistinguishable from ours.

Turning to tackling division, we come to education. The DUP has a democratic mandate, fairly won, to lead the Executive. The Executive have presented a Programme for Government that is committed to a thriving Irish-medium sector. Therefore, the Budget should be committed to funding that sector. Irish-medium club banks provide the best way to achieve that; that is why we voted in favour of them. However, our preference is for integrated education through the medium of Irish where demand exists.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: Certainly. I think that I had better.

Mr D Bradley: It is my understanding that the Minister of Education has now rejected Irish-medium club banks. However, the Irish-language film fund has not been catered for in the Budget. Does the Member agree that the money that has already been invested in that project will be wasted unless it is followed up with further investment and resources?

Mr Lunn: I thank the Member; he knows more about the Minister's thoughts than I do. I do not disagree with him.

Integrated education is the preferable way forward, and it is a matter of public record that we support Irish-medium education where there is demand for it.

Therefore, it is a pity that the Executive's new-found commitment to a shared future remains firmly in quotation marks. That commitment is not matched by funding to deliver a thriving integrated sector and more places in integrated schools, in line with parental demand.

My party is more ambitious than that. The integration of our society should start at the point at which parents demand — as early as possible in life. Funding must match that.

I turn to the arts — an area in which cross-community projects occur effortlessly. However, because the arts received no uplift at all in the draft Budget, Members should not be surprised that that sector was so vocal

during the response process. Another £2 million has been found for the arts, and that is a step in the right direction. However, it remains a very small step. That will leave funding for the arts still below £7·50 a head, and that compares with £12 a head in each of the neighbouring jurisdictions.

Finally, on the issue of tackling divisions, the Budget includes commitments to efficiencies. Those are welcome insofar as they match Great Britain's, but, if the Executive are to freeze rates, the Budget must go further.

The Minister said earlier that he had invited the Alliance Party to talk to him about some of those matters. We would be more than prepared to do that. Mr Weir and Mr Beggs both asked for more meat on the bones of our suggestions. However, we produced a 19-page response to the draft Budget during the consultation period, and I see nothing of that in the final document. However, we made our presentation, and we are prepared to take up the Minister's offer to talk to him at any time.

My colleague Stephen Farry appropriately outlined the Alliance Party's difficulty with the Budget's underlying economic policy. Let me be clear: we have nothing against low taxes. We fought an election campaign offering lower rates bills, but we specified that we would bring them about by making savings based on reducing the costs of division. The Budget is not committed to that, not even in the long term. We want to match low taxes with balanced investment, to deliver better services to indigenous businesses and to deliver better public services and an improved quality of life that will make Northern Ireland a much better place in which to invest. The Alliance Party is not alone in that. The Confederation of British Industry and the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland, scarcely known for advocating high taxes, are entirely at one with us on those matters.

On public services, I have already outlined areas of education and culture that can deliver a society that is committed to ending the divisions that sadly define it. It is noteworthy, with respect to education, that area planning is an essential part of delivering money to pupils, not buildings. That means not just integration along religious lines, but shared facilities.

On health, most of all, we were disappointed that the bid for free personal care for older people was not met. That was a specific manifesto commitment of all four Executive parties. They all contested the election having indicated that that was a priority; however, they have not delivered.

On transport, the Alliance Party has been clear that, in funding, the ratio of roads to public transport should be shifted in favour of public transport, and particularly towards rail. If imposing tolls on new roads is necessary

to make that viable, so be it. Toll roads have proved effective in the South. We want to know precisely what the allocation is for. Is a light-rail system to be constructed, or are we getting just another consultant's report? When will the results of the current report be made available to Members and the public? The Minister must use that allocation to prove that he is serious about his shift towards public transport, particularly with respect to the greater Belfast area, where, if properly delivered, a light railway would serve to ease congestion dramatically.

Last Tuesday, the Minister referred to our putting our shoulders to the wheel. The Alliance Party would like to get its hands on the wheel, never mind its shoulders. I hope that our day will come in that respect.

Mr D Bradley: *Tiocfaidh ár lá.*

Mr Lunn: You stole my line, Dominic.

In the meantime, my party will continue to provide input, make suggestions and try to provide constructive opposition, even in the teeth of criticism.

4.15 pm

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): As Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, I welcome the motion tabled by the Minister of Finance and Personnel on the programme for expenditure proposals 2008-09 to 2010-11 as set out in the Budget that was laid before the Assembly on 22 January 2008.

The Committee welcomes the additional allocation for social housing in the final Budget and is grateful that the four-party Executive listened to all concerns expressed during the consultation process on the funding that was originally allocated.

Providing access to decent, affordable, energy-efficient housing is a priority for the Department for Social Development. The additional £250 million that has been agreed for investment in that area will go a long way towards increasing the supply of social homes. The severe lack of affordable and social housing is a serious issue. I want to re-emphasise the need for joined-up Government, which other Members referred to during the debate on the draft Budget. The Department for Social Development must work strategically with other Departments, and all Departments must be committed to dealing with the issue.

The Minister has been unable to provide the Committee with specific details on how that additional money will be allocated, although the Committee understands that 5,250 houses will be built over the next three years, and up to 10,000 additional affordable and social homes will be delivered by 2013. The Committee must examine the wording that has been used — “up to 10,000” — although that is a matter that will be discussed with the Minister at a future date.

The Committee will pay particular attention to how the warm homes scheme will be taken forward in light of additional funding. That scheme has proved to be a lifeline for some people — the vulnerable, the elderly, and those who are in poverty. It is of the utmost importance that the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people in society benefit from the Budget. Let it not be forgotten that it was through the warm homes scheme that many people were identified and subsequently benefited from the benefits uptake campaign some time ago.

The Department for Social Development has a target to deliver cash-releasing efficiencies of £113·7 million during the next three years. That will be achieved through several measures; for example, the social security modernisation programme, streamlining the delivery of urban regeneration programmes, targeting housing resources much more effectively, and realigning manpower levels in departmental priorities to bring about staff reductions. That will provide the Department with additional spending power, and the Committee will be interested in seeing the details of the Department's efficiency programme.

Mr Poots: The Member paints a fairly good picture of the Budget outcomes for the Department for Social Development. Does he, therefore, disagree with the previous SDLP speaker, who appeared to attack the outcome of the process and the Minister for Social Development?

Mr Hilditch: Indeed, I do disagree. The events of the past 24 hours have been interesting.

Improving efficiency is a key element in the Budget process. I commend the capital realisation task force's work to identify ways in which more effective management of the Executive's assets might raise additional funding. A potential £900 million has been identified over the next 10 years, which is, indeed, a sizeable sum. The task force has also identified ways that the proceeds from up to £295 million worth of asset disposals might be reinvested during the Budget period. However, I understand that further analysis of the scope and feasibility of those potential disposals must be carried out.

During the consultation process on the draft Budget, significant pressures were identified by all Departments. As I understand it, the only way that substantial extra resources could have been allocated to any Department would have been by reducing the allocations proposed for other Departments. The Committee welcomes the Executive's decision not to pursue that option and is content for Minister Ritchie to use her discretion to deploy her available resources in pursuit of the Executive's strategic priorities and objectives as set out in the Programme for Government. The Committee will,

of course, play an important role in scrutinising and advising the Minister on all matters relating to the Budget.

In conclusion, the Committee supports the motion. The Committee has worked as a sound and solid unit throughout the Budget consultation process and has strongly supported Minister Ritchie in trying to secure funds with which to deliver the goods. I, therefore, wonder how she will feel about the SDLP members of the Committee potentially throwing her efforts back in her face later today.

Earlier, Sammy Wilson put us in the mood for a song. It is certainly not a case of, "Wake up, Maggie", as in the words of Rod Stewart's song 'Maggie May'; rather, it is a case of, "Wake up, SDLP." I support the motion.

Mr Gardiner: I preface my remarks by saying that I welcome the fact that the Budget is a Northern Ireland Budget that is presented by a Northern Ireland Finance Minister to a Northern Ireland Assembly.

I wish to examine the Budget's impact on the environment; Roads Service; the delivery of public-service reform; and, in particular, planning reform.

For environmentalists, the Budget is the Budget that was not. The opportunity to create and fund an independent environmental protection agency has been let slip. Given that we have a three-year Programme for Government, we, therefore, arrive at the inescapable conclusion that nothing will be done on that front for at least three years. It is not a question of "Next year in Jerusalem", nor is it even a question of the year-after-next-year in Jerusalem. We remain the only part of the United Kingdom without an independent environmental protection agency. For those on the other side of the community divide, we remain the only part of the island of Ireland without an independent environmental protection agency.

Farmers' concerns must be taken on board, and properly. At the same time —

Mr T Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gardiner: I will not give way; I need all the time in which I am allowed to speak.

Farmers' concerns must be taken on board, and properly. At the same time, however, that is no excuse for the continued inaction, and the clear postponement of action to outside the three-year time frame. Like many other Members, I had hoped to see a rationale behind environmental policy, and the funding base in place to support reform. However, that is simply not there.

The same is true of the reform of our public administration, including the reform of local councils, and the planning reform that flows from that. Once again, I deplore the fact that that issue, among others,

appears to have been allowed to drift. That drift damages morale, especially that of those who work in the Planning Service. It does little to inspire confidence in Government direction.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the statement on the Giant's Causeway that Minister Foster made earlier. I welcome it, and I also welcome her decision. It is a great pity that that decision was not reached earlier so that Northern Ireland's image did not look as bad as it does today.

Although the maintenance of roads across Northern Ireland is not an environmental issue, it is nonetheless important to the rural community. Planned roads expenditure for 2007-08 is £3,800 a mile. That is only 70% of the figure that was allocated for spending on roads four years ago. It is planned that £59 million will be spent on roads this year, compared with the £82 million spent in 2003-04. Worse still, that is a small fraction of spending on roads elsewhere in the United Kingdom. In England, the equivalent amount spent is £13,000 a kilometre, which converts to £20,967 a mile. In Wales, £7,600 a kilometre is spent, which equates to £12,258 a mile. As I have said, just £3,800 a mile is spent on roads in Northern Ireland. Spending on roads in Northern Ireland stands at just 18% of that in England and 31% of that in Wales.

If that situation is not attended to, it will lead to serious long-term problems. Look at the amount of money that has had to be spent on the rail infrastructure in England because of decades of neglect. There is already evidence that that unfortunate pattern may be repeated in Northern Ireland's road system.

In 2006, DRD spent over £101,000 to settle 425 claims. In 2007, over £73,000 of taxpayers' money was used to settle 445 of the 934 claims that were submitted. The Department for Regional Development has paid out almost £330,000 on personal injury and vehicle damage claims since 2005.

I hope that if there is an underspend in any Department, the Minister of Finance and Personnel will ensure that the environment, roads, public services and planning reform are assisted, to improve those services for the benefit of all the people in Northern Ireland.

Mr Durkan: I support amendment No 2. Other Members have questioned and attacked the SDLP's right to table an amendment because the party has a Minister in the Executive. However, Members have not been able to refute any of the points in our amendment. The Budget proposals do not provide clear budgetary lines for the key policy developments that are being championed, including the anti-poverty strategy. The best that Sammy Wilson could offer was an acknowledgement that that is true, but that it could not be so anyway.

Our amendment says that the Budget proposals:

"fail to set out funding commitments in respect of proposed reforms in post-primary education".

That is absolutely true; nobody is able to say that the funding proposals are clear in the Budget, because they are not. If it is an all-singing, all-dancing Budget, and if post-primary education reform is the most important issue that is facing us, it is bizarre in the extreme that that is not provided for in the Budget, and not even addressed or mentioned in the Programme for Government.

It is also true that the Budget proposals:

"abandon cross-cutting funds, including a fund for children and young people".

The integrated development fund is also to be wound up. That is exactly the type of fund that would have worked well in somewhere such as Limavady, with the challenges that it is facing, because that fund was designed exactly to meet social and economic challenges in different localities.

Our amendment is also right to say that the Budget proposals:

"are unclear in their implications for householders in terms of future charging for water."

When the reviews of water and rates were announced, the timelines that were given suggested that outcomes would be available by the time that we were taking decisions on the revised Budget. That has not happened; the strand two report on water was published yesterday, and it is going out for a 12-week consultation. There are implications in the recommendations of that report, and in the likely response of the Executive and Ministers.

Ministers are not saying that they will endorse the recommendations of the independent panel to source water revenue as part of the rates, with no separate charges or metering. It seems that Ministers are prepared to consider other options for charging and separate water charges. The SDLP stood on a clear manifesto that said no separate water charges; we wanted water revenue to be a clear, transparent part of the rates. That was our position in the last Executive; we wrote that option into the rating policy review that was brought forward at that time. The SDLP has taken that position consistently. Other parties have said that that is their consistent position, but they seem to be shifting in the current context. We are not.

Therefore, all the points of our amendment stand. If we were guilty of opportunism and cynicism, we would have thrown all sorts of populist and attractive issues into our amendment, such as proposals for free personal care and free prescriptions, which other parties had in their manifestos.

However, we did not include those issues in our amendment, because we recognise that, due to current constraints,

some of them will not be feasible unless we achieve other savings and resources over time.

4.30 pm

The amendment is clearly focused, reasoned and restrained. When the Programme for Government and the Budget were presented, Sinn Féin and the DUP were at pains to say that they were different, that it was their production now, and that they were doing things differently from how other parties would have done them.

The SDLP's amendment simply makes the point that we would have done things differently if we had been in a stronger position. Apparently, that is wrong. We are not making some unspeakable point — we are simply saying that we would have done things differently and that we have done things differently in the past.

We created the Executive programme funds as a way of getting more cross-cutting effort and more joined-up approaches across Government. Members now tell us that they do not favour such approaches, but the same Members were complaining yesterday about silo approaches. Cross-cutting funds, commissioning bids, and proposals from parties for more joined-up actions were designed to get over that silo mentality.

Funds are now simply being given back to Departments; that is spending via the traditional Civil Service route, which is through Departments. Some of us want things to be more radical than that. We are told that the Programme for Government and the Budget are about more cross-cutting actions. We are also told that the Budget clearly supports the Programme for Government, but, on Sammy Wilson's admission today, that is not the case. There is much talk about cross-cutting actions and initiatives in the Programme for Government, but there is no trace of associated budgetary lines in the Budget.

Claims have been made that the SDLP should be prevented from tabling amendments. However, the Assembly, not the Executive, takes the legal decision to approve the Budget, and all Members must take that responsibility seriously. If the Assembly's purpose were merely to rubber-stamp whatever the Executive agreed, it should not exist at all.

Mr P Robinson: That is the most absurd argument that I have ever heard. It is not a case of denying the SDLP the right to table an amendment — it is the ambush by the SDLP in its decision to table it now. The party failed to table the amendment at the Executive where it could have had an impact on the Budget.

Mr Durkan: It is not an ambush. When Ministers negotiate a Budget, inevitably they concentrate on the budget lines of their Departments. From my experience of budgetary matters, that is what motivated Ministers in the past. They were most focused on their own budget lines, and that is right and proper. Indeed, in today's

debate the Ulster Unionist Party stated that although it has reservations about aspects of the Budget, it supports the Budget because of its Ministers' share of it. It is natural and proper for Ministers to prioritise and focus on what they will get for their Departments and for key budget lines.

Margaret Ritchie rightly and strongly set out her priorities on social and affordable housing. She also rightly and properly made gains between the draft Budget and the revised Budget, and she voted for the Budget at the Executive to secure that budget line. That is how people have endorsed and agreed Budgets in the past. I know from experience — and the Finance Minister will realise in the future — that Ministers will soon tell him that although they agreed the Budget, they wanted to leave room for manoeuvre and wanted other things to be included in it. Those are the terms in which Ministers agree to such things.

However, parties in the Assembly are different. The Minister of Finance told us last week that parties should not determine their position on the Budget simply on the basis of how well their Minister is doing. Our Minister has done well in respect of social and affordable housing in the revised Budget. However, there are other questions to be asked about it. No party should be bought and bound because of budgetary gains achieved by its Minister.

There are wholesale issues in relation to the Budget, and our amendment touches on only some of them. It is realistic to request cross-cutting funds in the style of Executive programme funds to support priorities and to ensure that Departments must show good form in taking forward some of those measures.

This is a three-year Budget, and we cannot vote in the blind with regard to what will happen to water charges, for example. We do not want to be told, down the road, that our endorsement of the three-year Budget, when the recommendations of strands one and two of the independent water review panel's report were known, implied that we were going along with the plans for water charges — whatever they might be. We are not. Our position holds. The Budget states that there will be a reduced subsidy for water. We know that there are plans afoot, but we have not seen them.

Before the House is a three-year Budget, and the SDLP will not vote in the blind when such unknowns and ambiguities exist.

The SDLP stands by its manifesto commitments; we reflect our mandate. The SDLP Minister made the strongest possible case at the Executive, and set out strong grounds on inclusion and deprivation during the early work on the draft Programme for Government. She clearly stated her reservations about certain aspects and dimensions of the Programme for Government and its related Budget. She did not table a formal amendment,

and, in those circumstances, neither would I have done. My priority would have been to ensure that I secured the improved budget line for my Department. If Margaret Ritchie had tabled an amendment at that stage, it would have resulted in a further downwards revision in her own budget line.

The SDLP is properly using its position in the Assembly. This is not an ambush; it is accountability and democratic politics in the interests of the public.

Ms Purvis: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. The Budget is allocated to deliver the Executive's priorities as set out in the Programme for Government. This Budget will not reduce or eliminate child poverty or protect our environment. Rather, it will increase deprivation with the introduction of water charges. The Budget benefits big business, developers and owners of big cars.

More than 100,000 children are living in officially defined levels of poverty in Northern Ireland. That means that 100,000 children are not given the chance to experience or make choices that can improve their lives. Not all of those children are from families who live on benefits; 47% of children living in poverty in Northern Ireland live in a family with at least one working parent.

The impact of poverty and deprivation is stark. Infant death is one-third higher in deprived areas, and teenage pregnancy rates are higher. Some 28% of those living in deprived areas do not have a bank account; therefore, they pay more for financial services and utilities. Children from deprived areas do less well at school. We know that from the 11-plus results and performances at GCSE level and in further and higher education.

There are 27,000 families with children in Northern Ireland living in fuel poverty. The Budget contained a new allocation to fuel poverty, but it will do nothing to reduce the 2008 waiting list on the warm homes scheme. Families with disabled children are 50% more likely to be in debt. Although all families in Northern Ireland can afford to feed their children, their diets are not sufficient for proper health and well-being. Everyone knows how diet can benefit a child's progress and development.

I do not believe that the Executive will start to tackle child poverty, and Members must look at the contradictions. The future of community education programmes is in question. Those programmes help many people in the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland, especially women. They help women to return to education and, eventually, to the labour market. Those programmes are under threat, and if they end, the Executive's priorities will not be delivered.

Government initiatives regarding childcare — including Sure Start — have been developed. Many

parents, particularly lone parents, continually struggle to find flexible quality and affordable childcare. Childcare is essential in supporting those people in their return to work. The lack of proper, affordable, good quality and flexible childcare will add to the levels of child poverty in Northern Ireland.

Families who are affected by disability need more help than others — bringing up a disabled child costs three times more than raising a non-disabled child. Parents of such families are less likely to work and, if they do, they are more likely to be in low-paid jobs. If the Executive are to tackle child poverty, they must address those and other issues seriously.

The children's fund, which was one of the Executive programme funds, has helped many children in deprived areas of Northern Ireland. Over the past year, I have encountered several projects that have benefited many families in my constituency of East Belfast: one example is the Tullycarnet family project.

In addition, the Quaker Cottage teen project works with young people who are at risk from suicide, self harm and drug abuse. As the children's fund is to be scrapped, what will happen to those projects, and the children and families they support? Funding for many projects is not ring-fenced, or mainstreamed, and people will suffer as a result.

I will briefly mention water charging. As I said yesterday, my party is opposed to the introduction of water charges. People here have been paying for water through their rates and should not have to pay twice. Families receiving rate relief will not benefit by the introduction of water charges. When water charges are introduced, everyone in this society will be expected to pay, and, therefore, people who receive benefit and rate relief will not be £1,000 better off following the Budget. It is another expense that vulnerable families could do without.

Mr Gardiner spoke about the need to protect the environment. I fail to comprehend how money for roads rather than much-needed investment in public transport, to make it a viable, quality choice for people, will reduce emissions or our carbon footprint.

As one of the few left-of-centre representatives in the Chamber, I must criticise the concentrated use of PFIs and PPPs. I note the comments made by the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel; and given that Sinn Féin is chuckling its way towards raving capitalism and is voting for the Budget, I am astonished that its members can stand up in this House and criticise the use of PFI. PFI goes against democratic principles; it benefits private developers and it is not a fair deal for taxpayers. Private developers are unelected and unaccountable, and those who are using PFI to take over our hospitals and schools will leave a millstone of debt — potentially billions of pounds — for our children.

Finally, much has been said about criticism of the Budget. Everyone wants devolution, the Assembly, and the Executive to work and succeed. However, there is a way to bring down the Executive and the structures of Government and bring the Assembly to an end. It was not taken up during the last Executive, but the potential is still there — people do not have to vote for this Budget if they do not want to do so.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ar dtús, ba mhaith liom labhairt ar son an Choiste Cultúir agus ansin cúpla focal a rá mar Chomhalta príobháideach.

I will make some opening remarks in my capacity as the Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, a LeasCheann Comhairle, followed by some comments as an individual MLA.

First, I will comment on the aspects of the Budget allocation that relate to the arts, libraries and sport. I welcome the Budget increase for the arts. Although relatively modest, it is nonetheless an increase. Of course, arts sector representatives continue to say that the settlement falls short of requirements and will not deliver a per-capita funding figure matching other regions in these islands. For example, in the Twenty-six Counties the figure is close to £14, whereas it is less than £7 in the North.

4.45 pm

I commend the arts lobby for putting a coherent and compelling case to the forefront of political awareness in the time between the publication of the draft Budget and the final Budget allocations. The Finance Minister said in his Budget statement on 22 January 2008:

“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”. [*Official Report, Bound Volume 26, p315, col 2*].

The arts lobby made itself heard. The Executive showed that they were prepared to listen and respond positively, which is a welcome development that shows the positive impact of the new political dispensation. We all have a better understanding of the contribution of the arts to wider society in areas such as health, the economy and cultural tourism. The Minister of Finance and Personnel acknowledged those benefits in his Budget speech.

Although the situation is better than it would have been under the draft Budget, serious challenges remain. Like the arts, libraries in the North enjoy significantly less funding per capita than in other regions. The additional £0.5 million each year is welcome. On 22 January, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure heard representatives from the education and library boards voice concern that reductions and efficiencies have already been carried out and that there is nothing more to give. That is a crucial area for the continual attention of the Executive. I am mindful that other

monitoring rounds and the spring Supplementary Estimates lie in the immediate future — I hope that the Executive continue to show that they are listening to those lobbies that make strong and compelling cases.

Libraries are undervalued and, perhaps, undersold. They play a crucial role in tackling problems of illiteracy, and they make provision for migrant workers who often use Internet and other facilities. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister must have a greater appreciation of the beneficial role that library provision has for migrant workers and ethnic communities, and the role of libraries in the promotion and facilitation of cultural tourism.

At a time when there is a freeze on capital projects at a community level, where much good work is being done, it is regrettable that there is no additional funding for sport. I have just come from a wonderful event in the Long Gallery, which celebrated the work of an excellent community-based sporting organisation in Belfast called Cumann Spórt an Phobail, which operates in the Ballymurphy, Upper Springfield and Whiterock areas. With Sport NI, we saw evidence of tremendous work happening at a community level to improve sports facilities and opportunities for young and old people. Therefore, it is regrettable that there is no additional funding for sport in the Budget. Members must send positive messages about the role of sport in promoting health and tackling obesity and remind ourselves of the Executive target to get 125,000 children in the North participating in sport and physical recreation by 2011. I take this opportunity to reinforce those points about sport, arts and libraries.

As an MLA, I welcome the extra £4.6 million allocated to youth services in the final Budget.

Again, the Minister of Education, Caitríona Ruane, has listened during the consultation period, and has recognised the importance of youth services, youth clubs and youth projects. The final allocation reveals that there will be an additional £4.6 million over three years. However, I have to say that the Executive must keep their eye on that particular ball. We must listen to the Youth Service and the youth sector about the challenges that they face. I ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether opportunities might arise for youth projects in the upcoming monitoring rounds and the spring Supplementary Estimates.

The final Budget allocation shows that Ministers are listening, but they must demonstrate that they are continuing to listen as other opportunities arise.

Mr D Bradley: The Member was absent from the Chamber when I raised this point earlier. Will he agree with me that it would be advantageous if the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure would listen more closely to the Irish language lobby? I refer in particular to the Irish language film fund, which has not been catered

for in this Budget. Many small companies depend on that fund for training and production support. If the fund is not augmented, that would represent bad practice. Indeed, the investment that has already been made would be wasted, and I am sure that the Minister of Finance and Personnel would not agree with wasting resources in such a way, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr McElduff: Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don méid atá ráite ag Dominic Ó Brollacháin. I agree 100% with Mr Bradley's point. I am pleased that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure is in the Chamber to hear that very important message.

The Executive should take every opportunity, in this Budget and in the coming times, to demonstrate support for the building trade and the construction industry. We know about the policy climate created by PPS 14, and that chartered surveyors are saying that projects are being delayed. We know that social housing must be delivered. Nevertheless, the Executive and the Minister of Finance and Personnel must hear those messages.

I recently spoke in the Chamber to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who said that he hoped that the Minister of Finance and Personnel would hear the same message. I ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel to take particular cognisance of petrol retailers in communities on this side of the border, who have had their businesses disadvantaged by proximity to petrol retailers on the other side of the border. Those businesses have been decimated over many decades by that situation, and, I am sure, other factors that Members may choose to draw to my attention. However, I ask the Minister to examine Varney II in the near future in order to find opportunities to introduce compensatory measures for those businesses.

This is a four-party Budget, produced by a four-party Executive. It is good work, as has already been said by the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, Mitchel McLaughlin. We have arrived at the Budget allocation, the Programme for Government and the investment strategy. However, there is no escaping the reality that major obstacles to delivery by the Executive remain. One of those obstacles is the fact that taxation and public expenditure policy are still set in London. We should not keep pushing that issue further down the road. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Simpson: This has been an interesting debate over the past few hours. I was going to say that it was an intelligent debate, but having heard some of the comments that have been made by Members from some parties, I have to wonder.

A Member: You are talking about the Alliance Party.

Mr Simpson: I am looking at the Alliance Party. Many years ago, there used to be an old preacher in Northern Ireland called W P Nicholson, who, when he

heard people talking nonsense, would say that it was "tripe with a capital T". Well, I have listened to some tripe with a capital T in this Chamber today.

Naively, I thought more of the Alliance Party because I understand that some of its Members come from a business background. I thought that they at least would have had some intelligent ideas on taxation, and, in particular, on industrial derating. However, we live day by day, and we are surprised many times. That is the way it goes.

I support the Budget, which is innovative and can only be good for Northern Ireland. A number of messages must be sent out from this Chamber. First, the SDLP's behaviour should be condemned over and over again.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Simpson: The Trimble/Mallon Assembly was quite some time ago — in fact, I can scarcely remember the two individuals in question. However, they tell me that they once ran the Assembly. At that time, the DUP Ministers took up their ministerial positions, but they acted against the Executive. Why did they do that? Why did the DUP embark on that course of action? There was one fundamental reason: the party opposed the arrangements that were then in place; it campaigned and issued policy documents against them, and it suggested alternative arrangements.

Mr Durkan: Now the DUP operates those same arrangements.

Mr Simpson: Hold on a wee second; I know that it is beginning to hurt.

Mr Storey: They think that they won the election.

Mr Simpson: Yes, that is exactly right.

However, the same cannot be said of the SDLP; its Members support the current arrangements; they have campaigned and electioneered in favour of them, and they have spoken and written in favour of them. They rallied behind the Minister for Social Development as she sought greater funding to carry out her work in the Executive.

Yet, in an entirely selfish, hypocritical manoeuvre, SDLP Members shafted their own Minister. They left her high and dry, letting her go through one Lobby in favour of the PFG while they went through the other Lobby to cast votes to oppose her actions. Shame on the SDLP. Such behaviour — "Durkanomics" — *[Laughter.]* — does not even have the safety net of political gain. The SDLP is a party in decline whose members desperately hope that Bertie Ahern will take time off to save not only his own political bacon but theirs too.

Lord Morrow: He cannot do both.

Mr Simpson: No, he cannot.

The Budget ought to be welcomed as a good beginning on the journey towards a better future. It confirms the freeze on rates over three years and that industrial rates will be capped at 30%; it also addresses the priority given to the economy by the Programme for Government. The Executive have increased allocations to the Department for Employment and Learning by some 35%, which is very welcome. Furthermore, DETI has received another 21% increase in funding.

The Budget also provides for the largest ever allocations for capital investment in new public-sector infrastructure — more than £2 billion a year by 2010 and 2011. That will help to promote a programme of investment in hospitals, schools, housing, roads, public transport and other public services. Northern Ireland must move forwards towards a more private-sector-led economy if it is to prosper and compete in future. Dependence on the public sector is now an obstacle to our development. In today's economic climate, Government or Assembly intervention can have only a limited influence on the economy.

Alongside that, however, the Assembly will be required to deliver infrastructure, promote tolerance, health and well-being, advance environmental issues, and create excellent and efficient public services.

5.00 pm

I am pleased that a funding increase has been allocated to Margaret Richie, because all Members of the House have been lobbied many, many times on social and affordable housing. The lack of such housing has created major difficulties, and it is good to see that her Department's budget has been increased.

The additional money for the Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey, is most welcome. It is rumoured that when Michael McGimpsey heard the news that his budget was to be substantially increased — and I emphasise that it is only a rumour — he almost smiled. I know that Members may find that hard to believe. However, no paparazzi were there to take a photograph, and, perhaps, that is a malicious rumour that should not be repeated.

I welcome the additional funds that have been announced in the Budget. 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 Enterprise, Trade and Investment will receive an additional £14 million to fund a range of projects, including the promotion of investment and innovation and research.

The Department for Employment and Learning will receive an additional £40 million over the next three years to fund various projects.

Northern Ireland still has a long way to go, and there are outstanding issues to be tackled. The actions of the SDLP in the past 24 hours have again brought to light the need to move towards a more normal system of Government and away from the current model — the deficiencies of which have been highlighted in the Assembly this week.

Notwithstanding those issues, the Budget, coupled with —

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Simpson: I am about to finish.

The Budget, coupled with the Programme for Government, affords the Assembly an opportunity to set its sails.

Mr Durkan: Will the Member address the fact that he and his colleagues, including the Finance Minister, regularly vote against the Westminster Budget, which includes the allocation of public expenditure here? Doing so is not perceived as irresponsible, but as good democratic practice.

Mr Simpson: The difference, as the Finance Minister said, is that the DUP does not sit in the Cabinet at Westminster.

Mr Durkan: The Westminster Budget includes allocations for here.

Mr Simpson: The Budget will start Northern Ireland off on a good footing, and Members can look forward to a better future for the Province.

Mr Moutray: I join my party colleagues in paying tribute to the Minister of Finance and Personnel for delivering to the House and the Province a momentous, forward-thinking and business-led Budget. Remarkably, it is the first Budget to emanate from the House in almost 40 years. As such, the Budget is a political landmark for the Province, and it will aid in providing a peaceful, prosperous and fair society today, tomorrow and in the years that lie ahead.

Members have witnessed a great milestone in local politics: the Budget will afford us, as elected representatives, the opportunity to deliver a better quality of life for those who live and work in Northern Ireland.

For many years, this Province suffered as a result of the stagnation that was brought about by 30 years of terrorist violence and, indeed, direct rule. Therefore, the Budget places Northern Ireland's destiny in our hands. It places in our hands the building blocks with which a better and brighter future can be achieved.

I welcome the fact that the Budget has been accepted unanimously and endorsed by the four Executive parties.

The Budget sets out in great detail the spending plans for the Departments over the next number of years. Those plans include the necessary expansion of the infrastructure to satisfy modern investment; increasing the educational attainment of young people; reducing poverty; increasing economic activity; protecting our environment; reducing the number of deaths on our roads; and reducing treatment waiting times for patients. Those are, without doubt, real issues that have affected and will continue to affect everyone in their daily lives.

The Budget enables us, as locally elected representatives, to allocate the resources to tackle those issues at first-hand. The Budget's primary focus is on economic growth, clearly demonstrating the Executive's long-term commitment to building a better future for the people of Northern Ireland. That focus also aligns with the priorities that have been identified in the Programme for Government and investment strategy. Those are to grow a dynamic, innovative economy; to promote tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being; to build and invest in infrastructure; to deliver modern, high-quality and efficient public services; and to protect and enhance our environment and natural resources.

Ultimately, those three documents will work together to achieve the overarching aim of building a strong and competitive Northern Ireland economy that will, in due course, reduce and eradicate poverty and social exclusion.

I particularly welcome the Budget's efforts to implement the investment strategy for Northern Ireland to improve infrastructure; refocus business-support measures on exports; implement the skills strategy and the FE Means Business strategy to improve individuals' skills; implement the regional innovation strategy; and enhance linkages between the education and business sectors. All those will contribute to the Executive's economic vision's being realised.

I welcome the Finance Minister's additional allocations for mental-health provision and for those with learning disabilities, in particular, and for youth and library services, and, indeed, social housing. That could not have been boasted about when we were subject to direct rule policies.

The real challenge now is for each Minister to take responsibility for administering those policies and ensuring that the Executive are efficient. The 3% efficiency-savings targets that have been set are a challenge for each Department. My plea is that the Departments endeavour to exceed that target in order to provide additional spending power.

I am proud to be a Member of an Assembly that, ultimately, through this Budget, has displayed a vision for Northern Ireland. The Budget identifies the real needs that exist in society, and notes the resources that are available to tackle those needs. It will enable us to

deliver, which is what we were democratically elected to do.

The Budget gives value for money for every pound that is spent. However, we cannot enter this process of administration and roll it out while wearing rose-tinted glasses. We must recognise the challenges and the need for us, as elected representatives, to embrace them and prove that devolution can make a real difference to people's lives.

By tabling amendments yesterday and today, the SDLP has demonstrated its backward-looking vision. I question whether there are divisions in that party, given that the Minister for Social Development voted for the Programme for Government, while her party colleagues voted against it. It appears that Margaret Ritchie's party colleagues are unable to support her in her Executive decision.

Unlike the SDLP and the Alliance Party, I, along with members of my party, endorse and agree to the finely tuned, well-balanced and meticulously documented Budget that the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Executive have brought to the House. I support the motion.

Mr K Robinson: I was looking for evidence in the Budget of specific funding for the massive educational changes that the Minister of Education has proposed and that are centred on her new vision that transfer should occur at the age of 14.

It is clear that a restructuring of education, entailing the creation of schools for 11- to 14-year-olds and 14-to 19-year-olds, is so far-reaching that it is bound to involve considerable expenditure on new buildings, staff training, support costs for major curriculum change, and the redesign of existing buildings.

Inevitably, such a far-reaching process will involve a fundamental look at the entire schools estate in Northern Ireland. In fact, I cannot see how any such process would be able to avoid a major rationalisation process as well. How can we evade the inevitable question in the face of such massive changes? How can we continue to operate several distinct school systems — the state system, a maintained system, an integrated system, and an Irish-medium system? Surely we have an opportunity here to pursue a shared future for all.

Try as I might to find it, however, there was no mention of additional funding for such a project in the educational provisions in the Budget. That is a three-year spending programme; therefore, there is no money for such a programme for at least three years. How can that be?

The Minister of Education promised that selection would end by the year 2009, which is just a year away. I heard that the Minister reckoned that her proposals

were, in the main, cost-neutral. How can that be? Unless, of course, her proposals involve the rationalisation of her current four-fold system, with the introduction of a universal, one-size-fits-all system of geographically based schools, with postcode-selection processes, catering for an 11- to 14- year-old and a 14- to 19-year-old split. The sale of redundant school buildings might then be used to generate the capital assets to fund the massive costs of such a radical restructuring of the school system that selection at 14 would inevitably entail.

The absence of such earmarked funding in the Budget indicates either that what the Minister said will happen simply will not happen, or that there is another way of funding her proposals, outside the ordinary constraints of the block grant.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel said in his Budget statement:

“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 ... and our capacity to reinvest these proceeds.”
— [*Official Report, Bound Volume 26, p317, col 1*].

It is unclear whether those disposals have already been factored into the new Budget allocations announced last Tuesday. Perhaps the Minister will let Members know, and inform us whether he intends to put additional funds into the Department of Education’s budget to finance any such major restructuring of the schools, as the Minister of Education contemplates.

In purely educational terms, the Budget is a relatively modest document. All that is evident from the budgetary figures is that the Executive have allocated an additional £3 million for next year followed by a further £5 million in each of the two following years. That modest additional funding will provide for an increase in the level of resource funding available for youth services each year over the three-year Budget period.

However, Youth Service personnel say that that equals a standstill allocation to the youth sector, which will be a disappointment to all those who put so much into working with our young, and our — sometimes disaffected — youth.

The education targets in the Programme for Government that are funded by the Budget are similarly conservative. The aspiration is that by 2015, 80% of the working population will be qualified to GCSE level or equivalent. Since the current figure of people with no qualifications is 21% in Northern Ireland, even the new targets are very conservative.

At the moment, a quarter of our adult population has poor literacy and numeracy levels, and, every year, 4,000 people reach the age of 16 without achieving a basic English or Maths qualification. The Department for Employment and Learning should not have to do

remedial work for the Department of Education. That is important

It may be worth restating that children do not fail at 11 years of age; rather, the system fails many of them in their early years.

5.15 pm

I welcome the large-scale investment in further education. That investment will support the Further Education Means Business strategy and emphasises the fact that further education colleges will be the engines of economic growth.

We cannot rely on the UK Exchequer or Europe to pay our way. The economic focus in the Department for Employment and Learning’s budget is a precursor to eradicating underachievement, unemployment and eventually, I hope, poverty. I also welcome the provision in the Programme for Government for an annual review. That represents not only a milestone in the progress towards targets but will build in the capacity for adjustment to changing circumstances.

The Department for Employment and Learning recognises that there is a clear link between the levels of spending on research and development and the levels of innovation in new products, economic growth, prosperity and employment. Hitherto, Northern Ireland has had a mixed record on R&D, although both Queen’s University and the University of Ulster are world leaders in their particular research fields. Sadly, however, if one adds up the total spend on R&D in Northern Ireland, it comes to about 1% of gross domestic product, while other industrial economies average between 2% and 3%.

I commend Sir Reg Empey, the Minister for Employment and Learning, for his winning the largest share of the funds for innovation — some £40 million out of £90 million. Those moneys are critical, because they make it possible to fund 300 new PhD studentships, which will be in the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. It is to be hoped that those new studentships will lead to positive spin-offs for our regional economy, which may eventually come to resemble the Research Triangle Park in North Carolina or the Silicon Valley in California. A pool of world-class research students should provide a future magnet for foreign direct investment.

Finally, I thank the Minister for his additional allocations, totalling £2 million, to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure for 2008-09. Those allocations have been made in response to specific issues that were raised during the public consultation on the draft Budget, and they are very welcome.

Similarly, I acknowledge an additional £5 million that has been allocated to the Department for its creativity seed fund, which is important if creative potential and

innovation are to be unlocked. The connection between themes that have not been exploited previously is vital if we are to source new industry that is based on creativity and design. We need to look closely at the performance of that fund to see whether still more volume and range can be achieved as a result of the additional funding.

However, I have grave concerns about funding for sports and the arts, the spending on which still lags behind every other UK region, even though both are potentially key generators of economic income.

It is good for the House and for Northern Ireland that the Assembly has now turned to the real business of government. I am pleased that yesterday's motion on the Programme for Government and the investment strategy was amended to include an Ulster Unionist amendment that sought to create a process of ongoing review for the Programme for Government. The Programme for Government and the Budget are two sides of the one coin, so, in light of ongoing experience, the potential exists for flexibility and responsiveness in the allocations. I support the Budget proposals.

Mr McCausland: I support the Budget, which is the product of a four-party coalition, even if one of those parties seems to try to suggest that it is not part of that coalition and, therefore, is not in some way responsible for the Budget that emerged from that coalition. It seems that that party is content to live in a state of delusion.

I shall concentrate on the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, which, relative to some of the larger Departments, is small. Nevertheless, it is a significant Department, because sport, culture, arts, libraries and museums matter to many people. They affect the quality of life of people in Northern Ireland, and many people feel passionately about them.

Several Members have already said that they would like more money to be spent in some of those areas, and everyone in the House shares that view. However, the Executive have a finite amount of money. The SDLP's problem in demanding more money is that it cannot say where that money should be taken from. Does it want the money to be taken from social development, health, education or some other area?

The Alliance Party can tell the House where it wants the money to be taken from: it wants to take it from my pocket and from the pockets of every person in Northern Ireland. That is interesting, because the Alliance Party has vanished from my constituency. We have not seen any of its members, and they have not represented anyone there, for a long time. If that party continues in its present way, it will probably disappear from the rest of Northern Ireland in the not too distant future. On hearing that the Alliance Party's view is that everybody should pay much more, many people might decide that they do not want to support it.

Libraries and museums are major areas of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's expenditure. They constitute half of the Department's total budget, with 30% going to libraries and 20% going to museums.

The North/South Language Body was mentioned earlier in the debate; I am pleased to see that the funding for that is rising from £6.1 million this year to £7.4 million over the period of the Budget. Significant funding is built into that for the Ulster-Scots Agency, which I welcome. Sadly, over the years, that agency has suffered from serious underfunding, stretching back to the formation of the language body and the two agencies within it. That serious underfunding has created difficulties for the Ulster-Scots language community and for the wider community that is interested in Ulster-Scots culture. The allocation goes some way towards redressing the shortfall that we have inherited from the period of direct rule and earlier. The money will be used well, and many good projects will benefit from it, right across Northern Ireland.

Sport is one of those issues that has benefits not just in the enjoyment that it creates, but in its impact on health. Culture, sport, libraries and museums all have an impact on tourism. I am glad that the Budget points to the clear links between those areas in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Executive priorities of growing a dynamic, innovative economy; promoting tolerance, inclusion and well-being; investing in infrastructure; and delivering modern, high-quality, efficient public services. Sport and culture are important in providing a better quality of life, and they also have an impact right across Government priorities.

Tourism is a major growth area in the economy, and cultural tourism has been identified as a core area for growth. I welcome the fact that even Tourism Ireland has finally recognised in recent months that —

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that Ulster Scots is an important growth area for cultural tourism? In my constituency, Strangford, the rebirth of Ulster Scots has been a big talking point with regard to cultural tourism in the area.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for his comments. I was about to say that Tourism Ireland has identified the Scotch-Irish market in America as a wonderful opportunity for promoting tourism. I am sure that when the Scotch-Irish come here, they will want to visit Strangford and the Ards Peninsula, which is part of the Ulster-Scots heartland.

Mr Shannon: I will be their guide.

Mr McCausland: We do not want to go too far, please.

There is recognition here of a potential tourist market that remains untapped. For so long, Tourism

Ireland has concentrated solely on the Irish-American market. The other 20 million Americans whose roots are here on this island, and particularly the northern part of the island — well, that Scotch-Irish market has now been identified. The opportunity is there for us to grow our tourism through that.

I welcome that £32.5 million is to be made available for arts and cultural infrastructure. In respect of Belfast, mention is made of the Metropolitan Arts Centre in the Cathedral Quarter, and the new Lyric Theatre, which is to be built in the south of the city. I could not miss the opportunity to commend Belfast City Council for spending so much on the arts — of all Northern Ireland's local councils, it spends the most on the arts. It has certainly stepped up to the mark in respect of the aforementioned projects, and it will be investing in them.

After consultation, an extra £1.5 million has been made available for expenditure in the arts sector. That demonstrates that the Executive have been responsive to the opinions that they heard during consultation. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is investing £146 million to support the delivery of the draft Northern Ireland strategy for sport and physical recreation for 2007-2017. The intention is that by 2011, that investment will have stopped the decline of adult participation in sport and physical recreation. That decline is to the detriment of the health and well-being of the people of Northern Ireland, and that must be reversed. The investment is being made to reverse that decline.

I mentioned cultural tourism — that must be related to our libraries, which, as has been noted already, account for 30% of the Department's budget. If we want to increase numbers, we need to increase and grow our cultural product so that when folk come here, there are more things for them to do. That will encourage them to stay longer, and to come back. When they are here, it will encourage them to visit more parts of Northern Ireland.

Investment is important in museums because, as well as the four museum sites that constitute the National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland, the 31 independent museums must be considered. The key point is that through tourism, such investment will be for the benefit of the economy as a whole, not just for the benefit of our own folk.

Finally, I note that the aforementioned issues tie in with the theme that is embedded in the Programme for Government — a shared and better future. If we are to have a better future for our society, it has to be a shared future, and a central element in that is cultural diversity. Another aspect must be the interdependence and relationships between different cultural traditions.

By developing our cultural infrastructure, and by growing the cultural capital for today and tomorrow, we are contributing to a shared future for Northern

Ireland, and that is something that I hope that everyone would welcome.

Mr B Wilson: I welcome the opportunity to give the Green Party's views on the Budget.

The Budget, as a whole, is not bad, given the financial restrictions that the Executive placed on themselves. I welcome the fact that some of the criticisms that were made in the Assembly have been taken into account by the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I agree with his emphasis on entrepreneurship, economic development and increasing skills. Those are essential for the future of our economy. However, there are major issues that have been ignored by the Budget, and I, therefore, intend to oppose it.

Some Members have suggested that it is wrong to criticise the Executive, and that anyone who does so is being negative and trying to destabilise devolved Government. I do not subscribe to that view. I believe that our most important role as MLAs is to scrutinise all Executive decisions and to highlight those with which we disagree. Neither the Executive nor this Budget are above criticism. In addition to the failure of the Budget to take a shared future into account, it gets no marks for failing to address environmental issues, as Mr Gardiner has pointed out.

The Executive claim to be concerned about climate change, but the policies that they will implement will have a detrimental impact on the environment. They claim to be green, and to support sustainability, but there is nothing in the Budget to substantiate those claims. In fact, all the evidence is to the contrary — particularly with the abolition of the Reconnect grants to support small, renewable energy systems, and the reduction of the percentage of the Department for Regional Development's budget for public transport. That, together with the Minister of Finance and Personnel's recent decision to change building regulations to state that the inclusion of renewables in new buildings is no longer mandatory, is a total negation of the Executive's claim to support sustainability.

5.30 pm

The decision to abolish the Reconnect grants, which were first introduced by Peter Hain, and the change in the building regulations sound the death knell for many small businesses in Northern Ireland.

Over the past two years, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) has encouraged firms to develop skills in the installation of new renewable-energy systems. Their staff were encouraged to take courses at the Renewable Energy Installer Academy, funded by DETI, and more than 800 installers completed those courses. An industry based on the new technology was evolving; students were developing skills that were increasingly in demand, North and South. However, that developing industry depended on the demand for

microgeneration systems. The end of Reconnect grants and the Finance Minister's decision on building regulations have destroyed that demand, and the installers, rightly, feel betrayed.

Recently, I attended a meeting in Downpatrick, at which the installers expressed great anger at those decisions. They argued that they had been let down by the Government and felt that they had wasted time and money in acquiring those skills only to find that there was no demand for them. Some of the installers even stated that they would be forced out of business if Reconnect grants or similar support are not introduced immediately; others said that they would have to seek work in the Republic, where such grants are available and extremely popular.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel's decision runs contrary to his claim to grow our indigenous private sector. Northern Ireland is losing small businesses that could develop into much larger ones. It is a betrayal of everyone involved in the scheme. I appeal to the Minister to find some way of supporting the installers. We cannot afford to lose a large number of small businesses that are at the cutting edge of technology.

That decision is at best short-sighted, particularly in the light of last week's proposals by the European Commission, which will increase targets for the use of renewable energy. The Irish Government recently increased grants for microgeneration systems, and local authorities in GB are strengthening building regulations to require greater energy efficiency in new buildings. While others promote renewable energy, the Executive are discouraging the uptake of renewable systems.

My other concern relates to the Health Service. As a former member of the Eastern Health and Social Services Board, I was concerned about the allocation for hospital services in the draft Budget. I welcome the extra £10 million, but it falls considerably short of what is needed, according to the Bamford Review.

As I pointed out in the debate on the draft Budget, an increase in the health budget of 2.6% is the lowest for more than 10 years. That percentage increase is equivalent to a freezing of the health budget when one considers demographic pressures and that Health Service inflation is higher than ordinary inflation. Compared to an increase of 4% in real terms in England, a freeze is unacceptable, particularly when one considers the length of trolley waits in Northern Ireland and other problems that are considerably worse than in England.

The differential in expenditure per head between Northern Ireland and England has reduced significantly in recent years. A recent study showed that, taking into account age profile, deprivation levels and market forces, the Health Service in Northern Ireland requires 10% more resources per head than in England due to its higher need. The present differential is about 4%, and

the proposals for 2008-09 will erode the differential completely.

The additional money in the revised Budget, now agreed for the comprehensive spending review (CSR) period, is welcome. However, according to Professor Appleby it falls far short of what is needed — a point that he made in his report to the Department of Finance and Personnel in 2005 and which he repeated in his evidence to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

The latest increase raises our real-terms health budget by less than 2%, compared to the previous 1.1% — and is still a long way short of England's new money of 3.7% over the next three years. Efficiency and productivity improvements of 3% per annum have already been factored in, and there is simply no scope for achieving further savings except through closing services and hospitals.

The revised Budget sets out a wish list of additional services. Last week, Members were informed about all the extra services that were going to be provided, but there was no indication of where the resources for any of those programmes would be coming from. The wish list is totally unrealistic.

As a member of the Eastern Health and Social Services Board, I recall that we had great difficulty in achieving efficiency savings of 1%. Therefore, it is over-optimistic to assume that efficiency savings of 3% are achievable. Many Members have said that such savings can be made, but they have not told us what those savings would mean in real terms, or what is going to happen. Given that the NHS is labour intensive, it will mean job losses; in fact, thousands of job losses — and it will be difficult to explain to overworked nurses and overworked doctors, patients, and all those who are on waiting lists why we are getting rid of a lot of staff.

Much of the savings and reorganisations that are supposed to pay for the new services are already being made in the present financial year, by reducing the number of health trusts from 18 to five. Therefore, where will the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety find the money to bring Northern Ireland into line with access targets and waiting times in England?

Professor Appleby showed that there is a need for 7% higher spending on health in Northern Ireland, based on need, if we are to enjoy similar standards of care as those in England. Yet, last week, he identified a £500 million shortfall in health spending over the CSR period. Therefore, not only are we going to have lower standards of care, the gap between entitlements and expectations in Northern Ireland compared to those in England will continue to widen. Access targets and waiting times here will simply not match English levels in the foreseeable future.

Mr Adams: Maith thú, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Go raibh míle maith agat. Déanaim comhghairdeas leis an Tionól agus go háirithe leis an Aire. I commend the Executive, and the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in particular, on the Budget.

The Executive faced an enormous challenge in putting together the Programme for Government, the Budget, and the investment package. As other Members have noted, the issues that needed to be tackled included: significantly high levels of disadvantage and poverty in many urban and rural areas; serious underfunding in health and education services; the environment; cultural rights; infrastructure; the crisis in the agriculture industry and economy; housing provision in the community and voluntary sector, and many other issues.

The fact that we have had to work within an inadequate block grant from the British Government exacerbates the situation. It is a significant problem that taxation and public expenditure policies are established in London, as is our existence on the edge of British Exchequer concerns.

I want to address my remarks to the Members on the benches opposite. Lack of economic sovereignty is something that the Assembly, and unionist representatives in particular, will have to face up to. That is the difficult context in which the Budget was produced.

Sinn Féin Members have stated their concerns about some aspects of the Budget, including the failure — I would say refusal — of the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to seek adequate funding for the Irish language. However, given the limitations imposed on the available funding and the conflicting demands placed upon the Budget, advances have been made, especially in the commitments underpinning the Programme for Government, the Budget, and the investment strategy, as well as the commitments to funding levels, and the underlying strategy governing all of those. That strategy — the equality impact assessment process — is the key element in the proper operation of the equality mechanisms.

However, we need to monitor the Programme for Government, the Budget, and the investment strategy constantly and be ready to redirect resources if necessary. More especially, the Executive and the Assembly need to present the British Government with a united demand for greater fiscal independence and an increase in the block grant, if we are to deliver high-quality public services and have a bigger, better, more effective, more efficient and prosperous economy.

Why should a British Chancellor worry about Ballymena, east Belfast or any of the areas that Members represent?

I am convinced that sustainable social and economic progress in the region will occur only in the context of

a single-island economy. Regardless of other differences that exist among parties, none of them underestimates the potential for greater prosperity that the all-Ireland political institutions, agencies and bodies can bring in times ahead. All the parties have acknowledged that fact. That potential must be exploited to the full.

Finally, I wish to comment briefly on yesterday's decision by the SDLP to vote against the Programme for Government. That is evidence of a party that is totally lost, bewildered and confused. The fact is that the SDLP believed that the institutions would not be re-established. It fought the Assembly elections on that pretext. Until recently, its entire political position was predicated on the belief that the DUP and Sinn Féin were the "problem parties". That was its mantra. The SDLP leader stood in the middle of a busy road with a large lollipop, asserting that a vote for the SDLP was the way to stop the DUP, while Sinn Féin went about the business of trying to get the institutions back in place.

Since the institutions have been re-established, the SDLP leadership has been unable to come to terms with that new reality, with the results of the last Assembly election or with the new political dispensation. If I were them — and I am not, thankfully — I would take good advice from those who believe that one must follow the will of the people. Yesterday's SDLP decision was ad hoc; it was on the whim of the party's leaders. Members saw their hasty exit from the Chamber during the debate on the Programme for Government when their amendment was not accepted; and their fit of pique when the UUP amendment was accepted. Therefore, the SDLP position is not a considered one.

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Adams: No, sir.

The logic of that hasty decision is that it appears that the party will also vote against the Budget. How can a party in the Executive — a party that is supposedly committed to the Good Friday Agreement and its implementation — vote in favour of the Programme for Government, Budget and investment strategy one week, and against them the next? How can it vote for those measures in one forum, and against them in another? That does not make sense. Mark Durkan knows that. I have listened to the SDLP's efforts throughout the debate. The party has failed to provide a logical or rational argument to support its absurd position.

No one should forget — my party certainly does not — that the SDLP leader, along with David Trimble and the UUP, negotiated the reinvestment and reform initiative — the ultimate in Thatcherite policy.

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Adams: I will not give way.

That policy opened the door to British Government attempts to privatise water services, which have now,

thankfully, been ruled out by Minister Conor Murphy. Nor should anyone forget that an SDLP Minister of Finance tried to push through legislation on the strategic investment body — the vehicle for PFI, PPP and privatisation. Is that social or democratic?

Of course, the SDLP has the right to oppose the Budget. No one denies it that right. However, it is dishonest for that party to oppose and support the Budget at the same time, and — here is the rub — then pretend that it is doing so on principle. Sin é, a chara. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr McFarland: I am saddened that the Budget is overshadowed by the absence of the deal-breaking peace dividend — that far-famed £1 billion package, which the DUP did not deliver.

5.45 pm

Budget time encourages me to recall two previous Budgets and the DUP's wailing and gnashing of teeth. In 2000, I recall that Sammy Wilson urged Members to vote for an amendment to cut the North/South bodies budget by 50% in order to:

“save livelihoods and put bread on the tables”. — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 7, p186, col 2]*.

I offer a further quotation from the Hansard report, in which Minister Dodds said:

“There are those who say that we should not get too exercised about expenditure in the all-Ireland dimension of the Belfast Agreement. Perhaps they can justify this to their constituents: for every million pounds spent on the all-Ireland political dimensions of the Belfast Agreement, 200 extra heart operations could be carried out, 25 houses might be built for the homeless, or 1,000 homes could be adapted for disabled people.” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 7, p157, col 2]*.

He further states:

“For a million pounds we could put central heating in 300 family homes. Look at fuel poverty: 170,000 homes in Northern Ireland still do not have adequate heating.” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 7, p157, col 2]*.

In the following year, Lord Morrow said that £1.2 million should be taken off the North/South bodies budget and put into the warm homes scheme. This year, now that the DUP is in Government, is there a demand for a reduction in the North/South element of the Budget? There is not. What a difference an election makes to the DUP position on “North/Southery”, as Peter Robinson described it.

During the debate, Mr Alban Maginness referred to the DUP's intention, in 2000-01, to destroy the Executive. However, he did not recall that when a single vote would have torpedoed the Budget and the Executive, the DUP Members, sadly, bottled-out and made themselves scarce, which ensured the survival of the First Assembly and the Belfast Agreement. That is amazing.

The Budget targets concern me. Some are ambitious, and others are impossible — for example, the ending

of child poverty by 2012. There is a tendency, as each year ends, to concentrate on the future and the next Budget. Often, little attention is paid to whether the targets for the current year have been met. Will the Finance Minister assure us that, as the financial year ends in March, the success, or lack of it, in achieving the targets this year will encourage him to examine whether the targets for the coming year are genuine and whether, perhaps, the Budget needs to be readjusted?

Budget delivery depends on a 3% efficiency saving. In recent years, those types of targets have been missed by 50%. If that figure is applied to the Budget for the coming year, the Minister will find that he is £1.5 billion short in his Budget. I welcome the setting-up of the performance efficiency delivery unit. Ministers should be encouraged to accept the help of that unit. Its involvement in challenging present practices and identifying savings will probably allow Ministers, in all Departments, to take credit for the easy decisions while blaming the unit for the difficult ones. By the end of the year we may be on the way to achieving those efficiencies.

I echo the call for the reform of the Planning Service to take place quickly. How can we encourage businesses to locate here when the building of their new premises may be delayed by up to two years under the present planning process? The Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee examined the current system for Minister Dodds, and his stewardship of the Giant's Causeway landmark project. The Department of Trade, Enterprise and Investment has been allocated a budget of £21 million to support that particular venture. I hope that funding will be available to support the new venture that is being developed by the National Trust.

In conclusion, the UUP supports the Budget. However, we have pointed out that there must be adjustments as confusion on policies emerges — for example, the lack of clarity on the water rates issue. We will monitor that and act in the best interests of our constituents. I support the Budget.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that both winding-up speeches are limited to five minutes each.

Mr Attwood: I thank Members for their contributions to the debate. I also thank, in particular, those Members — across all of the parties in the Chamber — who put on record the Budget's gaps, flaws and fault lines.

If the speeches and comments that have been made about sports and arts, regional development, education, and the environment are joined up, it is clear that the gloss has gone off Peter Robinson's first Budget — no matter how parties vote this evening. The flaws and fault lines are now on record.

I particularly applaud some of the contributions on the Budget, including that of the Sinn Féin president, both in the Chamber and in the comments that he has

made to the media. He said that the SDLP's approach has displayed:

"a lack of considered and consistent leadership"

Mr Adams: That is correct.

Mr Attwood: Let us examine the record of his party, which joined the Policing Board after it said that it would not do so until Special Branch had been disbanded. Sinn Féin said that it wanted MI5 out of Northern Ireland, and then it agreed to a deeper and bigger role for MI5 in Northern Ireland. Less than a year ago, Sinn Féin gave a manifesto commitment to:

"Ringfence a meaningful proportion of the annual budget for programmes aimed at tackling economic inequality and poverty."

That commitment has been airbrushed out of the Budget, as has Sinn Féin's commitment to try to secure 5,000 new units of housing.

When Margaret Ritchie had to challenge Peter Robinson on her Budget line on housing, Sinn Féin said that she should stop whingeing. Where is Sinn Féin's manifesto commitment — a deal that was done with the electorate less than a year ago — that said that it would work to provide an increased financial support package for social economy projects? That commitment was forgotten; it is nowhere to be seen in Peter Robinson's first Budget. I thank Mr Adams; the words that came from his mouth rang hollow and have been proven false.

The SDLP has been advised to go with the flow, so let us consider what that means. It means that the children's fund no longer exists; a cross-cutting strategy to deal with children's issues in the North has been abandoned. Going with the flow compounds the confusion around the 11-plus with financial uncertainty. There is no Budget line whatsoever for the biggest reform of the education system for decades. Let us go with the Sinn Féin flow, which fails to provide one word or one pound of clarity on the single biggest issue that has concerned the electorate over the past year — water charges. Let us go with the flow of a Budget that has no Budget line for an anti-poverty strategy. Let other parties go with the flow; the SDLP will go with its manifesto pledges and with its responsibility to the electorate. It will not go along with having its eye wiped by a Finance Minister who clearly has the measure of Sinn Féin in Government and Sinn Féin Ministers.

Gerry Adams berated the SDLP for voting down the Budget in the Assembly but for voting in favour of it in the Executive. He asked how that could be reconciled. In case Mr Adams has forgotten, it can be reconciled because Mr Adams negotiated a facility for that with the DUP in the St Andrews and pre-St Andrews talks. Before St Andrews and as far back as the negotiations at Leeds Castle, Mark Durkan advised Peter Robinson that, because of the ministerial code, a Minister would be compelled to vote for the Budget, but that did not

compel the party to do so. If Mr Adams fails to understand what the SDLP is doing, he should ask his advisers because he signed up to that facility.

Mr Ford: Given the number of occasions on which a shared future and the cost of division have been referred to, I must start with that.

I want to address a point that was made by the Finance Minister, and Trevor Lunn's response to it. I welcome the fact that — unlike the First Minister — the Finance Minister has indicated that he is prepared to engage seriously with us on the issues. We will happily take up his offer of a meeting, because the Budget is too important to be simply dismissed with the type of rhetoric that we hear in the Chamber.

There have been two types of speeches during the debate — logical ones and illogical ones. There have been two types of opposition in the Chamber — a coherent one and an incoherent one. Although I disagreed with many of the speeches, at least some logical speeches were made by Members on the DUP Benches. In all other parts of the Chamber — bar this small corner — Members stood up and expressed their opposition to the Budget and the Programme for Government. However, they then indicated their intention to vote for it. Tonight, the SDLP may establish where it stands on the issue, but where will the Sinn Féin and Ulster Unionist Members who have expressed opposition stand on the issue when it comes to the vote?

It seems that Sinn Féin has not swallowed the Finance Minister's policies. There was some traditional, old-fashioned, Marxist rhetoric from all manner of places. I was particularly interested when Mitchel McLaughlin complained about PFIs. There was a degree of irony in his saying that because the former Minister of Education — the deputy First Minister — was sitting beside him at the time, and he was the most principled supporter of PFIs. I do not know how Mitchel McLaughlin could possibly have said that, but then Gerry Adams repeated exactly the same points. We talk about coherence within parties, but there are clearly major problems in Sinn Féin accepting its responsibilities in Government, as opposed to its old-fashioned rhetoric.

Peter Weir is not in his place, but he took an interesting line when he asked what we would do about school closures. The answer is simple: school closures are happening anyway, and they are happening in an incoherent way, because there is no area-based planning. My colleagues have been prepared to take logical stances, when necessary, to close unpopular schools, including a so-called integrated school in the constituency of North Down, where we took the realistic and honest solution. Therefore, we do not need Peter Weir to give us lessons on that issue.

Simon Hamilton complained about funding for Irish-language schools. I refer him to objective 4 of public service agreement 10 in the Programme for Government, which he voted for yesterday — and I did not — which gives a clear commitment to funding Irish-medium education. Therefore, if the Member is going to point the finger, he should remember that there are three fingers pointing back at him.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

There is no realistic method for dealing with the fundamental issue of education reform in the Programme for Government. There is nothing in the Budget to deal with the costs, which have been highlighted in different corners of the Chamber, and the importance of education reform. How on earth will necessary reforms be carried through if they are not mentioned in the Budget?

Health funding is rising, but it is still lower than other regions of the UK, despite the greater need. When Members discuss the Bamford Review, we must recognise the fact that £10 million is nowhere near adequate to address the needs of mental health and learning disability. It is an insult for people to pretend that £10 million is, in any way, significant support. If we intended to do something about mental health and learning disability, a larger sum would be allocated for it.

Issues have arisen in respect of the review of public administration and the need for reforms of local government, which, at this stage, have not been addressed. The £30 million that the Department of the Environment discussed for the necessary restructuring and reforms of local government has disappeared completely.

To take the tough decisions that need to be taken requires a coherent Executive with a clear vision. There may be a vision from the Finance Minister, but it is not the coherent vision of this Executive, and it is not a vision that carries across to some Members of his party. Even Mervyn Storey — loyal mid-Bench — though he may be — managed to criticise it. I thought that, at least, the Finance Minister would have his own party under control. However, that is simply not the case. There are too many complaints, and there is still too much to be done.

We will back an Executive if they have the courage to take the right decisions, regardless of whether they are difficult or popular. However, we did not support the Programme for Government yesterday, and we will not support the Budget today, because they fail to deal with those issues. It is time to recall this Budget and bring forward a Budget that meets the needs of the people of Northern Ireland.

6.00 pm

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): At the outset, I want to put one or two points on record.

No Minister who comes to the Dispatch Box — regardless of his or her responsibility — should feel undermined by concerns expressed by colleagues, or by statements, such as that made by Mervyn Storey today, that a Committee will pay special attention to certain areas. That is the job of Committees; that is what I expect them to do. The Committees exist to keep Ministers on their toes and to scrutinise properly. Those actions do not undermine Ministers. Ministers are undermined when their party votes against something that they voted for. We witnessed such an undermining of a Minister during proceedings today and yesterday.

Mr McNarry, Mr Adams and Brian Wilson raised a similar point — though each from a different angle. They asked whether the Budget was solid, or if it could ever be changed. It would be madness for any Finance Minister to bring forward a Budget and say that it will stand for three years and not be changed in any way. That would be a ludicrous position to adopt. There will be changes in the environment and in how we have to do business over the next three years. We will be required to look at different priorities, and it will be the Executive's job to re-order them; to look at what money is released in monitoring rounds; and to consider the spending of any further funds that we receive by way of asset sales. I give a clear undertaking that the Executive will continue to review and revise the Budget as necessary. Any responsible Executive would do that.

There was a tendency on the part of some Members to damn by faint praise. Mr McNarry thought that the Budget was “all right”, and Brian Wilson said that it was “not bad”. With such lavish praise, I am glad that there were some more constructive contributions to the debate.

The debate was instructive. Opposing views were put forward by Members, but, in most cases, the common purpose of Members was to make Northern Ireland a better place for all of our people. However, it is a matter of regret that, in some cases, we witnessed continued opposition for opposition's sake.

In amendment No 1, the Alliance Party returns to the theme of the cost of a divided society, presenting a shared future as the panacea for all the financial challenges that the Executive will face. As I said in my opening remarks, although I agree that we should exploit any potential from that source, I have to deal in practical reality, and savings of the order quoted are unobtainable in the short or medium term. Meanwhile, we must continue with sensible and robust financial planning as a fundamental component of the delivery of services.

Unlike the Alliance Party, my colleagues in the Executive and I do not have the luxury of wishing our problems away. We have to deal, in a mature and

sensible way, with the real issues that face us. Without the bluff that there is funding available from the source suggested by the Alliance Party — which can be picked up at any moment — it is only through tax increases that the extra spend that the Alliance Party advocates can be met. All Members know that if one was to cost the Alliance Party's list of additional funding requirements, the regional rate for every household in Northern Ireland would have to be doubled or tripled.

According to the Alliance Party's suggestion, domestic regional rates will have to be increased by 76% to cover its proposals for additional spending for health alone. In the build-up to future elections, I hope that the Alliance Party members will go out and be as honest as they have been with the Assembly today and state that they are a tax-and-spend party that wants to double or triple the rates of the people of Northern Ireland.

The SDLP tabled an amendment. Even I was beginning to feel sorry for the SDLP today: the party has been embarrassed. I am sure that my information is correct. Right up to the weekend, if not beyond, the Minister for Social Development expected her party to vote with her on the Programme for Government, the investment strategy and the Budget.

It seems that, along the route, for some party-political reason, a knee-jerk decision was taken to vote against the Budget and ditch the Minister.

Mr Durkan: I can assure the Minister that he has been misinformed on that point. Our approach to this whole process, going back a number of months, has been very clear, including the Minister for Social Development's negotiating remit and priority focus.

Mr P Robinson: Having attempted to get an answer to that question earlier, I am delighted to hear the Members' remarks. I said that there were only two alternatives: one was that members of the SDLP had shafted their Minister, the other that the Minister had behaved disgracefully at the Executive meeting. If she knew what her party's position was going to be, we will come back to that and there will be ramifications.

The SDLP's representative did not table a single amendment at any stage of the Executive's long consultation process or at the Executive meeting at which the three documents were agreed. It is no answer for the leader of the SDLP to tell Members that this is a democratic Assembly and that "this is where we do it". If one is a member of the Executive, that is where one should first do it. Of course, if one does not get his or her way in the Executive and decides — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr P Robinson: In the course of the Executive meeting, there was no amendment from the Social Development Minister — none whatsoever. If these

were die-in-the-ditch issues, of such importance to the SDLP that its members were discussing them for weeks or months beforehand, it seems strange that its Executive Minister — who is supposed to be a colleague — would not have said at least, "Hold on a second, lads and lassies, I have something that is so important to the SDLP that if we do not get it we will vote against the Programme for Government, the investment strategy and the Budget." In circumstances of such fundamental importance to a party, it is a Minister's duty to table an amendment. However, she did not — not a single amendment. It is a disgrace that the Minister for Social Development allowed the Executive to believe that we had resolved to her and her party's satisfaction all the issues relating to the Programme for Government, the investment strategy and the Budget. At no stage —

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mr P Robinson: Wait a moment; I have not finished with the Member. He will have plenty of opportunities to speak.

At no stage did the Minister for Social Development indicate to the members of the Executive that the SDLP would vote against the Budget, PFG or the investment strategy for Northern Ireland, nor did she suggest any changes that might have made them satisfactory to her or her party colleagues.

If the Executive is to work, every member of that Executive must be brought along at each stage of dealing with issues. That is why I took the trouble to resolve outstanding issues with Ministers who were unhappy about their draft Budget allocations and why I attempted to reach agreement with all the parties that are represented on the Executive — not just my colleagues.

It is my responsibility to ensure that all four parties are moving along with the process. However, here we have one Minister who hid from her Executive colleagues the fact that there was dissatisfaction of such a magnitude that the whole wrath of the SDLP would come down on the three key documents that represent the Executive's future strategy and policy.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for giving way; perhaps he will be able to recover and prevent himself from going completely over the top.

The SDLP tabled reasoned, measured amendments to both the Programme for Government and, today, the Budget, and there was nothing over the top or reckless about them. They are consistent with reservations that I understand the Minister for Social Development expressed in the Executive, and if some of her Executive colleagues had joined her in expressing those reservations she might have tabled an appropriate amendment. What was there to do otherwise? The Assembly is the legal authority on the Budget, and this is the proper place to table an amendment.

Mr P Robinson: That is an absurd comment for a former Minister of Finance and Personnel to have made. What would he have thought if he had worked on a Budget with his colleagues, but was not told at any stage about key issues therein that needed to be changed until his Budget was debated in the Assembly and thrown in his face?

He is correct on one point: the issues that he mentioned are not difficult to resolve. That is the reason that I must wonder why they were never raised; many of them could have been explained to the Minister, had she raised them, and they could also have been explained to the SDLP, had it raised them during the consultation process. The SDLP chose not to raise those issues because, for party political reasons, it wanted to ambush the Executive when the Budget came before the Assembly.

The Member for Foyle should hang his head in shame over the way in which he and his party have dealt with the issue. The SDLP has suggested belatedly that uncertainties over water reform and post-primary education, the standing-down of the children's fund, and the Budget allocation for health, prevented it from supporting the Programme for Government yesterday and the Budget today.

That list of excuses shows that the SDLP has been scratching around for any possible reason to justify its opposition to the Budget. Although it would have been preferable to have had all the issues that are connected to water reform and post-primary education resolved neatly well in advance of the Budget process, the leader of the SDLP knows — better than most in the Chamber, given his time as Finance Minister — that that is not how it works. The Executive have to undertake the strategic planning process on the basis of the best information that is available at that time. That is the only sensible approach, and it is the policy that he adopted when he was Finance Minister, and it is also that which his Executive colleague, the Minister for Social Development, endorsed.

Other Members asked how a Budget could be considered when the outcomes of the water review and the educational reform programme — if that ever occurs — are unclear. At no time in history has a Finance Minister been able to say that they know everything that will happen three years in the future and can therefore work out their Budget exactly. That will not happen; there are always issues that need to be resolved.

Mr Durkan: What about education?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr P Robinson: The Member asked about education. How can I possibly produce any costings for education when I do not know what the reforms will be? The only alternative is for me to postpone my Budget until I know. How many months or years would I have to

wait? I am required by law to produce a Budget in the time frame and in the manner in which I have. Perhaps the Member for Foyle is suggesting that I break the law; if I did, I might be with the Member for North Antrim Mr O'Loan being interrogated in Castlereagh Holding Centre, which is where he apparently wants to go on holiday.

Had the Minister for Social Development and the SDLP considered matters further, many of the concerns could have been resolved. The Independent Water Review Panel's strand-two report on water reform was published only yesterday. Given that, how could I have taken that report into account when working on my Budget? Ministers must now consider that report, and the Executive will have to take a position on it. Before any final decisions are made, the Executive's proposals will have to be subjected to public consultation in the spring.

Although post-primary admission arrangements are referred to in the Budget document, the Minister of Education is consulting with stakeholders on the details of her new proposal. Those will also have to be brought to the Executive for consideration and decision. If we waited for all the contentious issues to be resolved, there would not be a Budget.

Furthermore, the Northern Ireland Act 1998 places a duty on me, as Minister of Finance and Personnel, to lay before the Assembly a draft Budget before the beginning of each financial year. Officials in all Departments have to carry out very considerable planning. Mature government is about considering proposals in the current context while recognising the potential to review and amend as the position changes. In-year monitoring processes can address those emerging issues.

6.15 pm

Concern has also been expressed about the Executive's decision not to allocate funding for a separate children's fund. There can be no doubt that investing in our children, particularly at an early stage in their development, can yield significant benefits for all society. The only question that the Executive have to address is how that is best taken forward. The approach of the previous Executive in ring-fencing the funding for children's services from raids by other services had some merit. However, that only meant that projects had less incentive to get up and running, as has been shown by the significant levels of underspend for programme funds more generally.

There is little point in having children's funds if the money cannot be spent, and is not being spent. Instead, this Executive have agreed that the funding for the projects previously supported by central funds should be included within departmental baselines, where those projects can be considered against competing priorities, and where there is greater certainty regarding funding.

As far as the children's fund was concerned, there was an underspend of 26.4% last year, whereas the average percentage underspend across the Departments was about 2%. The Executive have decided that they should put that funding into departmental baselines. It is also important to recognise that the establishment of a children's fund now would require funding to be removed from departmental baselines; and no Minister, including the Member's own Minister requested that option.

In addition, by having a cross-cutting public service agreement on children and family, the Executive have recognised the importance of Departments working together to provide improved outcomes rather than the administration of a central fund.

Finally — with regard to the SDLP's amendment — the SDLP returned to the issue of health funding, despite the Minister himself recognising that the best outcome had been achieved in light of the current financial situation. Members will be well aware that the Budget includes record levels of investment in health and social-care services. However, the level of growth in spending has been compared unfavourably by some with that of recent years. In response, I would say that although spending was increasing at a faster rate in the early part of the decade, so was Health Service inflation, in part, due to the response to the increase in funding. The net result was a service in which productivity was falling and waiting lists were rising. This year's increases, of course, are on top of all of the previous increases.

Mr Attwood: I am intervening now because I believe that the Minister for Finance and Personnel is about to move on to broader themes. He has made two very significant comments during the debate. He has conceded that because he does not yet know what is going to happen with regard to education reform and water charges, no budget lines — not even indicative budget lines — have been arrived at. Does he not accept that over the next month, in the event that significant financial consequences arise in respect of water charges or Budget reform, that he will have to come back to the House and rework the Budget in a way that could make it very different from what it is at the moment?

Secondly, even though he does not know how much those education or water reforms might cost, he said that those matters might be addressed by in-year monitoring. If he does not know how much the reforms will cost, how can he claim that in-year monitoring will produce sufficient funds for Budget lines? There will be many other demands, and, as we know, the Minister made provision in the December monitoring outcome for the health budget.

If the Minister does not know how much policy reforms will cost to implement, how can he say that in-year monitoring returns will cover them? In the event that they do not, where will the Minister find the extra money for water and education reforms?

Mr P Robinson: One would think that the Member had just discovered the oracle. I have been involved in budgets at a local-government level for nearly 30 years. In not one of those budget processes was I not aware of some significant initiative that could arise in the future, but the cost of which, at that stage, was not fully known. In those circumstances, one makes the best stab at assessing what the likely consequences will be.

Whatever the water reform issues might be, they must either be dealt with through a reprioritisation of funding by the Department for Regional Development or by the Executive as a whole. In an in-year monitoring round, money can come from one Department and be used by another. The commitment that I gave at the beginning of this debate was that if there were issues that needed to be addressed, the Executive would address those issues. The Executive cannot simply make a decision on a matter that has cost implications unless they are satisfied that they have the funds to meet the associated costs. The Executive must resolve those issues before they can start the process of agreeing the policies.

If there are funding implications, the Executive have to consider how to deal with the resulting funding pressures. I cannot say what the cost implications of the proposals on either water reform or education reform will be. However, the normal processes of Government have been around for generations and are capable of dealing with those types of pressures. However, if high costs are involved and the relevant Departments cannot bear those costs on their own, there will be consequences for other Departments. That will always be the way. I imagine that that will be one of the factors that the Executive will take into account before approving any such policy.

Members will be aware that the Executive have no desire to return to the failed dogma that states that more spending is the answer to every problem that we face. Instead, we must focus on delivery and better ways of providing services to ensure that outcomes are improved. I cannot accept that the SDLP's arguments offer legitimate reasons for not approving the Executive's Budget. As I have already said, many Members — including, as has been pointed out, some of my own colleagues — would prefer to see some changes in some of the spending areas for one Department or another. It is inevitable that each of us will believe that a particular area deserves more funding than is presently allocated.

However, the decision that every Member must make is whether, to use the old Mo Mowlam expression — in the round — one believes that the Budget is facing in the right direction and that its trajectory will take the Executive forward. I believe that it is facing in the right direction. My colleagues on the Executive all believed that it is, and all of them voted, without reservation, for the Budget. I trust that their colleagues will have sufficient faith in their judgement to support what they agreed at Executive meetings.

I listened to the Minister for Social Development's concerns during the consultation period on the draft Budget. When the issue was first raised in the Assembly, I said that I was signed up to securing more funds for social development and housing. I indicated how I believed that I could get those additional funds, and I delivered more funds to the Minister for social housing. I must point out to some Members that the funds that have been allocated for social housing will not simply meet the targets that the Executive laid down in the Programme for Government — they will exceed them.

Those targets will be met, and the Minister for Social Development agrees with me that if we reach the targets, we should not simply consider that a good job has been done and that everyone can go home — we want to exceed the targets by as much as possible. By providing the Minister with an additional £205 million, on top of the considerable amount of money that her Department received in the last two monitoring rounds, the Executive have shown that they want to assist her.

It is regrettable that the SDLP chose to take its lead from the Alliance Party. Simply to have its voice heard, it opposed the Programme for Government and the Budget rather than joining the rest of the Executive in trying to build a better future for the people of Northern Ireland.

The SDLP leader was asked why no amendment was tabled in the Executive, but I note that he has yet to provide an answer. In truth, no answer could justify the steps taken by the SDLP yesterday and today. Ministers have a responsibility to inform their Executive colleagues of any problems in their party and to seek changes to meet those concerns.

Mr Durkan: Where does that appear in the rules? The Minister is proud of having renegotiated the ministerial code. However, as Alex Attwood said and as I pointed out to the Finance Minister, his changes to the ministerial code bind Ministers but not their parties, which is what he is trying to do now. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. It is important for a Member to request that a Minister or Member give way.

Mr P Robinson: I have never suggested that a party is bound by the action of its Minister. If any Minister

with a genuine desire to make the Executive work and to act for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland knows that his or her party has a problem that will cause it to vote against the Programme for Government, the investment strategy and the Budget, the least that could be expected is that he or she informs the Executive.

No such rule or law exists, but anyone will consider it most peculiar that the Minister for Social Development kept mum when she could have told her colleagues in the Executive about a problem that it would be wise for them to address. I suspect that the truth is that the Minister for Social Development thought that her party would back her, and she is putting the bravest possible face on having been badly let down.

Mr B McCrea: The Minister said that it is important for ministerial colleagues to keep him informed, and he described the difficulties in shaping a Budget when certain facts are unknown to him. Would it have been helpful if the Minister of Education had told him what she had planned — particularly plans to deliver a fundamental change to the education system within the three-year period of the comprehensive spending review?

Would it be helpful if all his ministerial colleagues brought him such information? In the absence of such information from the Education Minister, should the Assembly delay the consideration of fundamental changes to education until the next three-year period, by which time he will have had time to gather all the relevant information?

Mr P Robinson: At this stage, it is impossible for me to cost any proposal from the Minister of Education. Before her proposals come before my Department, she must present them to the Executive, a consultation process must be carried out and her Department must cost them. Until then, I do not know whether the Minister's budget alone, or in conjunction with any additional funding that the Executive are willing to provide, can meet the cost of her proposals. I do not even know whether the proposals can receive the Executive's support, but that is a matter for them.

Month after month, every Minister will have to deal with new proposals; at no stage will a Minister have dealt with all the proposals in his or her remit. However, I accept that the proposal in question is of great significance and is, potentially, hugely expensive.

However, I can work out a Budget only on the basis of the funding pressures of which I am aware. I have done that. If new pressures arise, clearly there will be decisions for the Executive to take.

6.30 pm

Several Members raised the issue about the reference to the £1,000 that each household will benefit from. I am not clear as to what type of mathematics they have engaged in — they seem to think that there will be

some difference in the £1,000 if the bills came through the door in the form of water charges. The figures that I quoted were the distinction between what is planned by this Executive and what would have happened had direct rule continued. Therefore, the reference to £1,000 took into account the fact that people would probably already have had two bills for water charges had it not been for the decisions of the Executive.

Therefore, the Executive have already saved people very considerable amounts of money compared to what they would have been paying in water charges had direct rule continued. Furthermore, the percentages would have increased with time in accordance with the legislation that was already passed.

Moreover, the Minister for Regional Development has already indicated that people should not pay twice for their water. The Executive have identified — and it has been accepted by the Consumer Council and others — that the figure of £162, or thereabouts, is the amount that had previously been paid by consumers in their rates bill for water, and that the overall amount should be reduced by that figure so that people are not asked to pay twice.

Therefore, that is what gives rise to the fact that people will be £1,000 better off as a result of devolution. The Executive's decisions take into account water charges being sent out according to the plans that the Executive already have in mind, but also the fact that we are freezing rates for householders for the next three years, whereas there had been an average of approximately a 10% per annum increase under direct rule.

Those are the savings that make up the £1,000. It is quite simply a straightforward arithmetical calculation that I had hoped Members would have been capable of understanding and accepting.

As Declan O'Loan acknowledged, I have always been clear that the saving is over a four-year period. However, it is still a substantial saving and that money is much better in the hands or pockets of the people of Northern Ireland, rather than supporting inefficiency across the public service.

A number of Members, including Stephen Farry, Declan O'Loan and Roy Beggs, raised issues concerning economic policies. Comments have been made about the appropriateness of existing economic policies and the relevance of regional targets. Let us be clear: existing economic policies that are driven by a direct rule mindset will, at best, ensure that the Northern Ireland economy will continue to languish at around 80% of the UK average. That is simply unacceptable.

We need to examine our suite of economic policies and invest further in only those programmes that will enhance our regional productivity. Investing in the four key drivers of enterprise, innovation, skills and infrastructure will be the key determinant for agreeing

investment. Measuring our regional performance against the south-east England financial powerhouse is pointless. We have defined the PSA targets to allow us to better gauge relative performance against the other UK regions.

Improved performance will not appear overnight; it will be a slow and gradual process. However, the Executive are determined to reach the targets that have been set. Bringing about such improvement is why I accepted the offer from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury for a second Varney Review. An external objective assessment of our economic policies and needs can only be helpful.

I strongly encourage my Executive colleagues, the Assembly Committees and Members to fully engage with Sir David Varney over the next four weeks during the consultation period. We need complete clarity on what direction our economy is required to take. Therefore, we need complete clarity on the policies that must be implemented.

Issues were raised by, among others, Mitchel McLaughlin, the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, and by Declan O'Loan and Roy Beggs, regarding the regional economic strategy. The new regional economic strategy will be significantly influenced by the second Varney Review as well as the decisions that have been taken by the Executive in respect of the Programme for Government, the investment strategy and the Budget.

I take no comfort from pointing out that I have always urged caution in managing expectations when trying to obtain any tax dispensation, and many of us were disappointed by the attitude taken in the first Varney Review.

However, the second Varney study will provide an objective assessment of what our economy needs by way of development policies and programmes. I am glad to say that that review will have some of our in-house officials involved, and there will, therefore, be a greater degree of local expertise going into the process.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel and Mr O'Loan raised concerns about PFIs and PPPs. Such contracts can only be put in place if they represent robust value for money in business cases and if they are affordable as regards departmental allocations.

Additional funding for youth services was mentioned, and I would like to point out to Jennifer McCann of West Belfast that in response to the call for public consultation for additional funding for children and youth services, the Executive have allocated an additional £13 million across the Budget period. The Minister of Education has used that money to allocate an extra £4.6 million to current expenditure on youth services.

Jennifer McCann also mentioned social housing and the affordability review. Across the three-year Budget

period, the Department for Social Development has been given the resources to deliver 2,000, 2,250 and 2,500 social and affordable houses each year respectively. To complement the Semple Review, Baroness Margaret Ford was commissioned by Margaret Ritchie to undertake a review of funding capacity, planning policy and delivery structures for social housing in Northern Ireland. I welcome the Minister's initiative and the interim report by Baroness Ford, which I have seen. The Minister will consider the issues emerging from the report of her advisory panel, which is examining the Semple Report, and will report back to the Executive.

Efficiency targets were mentioned by a number of Members, including Stephen Farry, Declan O'Loan and David McNarry. Some commentators have expressed concerns about the deliverability of the 3% efficiency targets, and I agree that that issue is important. Departments will soon be setting out detailed plans on their departmental websites showing how they will deliver against the targets, the key risks to delivery, and the associated contingency plans. That work will provide assurance, and will facilitate scrutiny of the delivery plans by Assembly Committees. Rather than doubt whether 3% can be attained, there should be pressure to try to go beyond 3%.

There seems to be confusion and concern that the efficiency agenda presents a risk to front-line services. The whole point of the efficiency agenda is to release funds specifically for reallocation to front-line services, not to take them away. Although it is for individual Departments to deliver those savings, Departments can come back to the Executive to seek support and assistance in the event that circumstances mean that delivery of efficiencies in any year will not be possible. I emphasise the point that the responsibility is on the Executive, as a whole, to deliver the targets set out in the Programme for Government.

David McNarry and Roy Beggs mentioned the question of funding for a national stadium. I assure them that I will take the decision in the Department of Finance and Personnel and inform my Executive colleagues, and it will be based entirely on the evidence presented in the business case. The key driver for that decision will be demonstrable value for money and affordability, and it is only right that the business case should embrace all the cost factors. I assure the Member for East Antrim Mr Beggs that infrastructure, and other associated costs, will not be ignored when value for money and affordability are being considered.

David McNarry and Alan McFarland referred to the Chancellor's package. It seems ironic that Mr McNarry should raise the issue of the package, since he and his party had given up on it before devolution and had advised my colleagues to move on to devolution and leave the issue behind. If it had been left to them, we would still be stuck with the reinvestment and reform

initiatives and borrowing conditions that would have required huge annual regional rate increases. I am glad that we managed to get that changed.

We should not underestimate the scale of what we have achieved, especially in the wider UK public expenditure context in which the package was secured. Although we would have liked to have achieved more — and what Executive would not? — negotiations with the Treasury have paid dividends. The Member for North Down said that we promised a £1 billion package and that we had failed to deliver. He is right; we have failed to deliver a £1 billion package — we have delivered a package that is worth more than £2 billion.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr P Robinson: As a result of the negotiations, we delivered guaranteed —

A Member: Where is it?

Mr P Robinson: The Member asks, "where is it?". If he looks at the investment strategy, he will see where it is. We have £2 billion a year in capital expenditure, because we are using the benefits that we could derive from the package, benefits that came from our ability —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr P Robinson: The Member should let me make the case before he intervenes. Indeed, he might choose not to intervene when he hears the case made.

Previously, money that was gained by way of asset disposal found its way back to the Treasury and, at the very least, we ended up having to argue for it or some part of it. We would never have been able to argue for the scale of asset disposal funding that we have been able to allocate in Northern Ireland. We have already been able to identify approximately £1.1 billion for the next three years. The capital realisation task force has identified another £295 million over that period, and I have allocated only £200 million in the provisions of the Budget. Therefore, there will be some room to manoeuvre should there be issues about the price of land that some Members referred to or other pressures that we might face.

Does the Member want me to give way now?

Mr B McCrea: I will ask a simple question on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland. If we have received the £2 billion, why do we all feel so poor? Why is the man in the street worried about the price of diesel, the price of food and other prices? The whole issue — *[Laughter.]*

Members can laugh, but I want to ask them a question. Does the Northern Ireland public feel that it has been given a fair deal?

Mr P Robinson: I can confirm that I have no intention of allocating funds to a subvention for

restaurants or the local grocery shop. The amount of capital funds available for the last comprehensive spending review period was £600 million per annum. We now have — and I will speak in language that the Member might understand — £2,000 million — well over three times the previous allocation, and that was due to the provision of the Chancellor's package. It was a massive bonus for the Executive.

In addition to the amount that we have gained from asset sales, we have had access over the Budget period to our full stock of end-year flexibility funding, and that has amounted to some £440 million. We have access to unused RRI borrowing, which is worth a further £100 million. As I have already said, breaking the link between access to borrowing under RRI, with the requirement to close the gap with GB council-tax rates, has been a massive benefit to the Executive and has allowed me to ensure that we did not have the 19% rate increases that the policy that the Member for Foyle introduced as part of his party's allocation for RRI — *[Interruption.]*

I would love to tell the story of my visit to the Member when he was Finance Minister, when I advised against breaking the link between our regional rate and water charging, and the consequences of that change.

Mr Speaker: Order.

6.45 pm

Mr P Robinson: I have only 15 or 20 minutes left, and by the look of the number of the pages that I have still to read, I am less than halfway through, so I had better speak quickly.

Today, it is the Executive and the Assembly who determine the level of rate increases in Northern Ireland, not local government in Great Britain.

Mr McNarry also raised the issue of the number of Departments that various parties hold and, therefore, how important those parties are and how far they can puff out their chests. He boasted about the size of the budgets of the two Departments that his party colleagues hold. Let me just tell him that size is not everything. The size of the Budget is not the key determinant in these issues. The quality of services that will be delivered to the people of Northern Ireland is what matters, rather than what those services cost.

The Alliance Party accused us of having a low-tax Budget. I am unapologetic about the reduction in rates for households and businesses. Industrialised countries across the world have recognised that supply-side policies, such as low taxation, are the key mechanisms for improving economic growth. I was surprised that Stephen Farry quoted the CBI and ERINI as though they were supporters of his, because they have been at the forefront of the call for reductions in corporation tax.

The Member for North Antrim Mr Storey raised the issue of reform costs. Although the programme of Civil Service reform, including Workplace 2010, must receive an appropriate level of funding over the Budget period, the level of costs required has not been finalised yet. Therefore, it would not have been appropriate to allocate all the funding at this time, in light of the competing priorities and pressures. That will also incentivise the programmes to minimise cost and maximise efficiencies.

The issue of procurement and poverty was raised by Jennifer McCann and Sammy Wilson, although I am not sure that they were both singing off exactly the same hymn sheet. The Executive have a statutory requirement to adopt an anti-poverty strategy. Ministers are committed to making people's lives better by tackling poverty and social exclusion. Those principles underpin the Executive's Programme for Government.

I remain convinced that the most effective way to alleviate poverty is to create employment and enhance regional economic growth and, in parallel, to increase spending on public services. That is what this Budget does. Although it is important that the Executive do all that they can to reduce the unacceptably high level of poverty in Northern Ireland, it must be recognised that using Government procurement as a tool to address poverty may result in lower levels of value for money, with an associated impact on services that are provided to the public.

Declan O'Loan raised the issue of the Department of Finance's efficiencies. Over the CSR period, my Department will take forward the most wide-ranging reform of public services that has been seen for a generation. At the heart of that reform programme is a commitment to developing world-class public services that will not only support the needs of the economy, but bring benefits to the wider society in Northern Ireland.

Delivering efficiency within public services is central to both the Programme for Government and the Budget over the next three years. As I have already said, I have established a performance and efficiency delivery unit to examine the scope for Departments, including my own, to deliver savings over and above the 3% target for this Budget. More than 40% of the funding that is allocated to my Department over the CSR period is required to support the delivery of the key Northern Ireland Civil Service reform programmes on behalf of all the Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. A number of meetings seem to be going on in the Chamber.

Mr P Robinson: If Members are reconsidering the decisions that they have taken in the past, they can continue with their discussions, and, hopefully, some sense will come from them.

The process of benefits realisation associated with the reform programmes will extend beyond the CSR period as projects are implemented and service delivery is stabilised.

Consequently, qualitative and quantitative value-for-money savings are expected to materialise over the longer term. Against that backdrop, the efficiency target of £14 million by 2010-11 represents a significant challenge. Despite that, my Department has identified, and is committed to delivering, efficiencies of at least £14.8 million by 2010-11, thereby finding savings that are 5% above the set target. Of the total efficiencies identified by 2010-11, £5.7 million — or 38.5% — relate to the recognition of income associated with recouping the cost of collection of district rates on behalf of district councils, thereby generating £5.7 million of additional resource cover for investment in services across the Northern Ireland block, and thus it represents a legitimate cash-releasing savings action.

The issue of funding for the arts was raised by several Members. The Executive recognise fully the role played by arts and sports in society, as is shown by the additional £4 million allocation to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in response to the concerns raised during the public consultation process on the draft Budget. The matter of the libraries was also drawn to our attention.

However, although we recognise the case for additional funding for the arts, it is important to note that spending comparisons quoted liberally during the public consultation significantly understate the current position as regards arts funding in Northern Ireland. In particular, alternative figures, from the official Treasury source, suggest that funding for the arts is on a par, if not higher, than in England, while sports funding is significantly higher. Therefore, I am confident that the increased provision for arts funding, agreed by the Executive in the revised Budget, will allow the people of Northern Ireland to enjoy the same benefits in that respect as the rest of the people of the United Kingdom. The proposed allocation will enable the implementation of the sport and physical recreation strategy, although the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will need to make some difficult decisions with regard to its priorities.

The issue of funding for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister was raised by the Member for East Antrim Mr Beggs. The increase in funding for that office since the previous period of devolution is mainly due to the provision of more services, rather than to an increase in bureaucracy. Since 2002-03, an additional £5 million has been spent on victims; that will rise to £13 million by 2010-11. An additional £2 million is required for the ongoing running costs of the office of the Northern Ireland

Commissioner for Children and Young People, which was not in place under the previous Executive.

With regard to support for the Executive spending area, the majority of additional costs relate to the Strategic Investment Board and the reinvestment and reform initiative. Although I encourage all my ministerial colleagues to keep costs as low as possible, I hope that Members agree that the services provided by OFMDFM for children, victims, older people and community relations are of significant benefit to the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister give way?

Mr P Robinson: I would love to give way, but I have so little time left that, by bringing Mr Beggs in for a second or third time, I will not cover another Member for a first time.

However, I will deal with a point that he raised in relation to the capital realisation report. The excellent work of Ed Vernon and the capital realisation task force identified the potential for £290 million asset disposal over the Budget period. As I indicated, I have not allocated all that potential funding, but rather have adopted a prudent assumption over the Budget period. A key issue to be considered before any disposal is taken forward is the state of the market. In that way, we will ensure that we secure the maximum value of all disposals. I assure the Member that there will be no fire sale of assets while I am Minister of Finance and Personnel. Consideration is being given to the publishing of the capital realisation task force report. At present, it is with the Executive, where further decisions have yet to be taken.

The issue of road structural maintenance was raised by Fred Cobain. I found his contribution to be rather Jekyll and Hyde in nature: while he read his script as Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, he made positive and constructive points; while he read his own script, he was in orbit and made some comments that were neither rational nor factual. The Budget allocation for structural maintenance will allow Roads Service to give priority to maintenance of the strategic road network, which carries the greatest volume of traffic. Other roads, including rural roads, will receive resurfacing treatment as far as the Budget allocation will permit.

A system of regular safety inspections is in place to ensure that essential response maintenance is identified and completed when necessary. The outcome of the final Budget means that funding for roads structural maintenance will total £200 million during the Budget period. I can assure all Members that that spending area can, of course, be augmented if in-year monitoring rounds identify additional funding and the Executive consider that an appropriate priority.

Fred Cobain also referred to railways. Translink now has the resources to procure 20 additional new trains, the first of which will be in service in 2011. It will also be able to construct a new railway station in Newry, secure some £40 million of track improvements between Knockmore and Lurgan, as well as completion of the £12 million track extension between Ballymena and Coleraine, and take forward a major track relay between Coleraine and Londonderry.

In respect of health efficiency, the Chairperson of the Health Committee, the Member for Strangford Iris Robinson MP MLA — with whom, as you would expect, Mr Speaker, I agree entirely — pointed out that the Budget package for health represents a golden opportunity for the Health Minister to deliver further efficiency savings beyond the 3% target. It provides him with much greater flexibility. Of course, any efficiency savings that are made will go to front-line services.

I welcome the work of the Bamford Review of mental health and learning disability. I am sure that all Members want improved services for patients in that sector. The additional allocations in the revised Budget for 2008-11, along with a package of measures to provide greater financial flexibility, will enable the Department of Health to cover its substantial cost pressures as well as a series of service developments during the Budget period. That will include improvements to mental-health and learning-disability services.

The Member for Upper Bann Sam Gardiner referred to the environmental protection agency. No decision has been made about the establishment of such an agency in Northern Ireland, which was proposed in the report of the review of environmental governance. I understand that the Environment Minister is carefully considering her approach to environmental governance. In doing so, she is taking account of the recommendations of the independent review of environmental governance report, of resource and wider policy considerations, and of points that stakeholders have raised with her and the Department.

The Member for West Tyrone Barry McElduff referred to additional resource allocations. He pointed out that they would enable the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to allocate additional funds to areas that he and I consider important, such as sport and physical recreation. I believe that around £11.5 million has been allocated to commence the implementation of the Department's sports and physical recreation strategy, which focuses on increasing participation in sport, particularly by young people.

The Member also referred to the fuel duty differential. In recent years, the fuel duty differential has converged considerably. It is also welcome that law-enforcement officers in the border area have seized

around 11 million litres of illicit fuel, dismantled 93 laundering plants, disrupted 19 criminal gangs who were involved in oil fraud, and secured 31 convictions for oil fraud offences. That occurred between April 2000 and March 2006.

Mr Adams pointed out to Members on these Benches that there were issues that they might want to consider, such as the denial of fiscal flexibility that comes with Northern Ireland being part of the United Kingdom. I must point out to him that there are significant benefits from Northern Ireland being part of the United Kingdom, particularly the fact that its deficit, which is in the region of £7 billion per annum, is funded by the Treasury. That amounts to around £9,400 for each member of the population of Northern Ireland. Therefore, if the Assembly were to consider that purely on financial terms, it would not make any changes. However, for many Members, the reasons for staying in the United Kingdom go well beyond the issue of finance.

7.00 pm

I will touch on the issue of microgeneration, which the Member for North Down Mr Brian Wilson raised. For many buildings, certain microgeneration technologies will simply not be appropriate; for example, wind turbines or solar panels in a shaded hollow, or wood-pellet heating systems where there is insufficient space in which to store pellets. Therefore, it makes no sense to mandate designers to use them. Improving the thermal performance of a building is widely recognised as the most cost-effective means of reducing emissions. Mandatory microgeneration would force designers to use a more expensive technology to achieve the same results.

I think that it was the same Member who tabled some questions for written answer on that subject. Rather than take up further time now, I can tell him that he got an extensive response, which he may have already received, to those questions. Papers have been placed in the Library as a result of inaccurate stories on the issue that were printed, particularly in 'The Irish News'.

I thank all Members who spoke today and who have put forward their views throughout the Budget process. I regret that, due to time constraints, it has not been possible to respond to each issue that each Member has raised during the course of the debate. However, I hope that the main themes have been addressed. I am sure that we will return to many of them in future debates on financial matters.

Members have raised a number of important issues, not only for the Executive to consider as we move forward but for individual Departments and their Committees to consider. Although I may have fundamentally disagreed at times with a position that

has been advanced, that should not be mistaken for any lack of desire on my behalf, or on that of my Executive colleagues, to hear differing views on the proposed priorities and their associated spending plans.

The debate throughout the Budget process was at times robust, but there can be no doubt that the public's views have been made known. The Executive have listened to those views, and the result is an improved set of Budget proposals. In that context, I agree with the 'Belfast Telegraph' editorial on the revised Budget, which stated:

"when it comes to putting government money where it is most needed, there is no substitute for devolution."

That is not to say that any devolved Budget would be good enough for the people of Northern Ireland — we have done much better than that.

The Budget is a Budget for households, because it reduces regional rates; for business, because it increases levels of support, particularly for innovation activity; for public services, because it provides record levels of investment; and for all the people of Northern Ireland, because it puts in place a comprehensive strategy to deliver real improvements to local people's lives.

Although the Executive's spending plans must be kept under review, I am confident that we have a strong starting position for the next three years. Therefore, I recommend to all Members that they support the Budget and do not pander to any party political advantage.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: Order, Members.

Before we proceed, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support. The votes on the amendments will require the support of a simple majority. I remind Members that if amendment No 1 is made, amendment No 2 will fall.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 9; Noes 66.

AYES

Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr McCarthy, Mr Neeson, Ms Purvis, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Lo and Mrs Long.

NOES

Mr Adams, Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Brolly, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Doherty, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Ms Gildernew, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr P Maskey, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCausland,

Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mr McFarland, Mrs McGill, Mr McGimpsey, Mr M McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Hamilton and Mr McKay.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put, That amendment No 2 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 15; Noes 65.

AYES

Mr Attwood, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr A Maginness, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr D Bradley and Mr Burns.

NOES

Mr Adams, Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Brolly, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Doherty, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Ms Gildernew, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr P Maskey, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mr McFarland, Mrs McGill, Mr McGimpsey, Mr M McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Hamilton and Mr McKay.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 67; Noes 24.

AYES

Nationalist:

*Mr Adams, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly,
Mr W Clarke, Mr Doherty, Ms Gildernew, Mr G Kelly,
Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann,
Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness,
Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín,
Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.*

Unionist:

*Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne,
Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Craig,
Mr Cree, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Sir Reg Empey,
Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin,
Mr Kennedy, 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 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 Ayes: Mr Hamilton and Mr McKay.

NOES

Nationalist:

*Mr Attwood, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley,
Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan,
Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr A Maginness,
Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey.*

Unionist:

Ms Purvis.

Other:

*Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn,
Mr McCarthy, Mr Neeson, Mr B Wilson.*

Tellers for the Noes: Mr P J Bradley and Ms Lo.

<i>Total votes</i>	<i>91</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>67 (73.6%)</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>22 (59.5%)</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>45 (97.8%)</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>0 (0.0%)</i>

Main Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2008-09 to 2010-11 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 22 January 2008.

PRIVATE NOTICE QUESTION

Water Supply at Killyclogher

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the work being undertaken by his Department to repair the water infrastructure near Killyclogher; and to ensure that the hundreds of families affected are reconnected to the public water supply.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that no families are currently affected by the loss of water supply due to the burst water main in the Killyclogher area, and none require reconnection to the public water supply. All customers are being supplied from adjacent water supply zones.

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Members should leave the Chamber in an orderly fashion.

Mr Murphy: I am surprised that there is not more interest in this matter.

Northern Ireland Water has isolated the section of damaged pipe and contingency plans have ensured that water supplies have been secured. The location of the breach has made the repair technically difficult and potentially hazardous. The difficult ground conditions have caused the pipe failure to recur at the same location, and Northern Ireland Water has engaged specialist structural engineers to provide advice on the best long-term solution and on the necessary preliminary works to ensure that the repair can be carried out with the minimum risk to health and safety.

The focus remains on repairing the damage as quickly as possible while managing the present technical and safety considerations. At the same time, the re-zoning allows water supplies to be brought in from other areas and has allowed Northern Ireland Water to continue to provide customers with water supplies.

7.45 pm

Mr McElduff: Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer and for accepting the private notice question. I welcome the assurance that no families are currently affected by a loss of supply. I appreciate the efforts of those carrying out the work in that area, on what are poor ground conditions.

How many calls did NI Water receive between Thursday 24 January and the evening of Sunday 27 January? Will the Minister detail the nature of the work being undertaken to provide a long-term solution? Furthermore, will the Minister give an

assessment of the short-term risk of a possible recurrence of the problem?

Mr Murphy: I appreciate the difficulties that have been caused for the people of Omagh. As I have said, no one is currently without a water supply. Of course, the people in the affected area will want some degree of certainty of future water supplies and of the continuity of that water supply.

On Thursday 24 January when the incident initially occurred, approximately 200 calls were received by Northern Ireland Water's customer relations centre between 4.30 pm and midnight. On the evening of Friday 25 January when the problem reoccurred, approximately 250 calls were received as the initial re-zoning exercise to supply the area from adjacent supplies proved not to be extensive enough. On Sunday 27 January, approximately 20 calls were received between 10.00 pm and midnight when the initial attempt to repair and recharge the main was unsuccessful.

As the Member said, the terrain around where the leakage occurred is difficult to work on. It was a landslide that dislodged one section of the pipe from the other. The ability of Northern Ireland Water's engineers to successfully carry out the repair was hindered by the ground and weather conditions, which caused difficulties and created health and safety issues for the operatives.

They made the connections to replace the water supply from other sources. As I have said, initially that did not suffice, but it was rectified and has sufficed since. It is the intention of Northern Ireland Water to repair the landslide that caused the initial leakage as soon as possible and to have all of the properties reconnected to the supply from Killyclogher.

Adjourned at 7.48 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 4 February 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Ross: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On 16 November 2007, I tabled a question for written answer to the Minister of Education. I still have not received an answer. Given that questions for written answer are supposed to be answered within 10 working days, can you use your office to investigate why, after 49 days, I am still waiting for an answer from the Education Minister?

Mr Speaker: Let me say to the Member, and to the whole House, that I have had a number of complaints from all sides of the House about Departments not answering written questions within the appropriate time. I can assure you that my office is being very active about dealing with those complaints.

Mr S Wilson: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The Minister in question not only disregards questions asked by individual Members, but disregards questions raised by the Assembly's Education Committee, which has a statutory role in the work of the House. We have written to you saying that, on a number of occasions, it has taken from September until January for the Minister to respond to the Committee's questions. I trust that, when you are considering the issue, you will pay particular attention to the Minister of Education and the Department of Education, one of whom seems to be out of control, while the other seems to be falling apart.

Mr Speaker: Once again, I say to all sides of the House that this issue is common to a number of Departments. It is not just one Department that my office is receiving complaints about. I assure Members on all sides of the House that the issue will be dealt with.

Mr Campbell: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. My point of order relates to today's questions for oral answer. I understand that you do not take points of order during that part of business, and I also understand the difficulty that the Business Office has when accepting questions that are tabled. However, today's question 9

to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure asks the Minister:

"to detail his plans to restore confidence in him and his Department among Irish language speakers following his failure to support an Irish language Act."

Mr Speaker, I ask you to consider that question's pejorative use of "failure", rather than asking about the Minister's "decision" not to introduce an Irish language Act. Although I am sure that a debate could have followed through supplementary questions, I would have thought that it was the Minister's "decision" not to proceed with an Irish language Act, rather than his "failure". I contend, therefore, as do many others, that that question ought not to have been selected.

Mr Speaker: I appreciate the point of order.

Mr F McCann: Regarding the point of order raised by Sammy Wilson, it would be more appropriate if he were to look into the way in which he conducts his chairmanship of meetings, and his treatment of people who come before —

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. Order. That is not an appropriate point of order. In answer to Mr Campbell, I will look at that issue and come back to him.

Mr F McCann: On a further point of order, do the concerns raised about Ministers not responding to written questions apply across the board to all Ministers, or are they confined to one Minister?

Mr Speaker: My office is gathering figures on exactly where the problem lies; however, I assure the Member that more than one Department is causing the problem.

Mr Storey: Further to the points of order raised by my colleagues Mr Ross and Mr Wilson, Mr Speaker, will you, in your deliberations, take into account that, following its submission, when a question appears on the Assembly website, AssIST, as having fallen, no information comes back to the Member who asked the question as to why it fell? In this case, the problem again concerns the Education Minister, and it may be yet another opportunity for her to be evasive. Will you look at that matter?

Mr Speaker: That is another issue that we shall examine. Let me remind Members on all sides of the House that the issue causes big concern to some Members, who, when they write to a Department, wait for a very long time for a written answer. I assure Members that the Office of the Speaker and the Business Office are looking into the matter.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker, Standing Order 42(1) requires Ministers to take the Pledge of Office, usually in this House or before you, as its representative. That pledge refers to the ministerial

code, which requires that Ministers support Executive decisions.

Last week, in this House, several Ministers failed to support either the Programme for Government or the Budget. To the best of my knowledge, no apology was given by those Ministers for not doing so.

I ask you to take time to consider whether those Ministers were in breach of the Pledge of Office that they took before this House.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order, but must remind him that that is an issue for the Executive and not for this House.

Mr Ford: With respect, Mr Speaker, I point out that the Pledge of Office is taken before this House, and I ask you, as representative of this House, to examine whether the Speaker has a role. I accept that the matter lies with the Executive; however, the fact that Standing Order 42(1) refers to the Pledge of Office surely gives you a role.

Mr Speaker: I will take the matter on board and look into it. However, I must again tell the Member that it is more for the Executive than for this House to deal with the matter.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. On the back of previous points of order, can you confirm, or can your office clarify, whether the Assembly has signed up to an anti-bullying policy?

Mr Speaker: I must tell the Member that that is not an appropriate point of order for the business of this House today.

Ms S Ramsey: Further to that point of order, I want to know whether the people employed by this Assembly are protected by an anti-bullying policy.

Mr Speaker: Once again, I can refer the matter to the Commission.

Mr S Wilson: Further to that point of order, I notice leaflets around the building to indicate that there are five harassment contact officers in the Assembly. Do those officers deal with complaints about Ministers who try to bully Committees?

Mr Speaker: Order. Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. We will now move on.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Proposals for the Reorganisation of the Health and Social Care System in Northern Ireland

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that he wishes to make a statement regarding proposals for the reorganisation of the health and social care system in Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I am making an announcement today on proposals to transform health and social care services in Northern Ireland. I shall put those proposals to the Executive next month for approval for public consultation.

Since my appointment as Minister in May 2007, a major challenge facing me has been the need to reform and modernise our health and social care system. Structures that had remained largely unchanged for 30 years had already started to alter dramatically as the radical reforms proposed under the review of public administration got under way. Health has been leading the way in that reform process. Only last year, the first significant step in reforming the health and social care system was taken when 19 trusts were reduced to five health and social care trusts and one ambulance trust. Those new organisations will be at the forefront of improving and protecting health, and delivering better-quality services to the population. They will work closely together, be more effective and efficient, and promote stronger links between hospital and community services.

Perhaps the greatest change that faces our health and social services, however, comprises the demands and expectations of members of a changing population who rightly expect access to services delivered in their own communities and homes, and to new life-changing drugs and modern technologies that will transform their lives for the better. I want a modern, responsive and forward-looking Health Service that tackles health inequalities and puts patients at the heart of its thinking.

When I took up office in May 2007, I inherited a raft of proposals for reform, which had been drawn up by direct rule Ministers for a direct rule Administration. The return of devolution, with local Ministers and a local Assembly scrutinising their work, presents a real opportunity to deliver a local solution that meets our local needs. I have said it before, and I shall say it again: I make no apology for having taken the time to consider the organisational changes that are required to put in place arrangements that are fit for purpose, both now and in the future, and that will deliver the best

possible outcome for patients and clients. To do otherwise would be to fail the people of Northern Ireland.

In recent months, I have spoken to a wide range of people, including patients, clients, carers and health and social care staff. There is a real desire for change in order to improve our system. I have reflected long and hard on what has been said to me over the past months. I have considered other models — not only in England, Scotland and Wales but in the Republic of Ireland — which have faced similar reform issues. Therefore, I am clear about what I want from our health and social care system. We must have a patient-centred service. Value for money is crucial, and the way in which services are delivered must focus on maximising benefits to everyone who uses the service. Our services must be efficient, high quality, capable of meeting challenging targets and without unnecessary duplication.

In addition to that, I want to develop forward-looking, innovative health and social care organisations that deliver on targets and are constantly striving to improve their performance for the benefit of patients. Quality and standards will continue to be driven up without compromise. Patients, clients and carers must be given the opportunity to voice their concerns and be sure that they are being listened to; dignity, respect, equality and fairness for patients, relatives and staff are at the core of everything that we do. Those are the guiding principles that I have used in determining the future shape of our health and social care system.

Some of the reforms proposed by the direct rule Administration have already been implemented. I am satisfied that the current trust structures should remain largely as they are, and I have already informed staff of that conclusion. The previous direct rule Administration's proposals also included the establishment of a large regional health authority to replace the four boards and to take on some departmental and agency functions, with almost 2,000 staff. In reviewing that proposal, my starting point has been that the structures must improve health and social care services and, thereby, the health and well-being of the people of Northern Ireland.

I, therefore, propose to establish a new regional health and social care board, which will be answerable to me. That body will focus on prevention and on making services more efficient, accessible and patient-centred. The organisation will be smaller and leaner than that in the previous proposal, and it will employ no more than 400 members of staff by April 2011.

12.15 pm

The new board has been designed to focus on three central functions. First, commissioning, by which I mean the process of planning and resourcing services that best meet the needs of the local population from the five trusts and other organisations. I have already announced the development of a comprehensive range

of service frameworks, which will set out the standards by which we will transform services.

Secondly, financial management of the health and social care system will ensure that we live within our means and get the maximum return on our investment.

Thirdly, strong performance management and improvement will ensure the achievement of targets, objectives, standards, improved safety and will create and promote a culture of continuous development. There will be renewed emphasis on disease prevention and earlier intervention for individuals and communities to create a healthier population.

My proposals will give the new organisation the authority to act on my behalf in pushing for significant improvements in efficiency and performance that will improve services for patients. In contrast to the previous proposals, I will be looking for clear accountability and governance arrangements between the regional organisation and my Department and the best use of available resources.

Although the regional board will have a strong local presence, decisions on its location will be determined in line with policy guidance and statutory requirements. Therefore, it may prove necessary to make temporary arrangements from April 2009, pending completion of the necessary processes.

Effective commissioning is the link between policy development and its delivery at ground level. I support active engagement of front-line professionals, such as GPs, nurses, social services staff, allied health professionals, public health practitioners and others, in the commissioning process. They will bring their innovation and expertise, which will help to secure better services for the communities that they serve.

There are benefits in tying commissioning arrangements to defined population areas; in particular, having coterminosity with local government.

Direct rule commissioning arrangements, which I inherited, suggested that there should be seven local commissioning groups: that was based on Peter Hain's proposals for seven district councils under the review of public administration. However, in the absence of firm proposals for local government reorganisation, I propose that we have five local commissioning groups, covering the same geographical area as the five trusts. Those local commissioning groups will operate as committees of the new regional board. However, this proposal will remain subject to review, pending the outcome of deliberations on local government reform.

Direct rule proposals for seven local commissioning groups did not include any input from elected representatives — that was a missed opportunity. Therefore, I propose to seek views on the composition and membership of the five commissioning groups. I want

to examine ways of ensuring that local people and councillors are given strong voices in the system. That will ensure that we have a more democratic and accountable process while retaining the strong benefits of having primary-care-led commissioning.

I want the commissioning system in Northern Ireland to take advantage of the unique opportunity to commission social care alongside health services. I also propose that the process will have very strong links with local communities and voluntary and community sector groups, so that they are involved in tackling health inequalities and in the design and delivery of health services in their areas.

On 3 December 2007, I told the Assembly that I remained to be convinced that the excellent work being carried out by the health and social services councils would be improved by establishing one large organisation, which was suggested by the direct rule Administration.

I am, therefore, seeking views on new arrangements that would ensure a strong local focus while giving patients, clients, and carer representatives a powerful regional voice. I also believe that, contrary to earlier direct rule proposals, there is a need for locally elected representatives to have an active role in the work of the proposed organisations.

Previous direct rule proposals included the abolition of several agencies and the transfer of their functions to a single multi-purpose authority. Aside from those who work in the Department, trusts and boards, a significant number of staff work in a range of agencies and organisations. Careful consideration has been given to all those bodies, and it is, therefore, proposed that the elements that make a substantial contribution to the three core functions of commissioning, financial management, and performance management and improvement, transfer to the new regional board. For the present, I propose to retain several of the existing agencies, but I wish to explore any opportunities to increase current efficiency and productivity levels.

The agencies that will be retained include the Northern Ireland Practice and Educational Council for Nursing and Midwifery, the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency, the Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Service, the Northern Ireland Guardian Ad Litem Agency, and the Northern Ireland Social Care Council. The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) would also be retained, but its role would include adopting the current functions of the Mental Health Commission for Northern Ireland.

The functions of the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland would also remain separate from the regional board and would be included in a new organisation that would have a wider role in providing

expertise and supporting local government agencies on health inequalities and health promotion for their communities. To facilitate that, I propose that locally elected representatives be appointed to the board of the new health promotion and improvement organisation. Following consultation, I will make a further announcement as to the further shape of that public-health body.

I also confirm that the Northern Ireland Regional Medical Physics Agency will be part of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. I am already considering the establishment of a shared-services organisation, on which I consulted last year. The aim of that body would be to bring together services that are common to health and social care organisations; for example, finance and staff recruitment. My proposal is that shared services would, for governance purposes, be part of a common-services organisation. That body would provide a range of support functions for the health and social care services, including some that are provided by the Department and the current boards and agencies. The current functions of the Central Services Agency would also be included.

Each year, we spend some £4 billion on our health and social care system. I am determined that we spend every penny of that wisely and to the benefit of the population of Northern Ireland. I have agreed already the plans that will see a reduction of nearly 1,700 staff and savings of more than £53 million being made by April 2011. The proposals that I have outlined today would deliver on those savings.

I will also set the new regional board the task of generating new levels of efficiency and better productivity. I anticipate that, over time, that will create significant additional savings that we can reinvest in front-line services.

I also propose that the Department be much smaller, with a staff of around 600 by the end of the comprehensive spending review (CSR) period. That reduction would be achieved through existing initiatives such as the Fit for Purpose strategy, the CSR, and the Northern Ireland Civil Service reforms. Several staff will also transfer to the common-services organisation and the new regional board.

While ensuring clear lines of accountability for the commissioning of health and social care throughout Northern Ireland, the new arrangements would allow the Department to be more sharply focused on its responsibilities for delivering the aims of the devolved Administration. They would also concentrate on introducing legislation and determining and reviewing policy standards, priorities and targets for health and social care. I also propose that the regional research and development office, which is in the Central Services Agency, would be best placed in the Department.

I believe strongly that those proposals would provide a streamlined and democratically accountable way of managing our Health Service. However, their success depends on the continuing dedication and commitment of our health and social care staff against ever-rising levels of demand and expectation.

I want to convey my thanks and appreciation to all the staff for the care that they provide to patients and clients each and every day. The staff are our biggest asset, and no one can doubt their commitment and their willingness to rise to new challenges. We need to ensure, therefore, that we make the best possible use of knowledge and skills in transforming the health system.

I realise that this is an anxious time for many staff, who are concerned about what the new structures will mean for them. I will ensure that the decisions on future structures are supported by an effective human resources strategy in order to address the concerns of staff and those who represent them. Key elements of that strategy are already in place, and the implementation process will be undertaken in close partnership with relevant professional bodies and trade unions. Until the outcome of the proposed consultation is known, we will not have the detailed information to inform discussions with individual members of staff. In the interim, I have asked that, as we work through the process, every effort is made to ensure that they and their representatives are kept fully informed.

I believe that, although extremely ambitious, these proposals can be completed in time for the new arrangements to be set up from 1 April 2009. That will, of course, depend also on the co-operation and goodwill of all those concerned. Unlike my direct rule predecessors, I propose a full public consultation on my proposals, which will provide a unique opportunity for the public, their representatives, health and social care staff, service users and all other key stakeholders to have their say. I plan to issue a more detailed consultation paper next month.

My statement gives only a first outline of the proposals, and it is intended to lead into, and not to pre-empt, discussion with my Executive colleagues. I welcome, too, early engagement with the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and am eager to meet as soon as possible. We are building the foundation for a vibrant and successful future for the health and well-being of the people of Northern Ireland. None of that, however, will be possible without the approval of the Executive and the Assembly. I look forward to the help and support of colleagues in taking forward these important reforms.

I have already made it clear that the public and patients come first, and that key principle is embodied in the proposals. We have now a unique opportunity to truly transform our health system into one that is world

class and fit for the twenty-first century. I commend the proposals to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): I welcome the statement from the Minister and thank him for providing an advance copy of it.

The Committee has for some time had serious concerns about the ongoing delay in reaching a decision about the structures to replace the existing four health and social services boards. The Committee believes that that has been the cause of great uncertainty, frustration and loss of morale among existing health and social care staff. More importantly, the continuation of the existing structures beyond April 2008, when the new structures should have come into place, will continue to absorb vital resources that could be better directed to other key service developments. The announcement today is, therefore, very welcome. I hope that it will end the uncertainty and provide some reassurance for those working in the health and social care field that the new structures will be in place in the near future.

The Health Committee will want to examine the proposals in detail, both during the consultation period and during the passage of the subsequent legislation, and will ask the Minister to attend the Committee as soon as possible. The Minister said that the new regional health and social care board will have fewer than 400 staff, whereas the proposed regional health authority would have had about 2,000 employees. I recognise that a number of bodies that were due to be subsumed into the authority will continue to exist. I welcome, particularly, the continuation of the Health Promotion Agency, which has a vital role in the area of prevention.

What assurance can the Minister give that the full efficiency savings envisaged will actually be achieved? What are the differences in start-up costs between the original proposal and the new board? Finally, what are the planned savings over the first three years?

12.30 pm

Mr McGimpsey: I welcome Mrs Robinson's approach to structures. I know that the original structures were due to be in place by April 2008. However, as I explained, it was necessary to carefully examine what we were getting ourselves into, and the direct rule model and proposals were not suitable in many respects — not least because, as Mrs Robinson said, under the direct rule model, the Health Promotion Agency was to be subsumed into the new body. Members will agree that health promotion — engaging the local population in their own health needs — is a key strategic step that the Department must take.

As I indicated, the original efficiency plan was to make 1,700 redundancies, which would have saved

£53 million a year. The new proposal will meet that target. There are also ongoing efficiencies, which will be achieved through a concentration on performance management, commissioning — local groups commissioning for the health needs of their areas — and strict financial management and financial regimes to ensure that everyone lives within their budgets. Those are future savings. As I said, all of that is dependent on a full consultation. There is no difference in start-up costs: in fact, although we are now planning for April 2009, we are already ahead of the original savings plan for the body that was to start in April 2008.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the statement and hope that it will go some way towards addressing the concerns that Health Service staff have had in recent years. I look forward to the consultation process and the discussions between the Minister and the Committee as we get more beef on the bones of the proposals.

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

The Minister said that the function of the Health Promotion Agency would remain separate from the proposed regional board and that it would develop a wider role and provide support to local government on health inequality and promotion. Does he agree that the Investing for Health strategy should be a key tool in addressing health inequality, and will he ensure that that strategy feeds into the new enhanced role of the Health Promotion Agency? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McGimpsey: The Health Promotion Agency was to be one of the casualties of the direct rule reorganisation, which was a mistake, because health promotion is a key objective.

A report commissioned by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown in the early days of their Government asked whether the country could afford the Health Service that Nye Bevan originally envisaged — cradle-to-the-grave healthcare that is free for all citizens. That report found that that was affordable and sustainable, but that a key element would be the engaging of the local population with their own health, which could be achieved through, not least, a concentration on health inequalities — someone who lives in a disadvantaged area is more likely to develop a chronic disease, will not live as long, and so on. A key way to reduce the need for healthcare is to engage the local population, and the Health Promotion Agency plays a vital role in that.

I have sat on Belfast City Council for many years and listened to policies being promulgated from on high by civil servants — the policies may have been brilliant, but they fell down when it came to implementation and delivery. There is an important role for local government in implementation and delivery in a number of areas,

not least through health inequalities. The Health Promotion Agency is vital to drive that agenda forward.

I appreciate the concerns of staff and the uncertainty that there has been. I have written to them and kept them fully informed, and I will continue to do so. I have had meetings with the trade unions, and I have written to all staff on the foot of my statement today to keep them informed so that they know where they stand. The support of staff is the most vital asset in delivering what we all want, which is the best possible Health Service for patients.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the Minister's statement, and I congratulate him on introducing proposals for much-reduced bureaucracy in the Health Service. I am grateful for his remarks about further including the community and voluntary sector by giving them a more active role, and for his comments about the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland. We are on our way to delivering a quality patient-centred service.

Will the Minister confirm that GPs will continue to play an important role in the local commissioning groups and that he will continue to work with the BMA (British Medical Association) as the consultation period commences?

Mr McGimpsey: I thank Mr McCallister for his remarks about developing Health Service structures and about trying to cut through some of the bureaucratic layers.

It is important to note that a fourth tier is not being introduced; the previous model had a fourth tier, which had the effect of adding a further layer of bureaucracy to the decision-making process. That will definitely not happen. The board should be seen to be working in parallel with policy development in the Department and should not be considered a fourth tier. That was one of my main requirements when I met with David Sissling to work my way through the process.

GPs play a vital role in determining health needs, and they receive support and information both from other professionals and those who are involved in several disciplines. They will also be supported by local councillors, who I see playing an important role on local commissioning groups by representing the needs of the people in their areas. As we meet rising needs and expectations — not least the challenges that changing demographics will bring — there will be a strategic change of direction for health services. That will involve early intervention, given that prevention is better than cure. We will try to keep people out of hospital by dealing with them at primary-care level, and that will be a GP-led strategy.

I have had several meetings with GPs and members of the local commissioning groups, and they are very enthusiastic and keen to move ahead. I am keen that they do so meaningfully and with support. They must

be allowed to do their work without being encumbered with too many layers. GPs will play a vital role, and I will be meeting with the BMA in the near future to discuss how we progress matters.

Mrs Hanna: I welcome the Minister's focus on prevention and early intervention. I also welcome that he has defined the functions of the organisations that he proposes to establish. I hope that we will see, and be able to measure, better outcomes for patients.

The Minister has proposed the establishment of five local commissioning groups, which would cover the same geographic areas as the five trusts. When we have a definite decision on the number of local councils that we will have — and the Minister referred to the involvement of councillors and local government — will he assure me that there will be coterminosity with councils to ensure better delivery of services on the ground and to ensure that people and patients do not fall between the cracks, as has happened in the past?

Will he also assure me that there will be much clearer signposting to services, which could include anything from phone numbers, screenings, and community-support services to appointments with consultants? The Minister is aware of the complexity of those services and the absolute confusion that the public have about accessing some of them.

Mr McGimpsey: I welcome Mrs Hanna's remarks. The five commissioning groups had to be fastened to, and coterminous with, something; their areas could not be marked out simply by drawing lines on a map. They had to be relevant, as Mrs Hanna, rightly, said. Under the Hain model, there were to be seven local commissioning groups, because Peter Hain had decided that there would be seven councils. We would be hard pushed to get agreement on seven local councils as things stand, and I want to move on.

I will ensure that the health system adapts to any number of councils that may be agreed. We can adapt to seven councils, to 11, to 15, or to any other number. However, I need to move forward, and I have decided that there will be five groups, because there are five trusts. The point is that a local commissioning group will not have to commission services from the trust with which it is coterminous; it can go to any trust in the region.

The Member made a vital point about signposting services. Providing information is absolutely crucial, because there is confusion. For example, I am frequently confused about how to access out-of-hours services. It is important to get that sort of information out to the public. There is a big job of work to be done to engage the local population and to give people meaningful information on the services that they may require, so that we do not end up with the confusion that exists in some areas at present.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome, for the most part, today's announcement by the Minister. However, I am concerned about the possible reduction in staff numbers. The Minister referred to:

“members of a changing population who rightly expect access to services delivered in their own communities and homes”.

That certainly contradicts the plans for the Ards Hospital site, which include the proposed closure of the successful and convenient minor-injuries unit. Will the Minister give the Assembly a commitment that that closure will not occur?

I welcome the retention of the Health Promotion Agency and the fact that the health councils will have more local input. What discussions has the Minister had with his Executive colleagues to ensure matching approaches, for example, to education, libraries and policing? Will he clarify whether the new local authorities will play a lead role in holding local health services to account?

Mr McGimpsey: On the Member's last point, accountability is one of the key elements, and I envisage the new board having a vital role to play in that, along with others. For example, locally elected representatives will be firmly embedded in the commissioning groups of the new board.

I inherited the staff numbers, and I ensured that they would not change as we looked at a different type of reorganisation. Those figures are out there, and negotiations are still going on. However, the target is to reduce the number of staff by 1,700, which will save £53 million a year. Substantial moneys have already been invested in that programme. I intend to ensure that that figure is reached without compulsory redundancies. I consider voluntary retirements, and so on, to be the way forward.

With regard to the Ards Hospital site, I have asked each trust to produce plans for 3% comprehensive spending review (CSR) efficiencies. I have not seen the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust's plan yet. I will examine it in due course. However, I know the Ards Hospital site just as well as Mr McCarthy does. I live within a few hundred yards of it, and I am well aware of the hospital's history in the Newtownards area and the assistance that it has been to my family over the years. Therefore, I will examine any question about Ards Hospital with particular care.

12.45 pm

Mr Buchanan: I, too, welcome the progress that has been made on the rationalisation of the health boards. Indeed, some of my party colleagues and I tabled a motion on 3 December 2007 demanding progress on Health Service reform.

Commissioning of services is crucial if cost-effectiveness is to be ensured. Does the Minister support contestability between different service providers?

The Minister has identified where savings of £53 million could be made. That includes reducing staff numbers by almost 1,700 by 2011. Will he confirm that that is not an accurate reflection of the current situation, given that it will cost the Health Service some £70 million to bring those plans to fruition by facilitating huge managerial pay-offs?

Mr McGimpsey: I ask the Member to write to me about the huge managerial pay-offs that he described; I am unaware of those, so I am interested to hear about them. However, I am aware that investment has been made to facilitate the reduction of 1,700 staff.

I will give the Member the same answer that I gave to Mr McCarthy and others: we will reach that target. My view is that that can — and will — be done without compulsory redundancies. That is the way forward. If the system loses 1,700 staff but continues to increase its activity, it is, by definition, getting more efficient. That is the right direction in which to travel.

Mr Buchanan is one of those who demanded that I make tough decisions. I look forward to his support — and that of the other Members who demanded it — in doing so.

We are making progress. Our Health Service has a first-class staff that makes the service work: it is its prime asset. Therefore, I will do whatever I can to look after those workers.

Ms Ni Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, am a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and I am not afraid to ask tough questions and support the Minister in making difficult decisions.

I welcome the involvement of locally elected representatives in local commissioning groups: that is a positive move.

The Minister mentioned community involvement, but will he clarify whether he is referring to the involvement of the community and voluntary sector? Often, health professionals who work in the community are seen as representatives of the whole community. The community and voluntary sector provides after-hours services for suicide prevention and for those who have mental-health difficulties. Those who provide those front-line services are often underpaid and ignored, and the local commissioning groups must recognise them and their work. They work in the most deprived communities, and they, above all, know where health needs are most acute. Will the Minister clarify the role of the community and voluntary sector?

Mr McGimpsey: I agree very much with the Member. In areas such as mental health and suicide prevention,

bereaved families and local community groups play a vital role. It is indisputable that such groups have saved lives. I see that network of local community groups, councils and councillors engaging fully with the Health Service as a whole, and using exactly that type of mechanism is the best way in which to engage a local population.

In Belfast, the Belfast Healthy Cities initiative and health action zones carry out work for the local population. One of the key questions is how we proceed with community planning. It is important that we work with local councils, communities, community and volunteer groups, not least where health promotion is concerned. Not only will local councillors sit on the commissioning groups, but I expect that they will be firmly established on the board of the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland. They will help to drive forward the agenda of health promotion.

Mr Easton: I, too, welcome the reforms that the Minister has announced. It is widely believed that performance management has been sadly lacking across the Health Service. What makes the Minister think that his proposals will lead to better performance management? When the 19 trusts merged into five, many managers retained their positions, although they probably should have left them. Can the Minister assure the House that there will not be a repeat performance?

Mr McGimpsey: Every organisation needs managers. For example, there are 1,300 staff in the Mater Hospital. Those 1,300 staff cannot simply be milling around the hospital; management must be there to organise them and to provide leadership all the way down. That is an essential requirement. Of course, the type of management that staff end up with is important. The Department wants the best management it can get for the Health Service. That is why I want to see performance improvement as well as performance management.

In March 2006, before any of us arrived on the scene, 76,000 people had been waiting more than six months for outpatient appointments: by March 2007, no one was waiting. That is the result of employing creative and inventive management techniques and of tackling problems by thinking outside the box. At the same time, in March 2006, 6,500 people had been waiting more than six months for surgery: by March 2007, no one was waiting. I encourage that kind of good, clever management. I am not suggesting that those reductions were achieved by 100%-perfect means; however, they show the kind of performance management and improvement that is needed. That is why performance management and improvement, as well as commissioning and financial controls, will be at the very heart of the new board. Its focus will be on how they work in the Health Service.

Mr Savage: I thank my colleague the Health Minister for his far-reaching statement to the House, and I congratulate him on it. I also welcome the fact that the Minister intends to appoint locally elected representatives to the new health promotion and improvement organisation. Does he agree that his decision shows that locally elected representatives and local people will be well placed in the new organisation and that the personal experiences, local knowledge and professional expertise that they can bring to the table will be an added advantage?

Mr McGimpsey: I thank Mr Savage for his remarks. I agree with him wholeheartedly. In particular, I believe strongly that locally elected representatives have a vital role to play in representing their communities. Therefore, I expect that the organisation will be permeated with local representatives. I look forward to the consultation during the next 12 weeks, when that matter will be discussed and examined in more detail.

I will have a model ready for the consultation, which will begin in two weeks' time. I regret that during my statement, I said that the consultation will begin next month: I should have said that it will start this month. I have not lost a month. I have an Executive Committee meeting on 13 February. Provided that the Executive approve — and without pre-empting what they will say — I am ready to launch that intensive 12-week consultation on 15 February. The Assembly has made constructive points that will be helpful to the Department as it works towards a conclusion to the matter.

Mr Gallagher: I, also, welcome the Minister's statement: it is an important first step in removing what patients see as some of the most unsatisfactory aspects of the Health Service; for example, waiting lists for those in serious difficulty. Many health professionals are unhappy because they have been unable to engage satisfactorily with the trusts at management level. The establishment of local commissioning groups should help to overcome the problem to some extent. Will the Minister tell us how the commissioning groups will be involved at management level, because their involvement at that level would help reduce some of the waiting lists?

We know about the shortage of NHS dentists. The Minister has made money available for the appointment of NHS dentists; however, those appointments have not happened. Indeed, the recruitment process seems to be very slow. Where will the recruitment process for NHS dentists be located in the new arrangements? Will it be included, for example, in the new shared services unit?

Duplication of functions has also been a big problem. Therefore, I welcome the Minister's reference to the Health Promotion Agency. Unfortunately, in the past, trusts have duplicated health promotion functions, which was unhelpful because we need a clear message

on health promotion. Will the Minister assure us that such duplication will be eliminated in the new structures?

Mr McGimpsey: The Member made a number of comments to which I will try to respond. First, we are recruiting dentists who will be directly employed — and, incidentally, one organisation that was to disappear under the direct rule model was the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency. There has been a problem with junior doctors and their training, and it seemed to me that scrapping that agency, which plays a vital role in training doctors and dentists, would be a mistake.

Dentists can make more money outside the Health Service than they can in it, and I am trying to address that problem. We have employed dentists directly, and one thing that a local commissioning group will be looking at will be the dental needs in their area. The group will then seek to commission dental services to meet those needs. I am hopeful that an effective commissioning process will help in the problem areas that the Member has mentioned.

Commissioning health services in local areas is part of the Department's strategy, which is to move towards primary care and away from secondary care. The objective is that people will avoid having to go into hospital because they will be receiving proper preventative care — early intervention, early treatment and, therefore, early prevention. That is the direction in which we intend to travel, and doctors will be driving forward that strategy. They will be playing the key role, and I am grateful to them for that. They are prepared to do it, and I subscribe to the old adage: never look a gift horse in the mouth. I am excited about the role that doctors will play.

It would be wrong for me to prescribe how the system will be managed. All that I can say is that management will be involved, and that there will be a constant quest for high performance and improvement in the management of the entire system.

Mr Ross: I welcome the Minister's statement. He said that approximately seven agencies would be preserved rather than be subsumed into the new regional board. Is he not concerned that that will reduce potential efficiency savings? Moreover, how will the Mental Health Commission's work be delivered within the regulation, quality and improvement authority?

Mr McGimpsey: I missed the first part of the Member's question, which was about trusts: the thrust appeared to be about efficiencies. We will seek to make efficiency gains. That is reflected, for example, in waiting-list targets. Next month, I will be in a position to announce a new range of targets. For example, the current target for a patient's pathway is 47 weeks, comprising 13 weeks, 13 weeks and 21 weeks, which

runs from first appointment with a doctor through to completion of surgery.

I will be in a position to reduce that, and I will make that announcement next month. That is an example of the ongoing efficiencies that are being found in the Health Service. The Department will warm to that task and get better at it. There is much more to be achieved, and all of that will be to the benefit of patients.

1.00 pm

The RQIA is an important body, which seeks to ensure high standards of health and social care services. As it was set up only two or three years ago, it is simply getting into business and it is one of the areas on which I will concentrate. The Mental Health Commission will be subsumed into the RQIA to ensure standards across the Health Service, not least because the patients whose treatment is supervised by that body are often the most vulnerable members of society. The RQIA will move forward with the Mental Health Commission. The Mental Health Commission can carry out unannounced inspections, and that will be a feature of future inspections.

Mr S Wilson: Having served in local government for a long time during direct rule, I share with the Minister a great scepticism about quangos. The more super the quango, the greater the scepticism. In the setting up of the regional board, which is a super-quango, how will the Minister ensure that the local commissioning groups, which are only committees of that quango, will have a real say in the decisions that are made centrally? How does the Minister intend to hold the regional board to account, and how will the Assembly be able to hold it to account?

The Minister concentrated on the 1,700 redundancies, but he also outlined a number of other ways in which efficiencies will take place. Apart from the 1,700 staff savings, new levels of efficiency, better productivity and a smaller Department will be introduced. What total saving does the Minister envisage from all those measures, and over what period will that be achieved?

The Minister talked about the concerns of staff. One of the biggest issues of concern for staff is the job evaluation process that is under way. Some staff who have been doing their jobs for some time have been moved down two or three levels, and that has affected morale. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that staff have a fair appeal against those evaluations if they disagree with them?

Mr McGimpsey: Although Agenda for Change is not, strictly speaking, part of the proposals, it plays a vital role. A number of staff are appealing their grades — several thousand, actually. The trade unions that represent the staff are negotiating with the Department and the trusts on the grading issue. It has been a long, slow and, at times, tortuous process, but we appear

finally to be coming out of it. It is important that the appeals are carried out properly and that people get a fair hearing. I take the Member's point, but I cannot tell him what I am doing specifically, other than overseeing the process to ensure that it is being done properly.

Staff will move out of the Department into other areas, leaving a smaller Department. I also intend that the Department will become more focused. Currently, 1,100 people work there — after nine months, there are still members of staff to whom I have not had a chance to talk. It is a large organisation that plays an important role, and the people who work there play an important and vital role at times. However, they do not all need to work in the Department; they should be out in other areas.

Commissioning will be one of the keys, and I will ensure that the local groups will commission for the health needs of their populations.

That constitutes the principle of the group. Rather than drafting people in, local GPs will be involved in the group, as will local allied health professional services and mental-health and learning-disability services. A range of disciplines and professions will be involved to ensure that the commissioning is done properly. The people whom I have mentioned represent the deliverers, and they will know whether the providers are not delivering properly. Therefore, they will play an important role.

The commissioning will be done properly, which will be a big step forward. It has always been in the back of my mind that it has been 35 years since the reorganisation of the Health Service. Within a few years, people realised that it was not quite right, so several attempts were made to tinker with it. I want to have a system that can evolve, and that is what we are moving towards. Therefore, when we see problems and a need for change, we will not have to break the system and start again. I am approaching the process in that way so that it will stand the test of time. If the commissioning groups are not quite right, we will evolve the organisation to ensure that they are right. We will continue to do that not only in the commissioning groups but in other areas.

Mr Durkan: I also welcome the Minister's statement and congratulate him for the work that has gone into it and the work that lies ahead. The Minister has said that decisions must be made on the location of the regional board. Does he accept that decisions on its location should extend to the reduced Department and to some of the other retained or reorganised agencies?

The Minister emphasised the involvement of locally elected representatives in local commissioning groups and the active role that they will play in the work of the retained area health and social services councils. He also said that local representatives will be appointed to the new health promotion and improvement organisation.

Although I welcome the commitment to involve local representatives, how does the Minister plan to ensure that their involvement on different bodies will not add to the confusion and possible duplication that he is trying to eradicate? Will he tell us more about the composition of the regional health and social care board? He has told us about its functions, but he has not coloured in its composition.

Finally, will the Minister assure us that the transfer of the Mental Health Commission's functions to the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority will not lead to any loss of focus on mental health, especially when there is such concern about suicide and when welcome additional money is available for the Bamford Review? People will want an assurance that there will be no reduction in management focus by the Mental Health Commission being subsumed into another body.

Mr McGimpsey: The Mental Health Commission will ensure that the appropriate standards are in place. That is why working with the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority — and being part of it — is a positive step forward. Mental health and learning disability are not inescapables in the Budget, but they are my number one priority, and I will ensure that nothing is lost as far as mental health and learning disability is concerned. Professor Roy McClelland is the chairperson of the mental health and learning disability board, which has been charged to act as champion for people with mental-health and learning disabilities. Its challenge is to ensure that I do not stray from the agenda.

The regional health and social care board will have a functional role. I assure the Member that we will have discussions and suggest proposals for its composition, among other things. Locally elected representatives must be permeated through the board, because they represent the local taxpayers who will fund and use the body. It will belong to local populations, which is why their representation is important.

Dr W McCrea: I welcome the Minister's statement. He has proposed that five local commissioning groups be established. How will that fit into the current local government review, which is led by the Minister of the Environment?

Mr McGimpsey: I am a member of the subgroup that is chaired by the Minister of the Environment. All members were asked for ideas on what powers relating to such areas as the Health Promotion Agency and health equalities, for instance, can be passed to local government. I see an important role for local government in the delivery and implementation of services. That is my main contribution. The Health Service, the health needs of, and health delivery for, local people will be the winner if that process were changed.

It is fair to say that there is no agreement on how many local councils are required. There are 26 now,

and agreement has not been reached on how many there will be beyond that. Peter Hain suggested that there be seven, but I do not hear anyone arguing for seven now. However, I had to proceed, and that is why I fastened on the trusts. I had to anchor the commissioning groups to something; I could not anchor on the basis of 26 councils. As Members are aware, the boundaries will be moving. For better or for worse, that is how I am going forward, but it can evolve. If necessary, I can evolve and adapt to whatever number comes out of the review of public administration when its deliberations conclude.

Finding a way forward for the Health Promotion Agency is more difficult, because it has to engage with the councils. If it is to engage with the councils now, it will have to engage with 26 local councils. Therefore, it will be beneficial to have the number of councils settled sooner rather than later. However, we are where we are. I assure Members that work on improving health provision will continue to the best of our ability, and the Health Service will adapt easily to whatever number of councils comes out of the review of public administration.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety elaborate on what functions are to be retained in the Department that were not envisaged in the original proposals prior to devolution?

Mr McGimpsey: The main issues that I am looking at relate to policy and legislation, and I am keeping human resources close to me. The new regional health and social care board will report directly to me. It is important that the Assembly, through the Executive and the Minister, is the responsible body, and that we do not have to work our way through lots of tiers. My line of sight is a key criterion, and it is important that I, as the Minister, can see directly to every layer or section of the Health Service. I do not want to have to meander through different tiers. Access to matters relating to legislation, policy, human resources and budget-setting plays an important part in allowing me to fulfil my function.

Mr I McCrea: I welcome the Minister's announcement. Does the Minister feel that the five local commissioning groups will be local enough? The Minister did not answer my colleague Tom Buchanan's question, so will he confirm whether he does support contestability between the trusts?

Mr McGimpsey: I missed the bit about contestability between the trusts in Tom Buchanan's question. I do not want to over labour that, because we are all part of the one team and seeking to deliver on the same agenda. Although the local commissioning groups might be coterminous with a trust — as I said in response to an earlier question — they will not have

to go to that trust for a service. The group could go to any of the trusts in the area, and that is important.

1.15 pm

Ian McCrea asked whether five groups are enough. Each group will determine how low it must — or wants — to go.

Many community-commissioning associations were proposed. However, I will leave the decisions about how those matters are to be determined to each commissioning group. For example, every GP in any particular area will have an opinion about what should be commissioned, and, therefore, decisions will depend on how each group deals with those opinions and allows them to be articulated. As I said, given that there are five trusts, five is the number of commissioning groups because I must have something to which I can anchor them, and that cannot be local government because of the fluid situation that we are in.

The other point that I made is that we are attempting to design a system that can evolve as needs change.

The Re-establishment of the Ministerial Subcommittee on Children and Young People

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the junior Ministers that they wish to make a statement regarding the re-establishment of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Paisley Jnr): This morning, Members received an advance copy of our statement. I ask that they check against delivery because, since this morning, that statement has been changed.

Junior Minister Kelly and I are announcing the re-establishment of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people. In August 2005, in the wake of the appointment of a Minister for Children and Young People, a ministerial subcommittee for children and young people was established under the previous Administration. Given my and junior Minister Kelly's specific responsibility for the co-ordination of children and young people's policy issues, we felt that, at the appropriate time, it would be important to re-establish that group, and a decision to do so has now received the Executive's unanimous support; hence this morning's statement. This is a pivotal step, which will ensure that children's issues remain at the forefront of policy and that Government's responses will be cross-departmental and co-ordinated.

Children and young people constitute more than a quarter of the population and, therefore, are the responsibility of all Departments. In addition to representatives from the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Court Service, all Ministers have been invited to join the ministerial subcommittee, and I encourage them all to attend the first meeting. Subsequently, only those with responsibilities relating to each agenda item will need to attend. That will help to focus the subcommittee's attention and avoid the replication of Executive meetings.

The establishment of the ministerial subcommittee is an important development because it will provide a platform that will encourage a joined-up approach to addressing children and young people's issues. The junior Ministers have an oversight role in the 10-year strategy for children and young people, and the subcommittee will drive forward its implementation and help us in that task.

For the incoming budgetary year, the ministerial subcommittee will provide a good opportunity for Ministers to identify one or more key priorities, which will supplement existing departmental and cross-departmental work. Incidentally, the Budget has been good for children and young people. In the first year, excluding baseline provision, we have identified more than £30 million for children and young people.

Further to the identification of baseline provision, we are confident that the amount of money in the Budget for children and young people will exceed that of the previous children's fund.

Unlike the children's fund, the new funding arrangements will ensure that children and young people's issues will be imbedded and mainstreamed in each Department's policies. That is a positive and important move. All Departments must now step up to the mark and ensure that children and young people are a priority. We are confident that the available funding should mean that no child or youth programme will be reduced or cut. Ministers must make that a priority, and the ministerial subcommittee will be one way to ensure that action is taken.

We also wish the subcommittee to help to achieve the greater integration of children and young people's policy, funding and service delivery, and that will be done without compromising or blurring the roles and responsibilities of individual Ministers.

The re-establishment of the ministerial subcommittee is only one of a large number of public service agreement targets associated with children and young people that we have set. Those targets are ambitious; however, we are ready and willing to rise to a high standard and to work tirelessly to ensure their full and swift delivery.

The subcommittee will strive to achieve transparency through the timely sharing of information that is relevant to children and young people, and which will help to facilitate joined-up working. The first meeting of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people is being arranged with other Ministers.

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): I thank the junior Minister for his statement and offer the support of my Committee for the re-establishment of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people. The junior Ministers gave notice of their intentions when they attended a meeting of the Committee last week, in which they outlined their proposals for ensuring cross-departmental delivery of children's and young people's priorities.

What role will the subcommittee play in ensuring that the direct resources provided to Departments in the Budget for those priorities will address the long-term needs of young people, and will not simply be used to tackle short-term funding pressures? When, in what form, and to whom, will the progress of the subcommittee be reported? How will the junior Ministers ensure that the views of key stakeholders will inform the work of the subcommittee?

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr G Kelly): I presume that the scrutiny Committee will continue its working partnership. All of this is about partnership. We want

to involve the scrutiny Committee, as we have already done, and we welcome its input. We also intend to ensure that all stakeholders are a part of this exercise. The whole Assembly is on board, because this is our future. The scrutiny Committee will be kept up to date on all issues that arise.

Miss McIlveen: I welcome today's announcement. Will the junior Ministers set out the current agenda and confirm the range of cross-cutting issues that will be addressed? Furthermore, will the junior Minister give the Assembly a working definition of severe child poverty and explain how he plans to eradicate it?

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat. I will answer the Member's second question first, as it is slightly more complicated. There are different ways of defining severe child poverty. The Government's published statistics on relative income poverty are arranged in order of depth of poverty: that is, children of households whose income is less than 70%, 60%, and 50% of median income. We have asked the NISRA (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency) statisticians to consider the best ways of defining different levels or depths of poverty. That work is under way.

The Executive are committed to tackling poverty in general, and specific emphasis has been given to child poverty and severe child poverty. The Executive recognise that poor children live in poor households. A number of common traits can be readily identified as indicators of poverty; for example, workless households, or those living in private-rented accommodation. In effect, that means that we can identify those most at risk, including children in severe child poverty. Through the Programme for Government, we must strive to implement the most effective policies that can be applied as a means of targeting those individuals.

The Executive are in the process of agreeing an overall anti-poverty strategy, based broadly on the Lifetime Opportunities programme, which was launched by direct rule Ministers in 2006. We will seek the views of the Assembly on those proposals in the near future.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like other Members, I welcome the re-establishment of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people. I also welcome the involvement of officials from the NIO and the Court Service, given that kids in the juvenile justice system are outside the remit of the Assembly.

In the statement, it was indicated that, in year one, an additional figure of over £30 million, excluding baseline provision, will be available for children and young people. Will the junior Minister state where that money will come from and how it was secured?

Mr G Kelly: In the past few months, we have undertaken a series of meetings as part of pre-Budget discussions to make the case for significant funding for

children's services. Indeed, long before the draft Budget was issued, we went to see the Minister of Finance and Personnel to argue for money for services for children and young people. We will continue to liaise with ministerial colleagues to urge them to mainstream and protect funding for children and young people within their departmental budgets.

All our allocations in respect of the priority funding packages that were initiated by direct rule Ministers, and other ring-fenced items, have been removed from departmental baselines. I will give the Member a breakdown of the £30 million that she mentioned. The £26 million allocated to the Department of Education (DE), the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) is broken down as follows: DE has been allocated £10 million for 2008-09 and £5 million for 2009-10; DHSSPS has been allocated £10 million in 2008-09; and DCAL has been allocated £1 million for 2008-09.

The additional £13 million allocated to DE is broken down as follows: £3 million in 2008-09, £5 million in 2009-10, and £5 million in 2010-11. The additional £30 million allocated to DHSSPS is broken down as follows: £10 million for 2008-09, £10 million for 2009-10, and £10 million for 2010-11.

I now turn to funding for OFMDFM for the implementation of the play policy and support of exemplar area-based projects. The 2008-09 period does not count, but in 2009-10, the allocation is £0.729 million, and in 2010-11, it is £1.614 million. That means a total of £69 million over three years for DHSSPS, DE and DCAL, and £2 million for OFMDFM. Added to the £26 million allocated to facilitate the continuation of projects previously funded by the children and young people's funding package announced earlier is the £2 million that I mentioned.

Junior Minister Paisley said that we have arguably more money than we had under the previous package; altogether, over £71 million has been allocated to children's services in addition to baseline funding.

Mr Durkan: I welcome the statement by the junior Ministers this morning, and, in particular, the re-establishment of the subcommittee. In the statement, junior Minister Paisley said that the new budgetary figures, combined with the baseline figures, are more than the amount for the previous children's fund. Of course, if one is to make a comparison, one has to combine the children's fund with the figures for all the departmental budget lines. At that time, considerable amounts were being put into departmental budget lines for child-health services, Sure Start and the free nursery year. If comparisons are to be made, Members must also take account of the fact that the other Executive programme

also gave particular priority to children, young people and family support services.

Will the junior Ministers ensure that, in the subcommittee's work, efforts will be made to encourage Departments to do what they can, where they can, to support families and parents? That is one of the most important ways of supporting children, where they are and where they need to be.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I very much take on board the Member's comments. It is the job of Ministers to encourage the mainstreaming of that money. The Programme for Government and its related public service agreement targets outline the Departments' commitments to addressing children and young people's issues. The subcommittee, as a whole, can hold Ministers accountable as regards those commitments. As the Member knows, there is cross-party support for this matter, and an enthusiasm on the part of all the Ministers to participate. The ministerial subcommittee will have enthusiasm.

1.30 pm

The subcommittee will establish its priorities and cross-cutting targets at the outset to ensure that tackling children's issues remains paramount and that the Government's response is cross-departmental and co-ordinated.

OFMDFM wants the subcommittee to achieve greater integration of policy, funding and delivery for those services that are relevant to children and young people. The subcommittee will strive to achieve transparency through the timely sharing of information on children and young people. That will help to facilitate joined-up working. Everything centres on that, and each Department must ensure that money is added to the funding that was available to them previously. Now that there is a final Budget, Ministers are committed to ensuring that that happens.

Mrs Long: I thank the junior Ministers for bringing their news to the Chamber.

During last week's meeting of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the end of special funding was discussed. I want to explore that issue further. Most people accept that mainstreamed and continuous funding is preferable to special funding. However, if money is not ring-fenced for services for children and young people, is there not a danger that internal departmental pressures may lead to its being diverted to other areas? What actions will the junior Ministers take to counteract that considerable risk?

The Programme for Government identifies some cross-cutting targets and priorities that relate to children and young people. However, other departmental issues, such as transport and planning, also have a major impact

on children and young people. Has any consideration been given as to how those services will be co-ordinated to ensure that their priorities are taken on board? Has the proofing of decisions for the impact that they will have on children and young people been considered?

Mr G Kelly: We have written to ministerial colleagues to request information on those elements of the children and young people's funding package that have been mainstreamed and retained. It was difficult to know which had been retained or otherwise before the Budget was agreed. Soon, we hope to be able to clarify that Departments have allocated their funding for the delivery of their strategy commitments to children.

As junior Minister Paisley said, the Budget was good for children. We are pleased that the final negotiations on the Budget led to an additional allocation of £13 million over three years to the Department of Education for services for children and young people as well as for youth services. An additional £30 million over the same period was also secured for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to implement the recommendations of the Bamford Review.

The granting of additional in-year flexibility, coupled with allowing the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to retain efficiency savings of over 3.5%, presents an opportunity for that Department to increase its resources further. In addition, £26 million was allocated to that Department and to 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.

The Member raised the broader issue of whether OFMDFM will assess the impact that any new measures will have on children. It will, and the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, of which she is Deputy Chairperson, will ensure that that happens. Every Department has a responsibility for many important issues, including child poverty, fuel poverty, poor housing, and educational disadvantage. That is why the subcommittee is being re-established, and, given that its remit covers many issues, it will be able to influence actively every Department. I understand that, due to diary commitments, early March is probably the earliest date on which all Ministers will be able to attend a meeting of the subcommittee. However, we are keen to move forward with the project.

Mr Shannon: I thank the junior Ministers for the contributions that they have made to an important subject. I am a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which, as the junior Minister said, is united in its intention to ensure that issues that relate to children and young people are addressed fully.

Will the junior Minister outline the work programme for the subcommittee on children and young people

and tell the Assembly who its members will be? How will the junior Ministers ensure that it compels every Department and Committee — whether the Department of Education, the Health Committee, the Department for Employment and Learning or the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure — to ring-fence money to ensure that the issues that affect children and young people will be addressed?

Mr G Kelly: The work plan will include the re-establishment of the subcommittee, actions for actively engaging children and young people in the political process, and actions to ensure that children and young people are made fully aware of their rights and responsibilities. Specific actions will be taken to find poverty measures that most effectively identify those children most in need, and specific targets will be determined to ensure progress in achieving our anti-poverty targets. Furthermore, the work plan will include anti-bullying measures; campaigns to promote the health, safety and well-being of children; details of a campaign of raising awareness on specific priorities; plans for engagement with the sector; and much more.

With regard to ring-fencing, I refer to my earlier answer. Our intention, and the intention of other Ministers, as stated in meetings of the Executive, is to ensure that the issue is progressed. Extra money has been allocated, including £30 million to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, £13 million to the Department of Education and £2 million to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Rather than use the term “ring-fenced”, the job of the subcommittee will be to ensure that that money is spent well. However, despite the fact that Ministers have made a clear commitment to address this issue, they have the right to run their own Departments.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the junior Ministers for this most welcome statement. Sinn Féin is totally committed to consolidating and advancing the equality agenda. The agreement of the Executive parties to measure the Programme for Government, Budget and investment strategy against the statutory guidelines is a major advancement and a welcome development.

In that context, will the junior Minister state whether the outcomes of the equality impact assessment 12-week consultation process will be taken into account when resources are allocated? Furthermore, on that basis, does the junior Minister agree that groups and organisations that work hard for the needs of children and young people should be encouraged to take part in that consultation process?

Members may wish to ensure that consultation meetings are held in each of their areas to ensure that the particular needs of children and young people across the North are taken into account when resources are allocated.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat. We encourage everyone, especially stakeholders, to get involved in that consultation process. The Programme for Government clearly highlights that equality, fairness, inclusion and the promotion of good relations will be watchwords for the Executive's policies and programmes across Government Departments. That places an overarching responsibility on all of us to proactively change the existing patterns of social disadvantage by using increased prosperity and economic growth to tackle ongoing poverty and to develop innovative measures that will address existing patterns of socio-economic disadvantage and target resources and efforts towards those in greatest need.

The Executive are fully committed to ensuring that equality is properly taken into account. In line with that, a draft equality impact assessment, carried out at a strategic level on the Programme for Government, Budget and investment strategy, was launched last week for the 12-week consultation that the Member mentioned.

The focus of that assessment is at the strategic level, and aims to consider the overall impact that will be associated with the Executive's priorities and allocations of resources as set out in the Budget and investment strategy. The Executive will take account of the final equality impact assessment carried out at a strategic level when implementing the Programme for Government and the investment strategy.

In the case of the Budget, the final equality impact assessment (EQIA) will be taken into account in the future allocation of resources, including during the monitoring rounds. The consultation on the draft EQIA will be an important exercise. The Executive are determined that the consultation on the draft assessment will offer everyone the opportunity to have their say and influence decisions.

Mr Beggs: I also welcome the reappointment of the ministerial subcommittee. However, the junior Ministers were given responsibility for children's issues in June 2007. Why has it taken some eight months for the subcommittee to meet? How regularly do they intend the subcommittee to meet? Will they ensure that in future it meets to scrutinise budgetary issues and deal with cross-cutting issues that affect children and young people?

Mr G Kelly: The institutions were set up in May 2007, and it has taken us until now to reach this point; I do not want to make any excuses about that. We intend to move forward with some haste. The first meeting of the subcommittee is being prepared, and we hope that it will take place early in March.

As for regular meetings, we will go through those processes when we get together. I hope that "regular meetings" says it all; we will meet regularly, and more often when it is necessary. I take the Member's point about

the Budget and in-year monitoring. We want to ensure that what we have promised for children in the Programme for Government — if I remember correctly, three public service agreements deal directly with, and five others touch on, this wide-ranging issue — is part of our departmental work.

Mrs M Bradley: I welcome the setting up of the ministerial subcommittee. Perhaps we should have had it a bit earlier.

Has an assessment been made of the level of funding that is required by the programmes resourced through the children and young people's fund that OFMDFM considers a priority and with which it wants to continue? Where is the funding for children's play, which is an important part of children's lives? Would it not have been better for the subcommittee to have had its own budget?

Mr G Kelly: I will first deal with the children's play policy.

The analysis of the consultation responses has been published on the children and young people's unit website. Work has begun on revising the policy statement to take account of those responses, and it is intended that the revised policy statement will be published by the end of March. Play policy contributes to all six of the high-level outcomes in the strategy and has been proven to have beneficial effects on children's physical and mental health, to aid development, to encourage social skills and to improve knowledge and skills. By the spring of 2009, action plans will have been developed to implement the play policy. We are delighted to have secured funding of over £2 million in years 2 and 3 of the Budget to take these plans forward and support exemplar area-based projects.

The Member also asked where money is used in each Department. We know where that money has been used, because there was an earlier funding package. We have extracted some helpful information from those couple of years when it was operational. The reason that we are doing away with the funding package and pursuing mainstreaming is because we now know which programmes are sustainable and effective. We are eager for all Departments involved in those policies and projects to mainstream them. That is the whole idea.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the re-establishment of the subcommittee. Can the Minister share some of the details of the implementation groups that will be established to carry out, or deliver on, the decisions taken by the subcommittee?

Mr G Kelly: A number of implementation structures have been, or are in the process of being, established to oversee the implementation of the strategy over the next 10 years. Those include a strategy planning and review group, which we will chair.

It will include the chairpersons of the other implementation groups, together with senior representatives of statutory, voluntary, and community-sector organisations. An interdepartmental group on children and young people will be established, as will a network of practitioners, comprising representatives of agencies that deliver services for children and young people, to provide commentary on the implementation of the strategy on the ground. A research and information group, and a parents' advisory group to seek the views of parents, will be set up.

1.45 pm

All groups will be required to meet at least twice a year, and the terms of reference and membership of each group will be approved by the strategic planning and review group. Each group will be chaired by a member of the strategic planning and review group who will report routinely at meetings. Terms of reference and membership lists will be published, and memberships will be refreshed every two years.

Ms Purvis: I, too, welcome the junior Ministers' statement and, in particular, their guarantee that issues relating to children and young people will remain to the fore.

Will the junior Ministers provide me with assurance on several matters? They said that the funding available should mean that no programmes for children or youths will be reduced or cut. Given that, will they assure me that those providing such programmes in the community and voluntary sectors will not have their funding reduced or cut?

I welcome the fact that the NIO and the Court Service have been invited to attend the subcommittee. Can the junior Minister assure me that non-devolved matters relating to children and young people will be given the same priority as devolved matters?

Finally, when do the junior Ministers expect to publish the action plan on their Department's 10-year strategy for children and young people?

Mr G Kelly: The reserved matters concern the NIO and the Court Service, both of which were deliberately involved in the original subgroup. They will continue to be involved. A close eye will be kept on all issues that affect children, and that applies equally to reserved matters.

It may be repetitive to say that, with regard to funding, the movement is towards mainstreaming. We have written to Ministers, urging them to determine what each individual Department will be doing about previous projects and those that continue, as well as those that they believe should not continue, and why. We will follow that up on an ongoing basis.

The current one-year action plan was published in March 2007. Future plans will follow a three-year

cycle, in line with Government finance policy. Work has begun on engaging with Departments, the voluntary sector and young people. Implementation groups are being set up to review the current action plan and strategy. A workshop with young people will be held in the next few weeks, and, as I indicated earlier, we will seek the views of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and involve it in the consideration of a draft three-year plan. Furthermore, the Commissioner for Children and Young People has agreed to bring together a group of representatives from the community and voluntary sectors to review the action plan.

Mrs D Kelly: I, too, welcome the junior Ministers' statement and the establishment of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people. We in the SDLP are concerned about equality issues. Will the Minister give us more detail about the EQIA that is under way? It is my understanding that the EQIA relates to the Programme for Government; if that is so, consultees and respondents will have an opportunity to impact on the action and implementation. Is that the case?

Moreover, what was the thinking behind establishing children's moneys in that way? At Westminster, a specific children's fund has been established, and agencies other than Departments can apply to that fund. That enables innovative thinking, not just more of the same.

In the Republic of Ireland, the Minister for Finance, Brian Cowen, has specifically set aside some €800 million for children and families; non-governmental organisations can also bid for that money. From what source in Northern Ireland can NGOs bid for funding? What is the potential for innovative thinking on children's issues? What are OFMDFM's priorities for children and young people over the next six months?

Mr G Kelly: I thank the Member for the question, which came at the end of her speech.

The Executive examined how children and young people's issues are dealt with at Westminster, in the South and elsewhere. They concluded that the best way to deal with children and young people's issues is through funding being mainstreamed in Departments.

The Executive will take account of the final strategic equality impact assessment in the implementation of the Programme for Government and the investment strategy. The final EQIA will also be taken into account in future Budget allocations, including monitoring rounds. During the important consultation on the draft EQIA, the Executive are determined that all people, including the voluntary sector, will have the opportunity to influence final decisions. Departmental budgets will also take the EQIA into consideration. Therefore, all those issues are involved.

OFMDFM is no longer the funding Department; instead, the moneys will be mainstreamed into Depart-

ments. The children and young people's funding package has not disappeared but has been replaced, we would argue, with an effective method to ensure that money is available to all Departments to deal with this issue.

Ministers will attend this high-powered subcommittee, which means that there will be direct access to their Departments. The Executive have made their decision about the way in which to progress this issue, and we think that it will be seen to work.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the junior Minister tell us what OFMDFM is doing to combat bullying?

Mr G Kelly: As Members know, bullying is a huge issue for children and young people. Any efforts to raise awareness of this issue and develop mechanisms to tackle the problem will, I am sure, be widely welcomed by everyone in the Assembly.

The anti-bullying forum, with participation by key stakeholder representatives, has developed a range of initiatives, one of which is the production of an information advice leaflet for parents and carers regarding bullying because of race, faith and culture. Over the next three months, we plan to produce and implement a dissemination strategy for the leaflet; that will involve the leaflet being translated into key languages and ensuring that parents are aware of its existence, either by flagging up web-based access or by distribution of hard copies through a variety of outlets, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

In the longer term, we intend to develop a one-day training course for schools, which will include preventative and responsive strategies on bullying because of race, faith and culture. It is also intended to help schools to review the usefulness of the website material.

Mr O'Loan: I welcome the setting up of the ministerial subcommittee, with the proviso that I hope that it will lead to a more strategic focus on the important issue of children and young people. The junior Ministers' statement said:

"no child or youth programme will be reduced or cut".

In response to the draft Budget, the education and library boards were greatly concerned that funding for the Youth Service had been cut substantially. Extra funding was provided in the revised Budget, but I understand that the Youth Service still regards its funding as being cut. Will the junior Minister give a definitive statement on that matter?

Will he confirm that the line in his statement, which states that the budget for the Youth Service is not being cut from last year, means what it says? If he cannot give a definitive statement today, will he undertake to write to me on that point?

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat. I have said repeatedly that it is for individual Ministers to determine

spending priorities now that the Budget allocations have been finalised. Part of the Executive's role has been to improve budgetary allocations for youth services but not through a dedicated funding package. I will write to the Member and give him more details. However, the position has been stated several times today. The Executive are advancing youth services, not through a funding package but through mainstream funding supported by a ministerial subcommittee.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also welcome the re-establishment of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people. Will the junior Minister state what actions are being taken to ensure the protection of children and young people?

Mr G Kelly: Protecting and safeguarding children is a key priority for us all. A Staying Safe policy statement is being developed as part of the 10-year strategy for children and young people. It will bind together and integrate current developments and measures on safeguarding children as well as consider what additional policies and actions are required.

The document will seek to place the Staying Safe policy in east-west and North/South contexts because the subject is one that does not stop either at the border or within the island as a whole.

Legislation to safeguard vulnerable groups is being taken forward in line with developments in England and Wales and in parallel with those in Scotland. We have also established the Bichard co-ordination group to oversee developments here. We are liaising with the NIO on co-ordination and on the development of a communications strategy for the new arrangements that will be implemented in 2009. We have arranged for cross-jurisdiction safeguarding to be put on the agendas of the North/South Ministerial Council and the BIC (British-Irish Council).

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Draft Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2007

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 for a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes to speak.

The Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee on the draft Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 (Dr Farry): I beg to move

That the Report of the Ad Hoc Committee set up to consider the draft Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2007, should be submitted to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland as a Report of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Secretary of State referred the draft Order to the Assembly for consideration under section 85 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Committee's report, if adopted by the Assembly, will, together with the Official Report of this debate, constitute the Assembly's response to the Secretary of State on the draft Order.

The Committee worked on this legislation in a challenging time frame. I pay tribute to the Deputy Chairperson and Committee members, who showed great commitment and dedication to the task in hand. I also pay tribute to the Committee Clerk, Committee staff and researchers without whose professionalism and efforts the Committee could not have succeeded.

On behalf of the Committee, I thank the officials and representatives of the organisations who provided information and evidence.

Minister of State, Paul Goggins MP, came to the Assembly on two occasions: the first was on 26 November 2007, when he briefed Members before the Committee was formed; the second was on 14 January 2008, when he appeared before the Committee.

The proposed Order is the outcome of a fundamental review of the law on sexual offences in Northern Ireland. Its aim is to achieve a strengthened, modernised and harmonised body of law, based on the Sexual Offences Act 2003, which was also informed by extensive and fundamental research.

The draft Order deals with 19 offences that are already covered in Northern Ireland through the Sexual Offences Act 2003.

Therefore, 40% of the provisions are already in place. However, more importantly, the draft Order would cover 36 new offences.

2.00 pm

The draft Order comprises seven parts. Part 1 sets out key definitions for words such as "sexual", "consent" and "touching". Part 2 covers non-consensual offences such as rape, assault by penetration, sexual assault and causing a person to engage in sexual activity without consent. It redefines rape, creates new offences and addresses evidential presumptions about consent.

Part 3 deals with sexual offences against children under the age of 16 and makes such offences easier to prosecute. The offences of rape and assault can now be used in cases involving children under the age of 13 without the issue of consent arising. There are also proposals relating to offences in which adults are in positions of trust, which also deal with sexual offences committed by members of the family or the extended family. There are provisions for offences that deal with exploitation through prostitution and pornography, which aim to protect children up to the age of 18.

Part 4 deals with sexual offences against persons with a mental disorder, and Part 5 deals with prostitution. There are new offences of loitering, persistent soliciting and kerb crawling.

Part 6 deals with miscellaneous sexual offences including preparatory offences that apply regardless of whether an intended sexual act occurs.

The key effects of the draft Order include, as summarised by the Minister: all offences becoming gender neutral; all non-consensual activity and sexual activity involving children and other vulnerable adults being criminalised; clearly defined offences; children and young people being placed at the centre of proposals; new offences designed to protect children from abusive behaviour in the home; the equalisation of the age of consent in Northern Ireland with the rest of the UK; ensuring that other vulnerable groups will benefit from added protection; and strengthened law on commercial sexual exploitation.

The Committee broadly welcomed the legislation — the only exception being the age of consent. We welcome the codification of the law on sexual offences into a single statute, the creation of gender-neutral offences and the stiffer sentencing regime. We also welcome the removal of consent as a defence for sexual activity with a child under the age of 13, and that such activity will now be regarded as rape. However, we were averse to the proposed defence of "reasonable belief" where a child is between the ages of 13 and 18. At last, some clarity has been brought to the law on rape, and there is now an in-built presumption of rape if violence is used or where an over-powering drug is administered.

The Committee heard evidence that the guidance for prosecution, social services and education is not clear or robust enough, and that the resources are not sufficient,

for children who engage in sexually harmful behaviour. Therefore, the Committee welcomed the Minister's commitment that effective guidance will be provided to the Public Prosecution Service and that he wants to ensure that he develops the guidance in consultation with voluntary organisations and statutory agencies. There is undoubted merit in the development of prosecution protocols. In the interests of consistency, justice and — particularly — the victims, that work should commence without delay.

The Committee was persuaded by the arguments for equalising the penalties for causing or inciting abuse of a child through prostitution and for paying for the sexual services of a child. We strongly recommend that the draft Order is amended to reflect that. It is anomalous that a perpetrator of the latter offence could receive life imprisonment whereas a person who controls the child might receive only 14 years. The Committee also feels that section 5 of the Criminal Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 should be amended to ensure that young people are not penalised inappropriately for consensual and non-abusing sexual activity. We also strongly recommend that the NIO, DHSSPS, key professionals and non-governmental organisations establish a forum to develop and advance policies and practices in that area. The Committee was grateful for the Minister's commitment to a round table discussion to pull voluntary- and community-sector representatives and his officials together. We also welcome the Minister's commitment to ensure that those parties continue to be involved in the development and implementation of the legislation.

The Committee noted that the positions of trust referred to in the draft Order do not include sports coaches, and while acknowledging the difficulties involved in definition, strongly urged the Minister to give further serious consideration to the inclusion of sports coaches in the legislation.

The Committee was united in its views, save for the proposed change to the age of consent in Northern Ireland. Members may be interested to know that a formal age of consent is not defined in legislation; rather, it is the age at which activities are not formally proscribed. The majority of the Committee is strongly opposed to any change to the age of consent here. We heard evidence from the Christian Institute against any change; it felt that the proposed change was ill-conceived and that parity with the rest of the UK was not important. It was further argued that lowering the age of consent would not result in the reduction of teenage-pregnancy rates. Members might like to know that the age of consent in the Republic of Ireland is also 17 years of age. The Minister argued that the legislation was about defining when sexual activity was a crime, not about defining when young people should engage in sexual activity.

The teenage-parenting strategy was effective in reducing teenage pregnancies, and its success has underlined its importance. The Minister said that even if the Committee were unanimous in recommending the status quo, he would still need to be convinced of the arguments for Northern Ireland being out of line with the rest of the United Kingdom.

The main concern of the NSPCC and Barnardo's was that the current age of consent tends to prevent young people from coming forward for advice if they are engaged in sexual activity. The Committee also noted the potential anomaly of people in certain circumstances being able to marry when they are 16 years of age.

In coming to its decision, the Committee felt that there was no public lobby in Northern Ireland for change. It felt that it was for the Minister to prove his case and that the burden of proof should not rest with those who wish to defend the status quo.

Finally, I want to comment in a personal capacity as a member of the Committee. I agree with all the Committee's recommendations. However, I find myself in the slightly unusual position of being its Chairperson, but reflecting the minority view in the Committee on the issue of the age of consent. My view is that the age of consent in Northern Ireland should be set at 16 years of age and be in line with the rest of the United Kingdom. I do not believe that there is a compelling reason for Northern Ireland to be out of line with the rest of the UK. The issue is not about encouraging or legitimising sexual activity at an early age; rather, we should recognise that it is a reality in our society — as it is in others — and we should ensure that we have a practical response to a genuine problem. In practice, young people are rarely prosecuted for engaging in sexual relations when they are below the age of consent; the authorities rarely view it to be in the public interest to pursue prosecutions for such activity.

There is a strong argument for ensuring that no barriers are erected that would prevent people from receiving proper advice from qualified professionals who could inform them of the risks that are connected to their activities. Anything that prevents people coming forward for advice is counterproductive. We can, in a responsible way, support lowering the age of consent to 16 years of age. I believe that that is the more responsible line to take, although I respect fully the views of those Committee members who argued otherwise.

Mr Ross: I support the report, and the bulk of the proposed legislation is welcome. Although much of the debate — both in the Committee and in the media — has centred on the age of consent, it does a disservice to the overall legislation, which, in many ways, toughens the existing law.

Many of the main proposals have been welcomed by all the parties. The Chairperson mentioned some of those proposals, including criminalisation of non-consensual sexual activity between and involving children, and a recommendation for more robust sanctions. He also noted that the defence of consent has been removed for those who engage in sexual activity with a child who is under 13 years of age, although some members would have preferred to have seen that apply to children who are 14.

The NIO argued that children are at the heart of the proposals. We welcome the fact that new offences have been created. The reason for that is that children should be protected in their homes, which is where most abuse occurs. The Committee heard disturbing and horrific evidence, particularly from children's groups, about how some public toilets in Northern Ireland have been used to advertise sex with children who are as young as 12 years old.

I am pleased that the report recommends that the law for those who incite the abuse of a child through prostitution should be equal to that for those who pay for the service. Indeed, the Chairperson has already referred to that.

The age of consent was the main issue in, and out, of the Committee. The proposals to lower the age of consent were strongly resisted by the Committee. Sinn Féin, in particular, seemed to argue against lowering it, expressing the fear that sexual predators from the Irish Republic would come across the border to prey on younger people. However, that party's representatives seemed to change their mind in the last meeting. Sinn Féin Member Mickey Brady made comments in the media, which were carried by UTV and 'The Irish News', stating his concerns about lowering the age of consent. He said:

"Sexual predators may be encouraged to take advantage. There are people out there who may well take advantage of that situation and that is a real fear".

However, one week later, after Pat Doherty expressed an opposing view on the BBC's 'Let's Talk', the Sinn Féin Committee members changed their opinions. Jennifer McCann said that Sinn Féin does not want to criminalise children, despite the fact that, as the Chairman said, the Committee agreed that section 5 of the Criminal Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 should be amended so that two young people who were consensually engaged in sexual activity would not be inappropriately charged.

Sinn Féin's rationale is dangerously close to the view that, because young people under the age of 17 are having sex, we should legislate for that. Many young people smoke and drink before they are legally allowed to do so. If we were to follow the Sinn Féin rationale, we would abolish all the laws in relation to that, despite the health implications.

It is somewhat bizarre that, at a time when the Government are raising the age at which one can buy tobacco products and are seeking to reclassify cannabis in order to protect children, they propose to lower the age of consent in Northern Ireland, despite the fact that there is no public outcry to do so. The argument that children are already engaging in sexual activity and that the age of consent should reflect that holds no water. Laws are put in place to protect us. Young people should be protected, and that is what the legislation aims to do.

Maintaining the age of consent at 17 is not about criminalising children, as Sinn Féin has attempted to argue; it is about protecting children from those who would try to exploit them. Let us remember that we are not talking primarily about two 16-year-olds who are engaged in consensual sexual activity, but, perhaps, about a 40-year-old man aiming to take advantage of a 16-year-old girl.

We must also consider the message that lowering the age of consent would send out. Having sex requires emotional and physical maturity, and lowering the age to 16 would send out the message that the Government expect young people to be engaged in sexual activity and were legislating for that fact. No arguments have been advanced that provide a good reason to align our law with that on the mainland. Northern Ireland has different laws relating to many issues, such as abortion and alcohol. Therefore, there is no reason that we should not maintain the age of consent at 17.

We have heard evidence from various groups that wish to see a lower teenage pregnancy rate and a halt to the spread of STIs, and we all agree with that. However, lowering the age of consent will achieve neither of those aims. There is no evidence to support that view. Neither is there a link between the age of consent and the number of young people who seek advice on sexual issues. The burden of proof lies with those who wish to change the law, not with those who wish to maintain the current position. Evidence given to the Committee shows that nearly 28% of 16- to 24-year-olds in GB had sex before the age of 16, whereas in Northern Ireland the figure is only 15%. We do not want to see any reversal of that.

In my closing remarks, I wish to touch on a few issues. We mentioned that sports coaches are not included in the provision about a position of trust. That is important, and we have encouraged the Minister to examine it. In England, in October 2007, tennis coach Clare Lyte was sentenced after a trial that heard evidence of how she abused her position as a tennis coach to engage in a sexual relationship with a child of 13. That hammers the point home.

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

Mr Ross: I commend the report and hope that Members will support it.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like the last two Members who spoke, I welcome the debate. I also welcome the report from the Ad Hoc Committee on the Draft Sexual Offences Order.

For the record, the previous Member's speech described my party's views incorrectly on several issues. The minutes of evidence will prove that my two colleagues and I probed many of those issues so that we could put information in the public domain before coming to our conclusion. I hope that the Member is not saying that comments and statements made by other Committee members indicate their personal points of view. We can do that. The Member has been somewhat childish to say that, because we were teasing out issues, we changed our minds. I raised the issue of sexual predators. The Member must recognise that. I told the Minister that my concern was not about two 16-year-olds, or two 15-year-olds, but about sexual predators who might use the law to their own advantage. There are two issues there, and the Member must be honest about them.

2.15 pm

However, it is a pity that the age of consent is the dominant issue in the debate. Many of the proposed provisions are positive and will go some way to protecting children, young people and the vulnerable. They will modernise the statute book.

The Chairman has, rightly, pointed out that the provisions ensure that offences will be gender neutral. Until the Order becomes law, an offence could take place between a 14- or 15-year-old male and a 15- or 16-year-old female. That created difficulties, because it was not gender neutral.

All non-consensual sexual activity, and sexual activity involving children and other vulnerable groups, will be criminalised. The Order must therefore be welcomed. It introduces new offences designed to prevent children from abusive behaviour in the home. Given that sexual abuse is prevalent in the home and extended family, that is to be welcomed. During Committee meetings on the proposed Order, several groups submitted papers to the Committee. Presentations were made, most notably, by the Christian Institute, the NSPCC and Barnardo's. Specific issues were aired from opposite ends of the room. I encourage that, and I welcome the fact that the Committee had the opportunity to listen to a number of organisations.

The NSPCC and Barnardo's were broadly content with most of the Order. Sinn Féin pushed several small, minor issues, as the Chairperson has mentioned. We pressed the Minister to ensure that there is a commitment to a round table discussion that will involve both the community and voluntary sector, and NIO officials. It is on record that I welcome that commitment, because we pushed for that for long time.

I take this opportunity to mention that NIO officials are at present in the Public Gallery.

We must keep an eye on that commitment. The Committee has reported, and it should not take its eye off the ball after this debate.

The Committee is concerned at the position of trust held by sports coaches. I do not claim to speak for all the members, but all showed concern on that issue, and it must be taken on board.

Again, I want to put on record that I, and other Committee members, raised the issue of victims and survivors. The Order deals with sexual offences; however, those cannot be seen in isolation from the issues of victims and survivors. We must consider them — they will be a key component. Recent media reports indicate that, whatever happens, victims and survivors are left to one side. Whatever criminal or sexual offences legislation is in place, concern for victims and survivors must be at its centre.

The age of consent is the main issue on which the Committee did not agree. However, members agreed to write into the report that what prevailed was a majority view. That is common sense.

Some organisations were concerned that certain provisions would prevent young people from seeking advice. They argued that, if marriage can take place at 16, on the grounds of equality, the age of consent must be 16. That view must be taken on board.

I am conscious that the Speaker will soon stop me from talking, which is a pity; however, I am sure Mickey Brady will make those points. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs D Kelly: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate, and I acknowledge that in the Committee there was general agreement on a wide range of issues, the exception being that of the lowering of the age of consent. It is my view that the age of consent should not be lowered.

The proposals contain much that is to be recommended, most especially, the clarification of the law on rape. The Chairperson, Dr Farry, has already accurately summarised the Committee's findings. It is unfortunate that this is not a devolved matter, since we would then take control of our destiny, without having to plead with a Secretary of State to promote the legislation.

With respect to most matters involving the protection of children and young people, the required actions involve close co-operation between agencies.

Therefore, there is a requirement on Ministers to study the report's recommendations carefully. The report references gaps in the provision of guidelines and protocols for professionals who work in the area.

I want to highlight in particular a policy area that needs urgent review: that of children who sexually

harm other children and, in some cases, adults. It is disappointing that neither the consultation nor the draft Order has considered any aspect of sexually harmful behaviour by children and how it should be dealt with. Such consideration is particularly important because research clearly shows that a large number of sex offenders begin offending when they are children. It also shows that intervention at that age is important and effective. It must be remembered that a large number of children who engage in sexually harmful behaviour are already victims. A host of treatments can be considered for those children, focusing on their own victim experiences and effectively preventing them from continuing to offend into adulthood.

The draft Order's arrangements contrast sharply with the multi-agency sex-offender risk assessment and management (MASRAM) arrangements, under which there is much clearer guidance and more money available. The Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey, and his colleagues must reflect carefully on that if the Assembly is to have any impact whatsoever in preventing the cycle of sexual violence and abuse.

Like other Members, I welcome the establishment of the rape crisis assessment and referral centre, which will be the first of its kind in Northern Ireland. It is certainly long overdue. The Committee Chairman said that although there is a lot in the report, legislation must be much clearer about the protection of children, young people, and particularly, women, who are most likely to be the victims of sexual offences. I am concerned about the lack of protocols and guidance.

I hope that the Minister considers carefully the views of the agencies that made representations to the Committee, especially the NSPCC and Barnardo's, both of which are widely recognised and established experts in the field. There is a clear call for the pertinent issue of young sex offenders and prevention of the cycle of abuse and victimhood to be dealt with urgently.

Mr McCallister: I broadly welcome the Committee's report and the general direction of the draft Order, which takes steps to further protect the most vulnerable in society from the unfortunate reality of sexual predators. This process has brought about the first major review of this body of law in Northern Ireland, and that is also welcome.

I strongly welcome the draft Order's main goals; it seeks to clarify the law, create new offences, bolster sentences and tariffs, and, of course, as other Members have mentioned, establish a rape crisis referral centre. In particular, I strongly welcome the removal of consent as a defence for sex with a child who is under 13 years of age, which will now always be considered as rape. I welcome, too, the corresponding increased tariffs for that offence and others.

However, I share the Committee's opposition to the proposed defence of reasonable belief when the child is between 13 and 18 years of age. More must be done to ensure the protection of young people in that age bracket and remove the defence of reasonable belief, which can often be used as a preconceived defence.

I welcome the Minister's commitment to producing effective guidance for the Public Prosecution Service. There are several issues with regard to that. First, we must ensure that relevant protocols are in place to deal more effectively with young people who engage in sexually harmful activities.

Secondly, we must ensure that young people are not prosecuted unnecessarily for consensual sexual activity, and the Committee's desire to amend section 5 of the Criminal Law (Northern Ireland) Act 1967, which relates to that issue, is welcome. However, we must also ensure that children — especially those under 14 years old — are protected, and that their best interests are not compromised by the non-reporting of potential offences. That is a delicate matter and we must move forward on those issues in direct consultation with children's groups, the social services, the police and the Assembly.

I share the Committee's disappointment that the age of consent will be reduced to 16 years of age. The Committee's view is that the burden of proof rests with those who seek change rather than those who, as has been suggested, oppose it. Regardless of the outcome of the debate, more needs to be done to improve education on relationships and sexual health. There is a high rate of teenage pregnancies in Northern Ireland, and it is extremely important that a cross-departmental strategy is put in place to reduce that rate.

Finally, depending on the completion of the draft Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2007, work must begin to ensure its smooth implementation. Stakeholders must work together to ensure that policy, legislation and guidance combine to give the maximum protection and support to our children and young people.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question time will begin at 2.30 pm. Members may take their ease until then. The debate will resume after Question Time, when the first Member to be called will be Mrs Iris Robinson.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I think that the Member knows the procedures. Points of order cannot be taken during Question Time.

Mr Ford: I am sorry, Mr Speaker: I did not realise that Question Time had begun.

Mr Speaker: Question Time takes place between 2.30 pm and 4.00 pm, and it has certainly started. I am happy to take the Member's point of order after Question Time.

Before we proceed, I welcome to the Assembly, this afternoon, representatives from the Basque Parliament, who are visiting Northern Ireland.

Question 1, in the name of Mr Easton, has been withdrawn.

Freedom of Information

2. **Mr Lunn** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans it had to introduce freedom of information legislation that is specific to Northern Ireland. (AQO 1688/08)

18. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans it had to amend the current freedom of information legislation to ensure that public bodies are required to keep records of, and publish details on, (i) the source of requests under the existing freedom of information legislation; (ii) the number of requests; and (iii) the cost to public bodies in dealing with these requests. (AQO 1656/08)

The First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 2 and 18 together.

Freedom of information (FOI) is a transferred matter. However, in 2000, the then Executive Committee decided not to introduce separate FOI legislation. Therefore, Northern Ireland was covered by legislation that was passed by the United Kingdom Government. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has

no current plans to introduce freedom of information legislation that is specific to Northern Ireland. There are no plans to amend the existing legislation to ensure that public bodies are required to keep records of, and publish details on, the source and number of requests and the cost to public bodies in dealing with those requests.

Details about the number of requests received and the source of requests are compiled in all Departments and are published annually. However, information about the cost of processing requests is generally not held because requests are dealt with on a case-by-case basis. No satisfactory formula that facilitates the calculation of accurate figures exists. However, a considerable number of staff and resources are tied up with processing freedom of information requests.

Mr Lunn: Does the First Minister retain the view that the freedom of information legislation remains an excuse for lazy journalism? Does he agree that, as inconvenient as it may be, it is a vital component of an open democracy?

The First Minister: I know that there are people in the House who believe in the infallibility of the Pope, but I did not think that as many people believed in the infallibility of the press. There are good journalists and bad journalists, just as there are good politicians and rotten politicians. I take my hat off to the journalists who have kept faith, both with the people whom they interview and the people whom they serve. However, I have no time for a journalist who is out to crack down on someone at whom he has taken umbrage; he has to take the heat as the rest of us do. I know that the honourable gentleman is quite capable of taking any heat that I would dare to put against him.

Mr G Robinson: Are codes of practice available on how Departments should discharge their responsibilities under freedom of information legislation?

The First Minister: Sections 45 and 46 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 require the Ministry of Justice to produce codes of practice, which provide guidance to public authorities on desirable practice in discharging their functions under Part I of the Act, and in relation to records management.

The codes do not have statutory force, but they provide essential guidance to public bodies on how best to meet their obligations under the 2000 Act. Failure to comply with the provisions of the codes may lead to a breach of the 2000 Act and, ultimately, to enforcement action being taken by the Information Commissioner. A revision of the records management code of practice is being undertaken by the National Archives of the United Kingdom. It is taking account of rapid technological advances in the management of electronic data, such as emails. Our Departments recognise that they will not be well placed to deliver on their statutory

obligations under the 2000 Act unless they possess robust information and records management systems.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Leaving aside all the First Minister's bluster about the press, does he agree that freedom of information policy contributes to open and transparent Government and helps to hold decision-makers to account? Does he fully support the principle of freedom of information?

The First Minister: The foreword of the 2006 annual report on the operation of freedom of information in Northern Ireland, which was published in July 2007, notes — although I suppose that the honourable Member never read it — that the 2000 Act continues to contribute significantly to the development of an open and transparent culture within Departments. We also stated that we will aim to disclose, wherever possible, information about the progress of our policies, with a view to informing everyone who engages with us — even him.

Mr Gardiner: Will the First Minister undertake to ensure that any regulatory burdens placed on small voluntary organisations, including the freedom of information regulations, are not imposed without a financial impact assessment?

The First Minister: The honourable gentleman makes a point that should be observed.

Child Protection and Welfare

3. **Mr Simpson** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the work that it has carried out on child protection and welfare. (AQO 1668/08)

The First Minister: We are developing a cross-departmental safeguarding policy statement that will bind together and integrate current developments and existing measures around safeguarding children, as well as examining what additional actions and policies are required. The document will also seek to place our safeguarding arrangements in an east-west and North-South context. Although the issue of child protection is not in the existing work programmes for the British-Irish Council or the North/South Ministerial Council, we will raise the matter at the next summit meeting, subject to an agreement from the other participating Administrations.

As announced by the junior Ministers this morning, we have re-established the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people to ensure co-ordination in the delivery of their priorities. The subcommittee will seek to place children and young people at the heart of the Government's agenda and improve the integration of policy and service delivery on cross-cutting issues. We have also established the Northern Ireland Bichard co-ordination group, which is overseeing

the implementation of the recommendations on child protection and vetting procedures resulting from Sir Michael Bichard's inquiry into the tragic deaths of Jessica Chapman and Holly Wells.

Mr Simpson: Does the First Minister agree that the case for child protection will not be advanced one iota if loving, caring parents are criminalised, or if children are snatched from loving, caring homes by force, over the issue of smacking?

The First Minister: I agree with my honourable friend. The law here provides protection for parents who choose to chastise their child reasonably through smacking. A recent judicial review by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People failed in its attempt to challenge that law. Therefore, there are no grounds for social services to remove children from their parents because of reasonable chastisement. I am sure that my honourable friend will agree with that.

Ms S Ramsey: I welcome the First Minister's answer to the initial question. Will he state what work is being done with the Irish Government to tackle child poverty and social exclusion across the island of Ireland? I know that he has touched on that. Has any work been done to build on the work that was done with the Irish Government on child protection?

The First Minister: The honourable lady will know that we have set a priority to deal with that matter and to eliminate it, eventually. We are dedicated to that task, and we will continue to work on it.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the First Minister state how the Programme for Government and the Budget will specifically improve the life chances of children — especially those with special needs — in the absence of the children's fund?

The First Minister: Now that the Budget allocations have been finalised, we have asked ministerial colleagues to provide us with details of those elements of the children and young people's funding package that have been carried forward. We are pleased that final Budget negotiations gave additional funding to the Department of Education of £13 million over three years for children, young people and youth services, and £30 million over the same period to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for the implementation of the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability (Northern Ireland).

The granting to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety of additional funding through the in-year monitoring process and the ability to retain efficiency savings over 3.5% also presents an opportunity for additional resources. Added to the £26 million allocated, we have facilitated the continuation of projects previously funded by the children and young people's funding package announced earlier. That will

provide a substantial allocation to children's services. With those additional resources, on top of mainstream funding, the Executive can focus on the important work of delivering on the vision contained in the 10-year strategy for children and young people, namely that all children and young people living in Northern Ireland will thrive and look forward with confidence to their futures.

International Relations

4. **Mr Ross** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline its proposals to improve international relations. (AQO 1723/08)

The First Minister: The Programme for Government includes plans to build on our recent successes in developing good international relations. Our objective is to enhance the positive image of Northern Ireland, generate practical benefits of attracting investment, exchange knowledge, encourage people to visit us and create business and cultural opportunities internationally.

Our recent visits to the United States and Brussels were successful and generated enormous goodwill and positive endorsement by senior politicians and business leaders.

2.45 pm

We will continue to work with the US Administration and US businesses on several important economic issues. In particular, the US/NI investment conference in May will be a significant milestone in our attempt to position ourselves as an internationally competitive and attractive business location.

As I said in a previous answer, we are also working with the European Union to build on existing partnerships and to enhance collaboration across key policies and programmes. Our recent discussions with President Barroso reinforced the commitment and support for the European Commission's Northern Ireland task force, which is responsible for identifying how our region can participate more effectively in EU initiatives.

We will also enhance our international role through the Executive's offices in Washington DC and Brussels, and we will build productive relations and networks in other regions. In addition, we will work with other partner organisations that are already committed to helping us achieve our objectives.

We are ambitious to extend the Northern Ireland operation in India, where one of our colleagues is visiting. Indeed, before coming to the House, I spoke to him on the telephone. We look forward to getting a good response in India and in parts of China.

Given those links, our country should benefit and opportunities should flow to it.

Mr Ross: I thank the First Minister for his answer. Over recent weeks — and the First Minister referred to this in his reply — we have heard Members from all sides of the House welcoming the upcoming investment conference. Will the First Minister elaborate specifically on how that conference will contribute to international relations?

The First Minister: The event is planned for May 2008 and will take place in greater Belfast. It will be an opportunity to showcase a new Northern Ireland and a stable, new devolved Administration that is pro-business and proactive in meeting international business needs.

The Prime Minister and representatives of the US Administration have been supportive and will play an important part in that conference alongside representatives from the internal business community.

President Barroso announced a European Commission task force. When we were in Europe recently, we formed a deputation to meet him, and he and other European Union representatives have greatly encouraged the investment conference. Of course, we trust that representatives of many other countries — including Canada — will take part in the conference.

Mr Kennedy: Does the First Minister agree that the establishment of an Assembly Committee for external affairs would be a good way to allow Northern Ireland to interact more closely with regional and national Governments in the European Union?

The First Minister: I would be interested in discussing that matter at any time. Anything that helps us to reach out across the world and interest people in coming to Northern Ireland in order to establish businesses should be examined. If any method offers hope of that — no matter who proposes it — we would be glad to consider it and, if it is worthwhile, proceed with it.

Mrs Hanna: I am sure that the First Minister is aware that the Department for International Development and Ireland Aid are looking forward to working with the Assembly on international development. Although that is a reserved matter, does the First Minister agree that our Departments have an opportunity to complement and support work in areas such as fair trade, ethical procurement, volunteering and exchanges?

The First Minister: The Assembly plays a part in those activities, and I hope that along the way we can get agreement and walk together so that progress can be made.

Ministerial Code

5. **Mr O'Loan** asked the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to detail the processes in

place to ensure that any alleged breach of the ministerial code is examined independently. (AQO 1687/08)

The First Minister: As you are aware, Mr Speaker, the ongoing judicial review of an alleged breach of the ministerial code by the Minister for Social Development, Ms Ritchie, prevents us from making any specific comment at this stage. I am surprised that the Member even asked the question. There are no specific provisions in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 that relate to the independent examination of alleged breaches of the ministerial code. However, section 28A of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires Ministers to act in accordance with the provisions of the ministerial code. A breach of that code by a Minister could be subject to legal action.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the First Minister for his courtesy, but his answer is no answer at all. I wrote to him on 7 December 2007, bringing the matter of a possible breach of the ministerial code to his attention and asking for an investigation. He knows that I did not even get an acknowledgement of that letter until seven weeks later, and that after prompting. The acknowledgement merely said that the correspondence was still under consideration. Does the First Minister not agree that that does not encourage confidence in the system?

Mr Speaker: The Member must ask his supplementary question.

Mr O'Loan: This is an extremely important issue. Will the First Minister agree with me that there cannot be confidence in ministerial conduct if there is not a clear mechanism for the enforcement of the ministerial code and that his answer confirms that no such system or process exists?

The First Minister: The Member talks energetically to the media about complaints that he has lodged with my Department and others. Let me be clear: there is nothing to investigate, and he knows that. He could not even lodge a credible paper or proper complaint with the Assembly Ombudsman on the same matter. He was knocked down. The fact is that no such complaint of substance exists, and the Member has failed to make even half a case.

Mr McFarland: Will the First Minister give some guidance to the House? If, for example, a junior Minister is found to be in breach of the ministerial code, what punishment would he recommend should be meted out?

The First Minister: I am not like the Member: I do not judge people before their time. The law must take its course, and it must be obeyed. That the Member asks such a question — about what I would do in circumstances that have not even come to pass — shows that he does not realise the responsibility that he has as a Member of the House.

Mr Moutray: Will the First Minister tell the House how collective Executive responsibility has been enhanced since the first Administration and how it prevents Ministers, such as the Minister of Education, going off on a solo run?

The First Minister: It was agreed at St Andrews to put the ministerial code on a statutory footing and to place a duty on Ministers, notwithstanding their Executive authority in their areas of responsibility, to act in accordance with the provision on ministerial accountability in the code. That code now contains safeguards to ensure that all sections of the community can participate and work together successfully in the operation of the institutions.

In addition to the matters that had to be brought to the Executive under the first Administration, it was agreed at St Andrews that the Executive would also consider any issues that were significant or controversial and which were clearly outside the scope of the Programme for Government or which the deputy First Minister and I agreed should be brought to the Executive.

It was also agreed that the Assembly would have the power to refer important ministerial decisions to the Executive, and the Pledge of Office was amended to require Ministers to participate fully in the Executive as well as in the NSMC and the BIC. All those provisions were designed significantly to enhance collective Executive responsibility in a way that was not possible in earlier Administrations. One cannot be a Member of an Administration if one does not take the weight and join with one's friends — or enemies, as the case may be — to do the job that one has told the public that one will do. There is no escape; we are all under the same yoke, whether we like it or not.

Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past

6. **Mr Burnside** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions it has had with the Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past. (AQO 1674/08)

The First Minister: Officials met members of the Consultative Group on the Past in October 2007. The group also met the deputy First Minister and me separately. Those meetings took place last month and were largely a listening exercise. We understand that the consultative group is to continue to consult on a wide basis, and we await the outcome of that process.

Mr Burnside: There is no doubt that there is already a line of thinking on the Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past that is at least considering making victims equivalent to the IRA/Sinn Féin perpetrators of an armed insurrection in this Province over the past 40 years. Does the First Minister — although over the

past 12 months he has gone back on many of the things that he has believed in as a Protestant and unionist leader over the past 40 years —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Burnside: Will he at least —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Burnside: Will he at least —

Mr Speaker: Order. Will the Member take his seat and come to his question.

Mr Burnside: Will the First Minister at least stand firm by saying to the House that there is no equivalence between the victims of the terrorist insurrection and those who perpetrated it over the past 40 years?

The First Minister: Looking at the man who asked the question and looking into his past, I think that he would be better keeping his mouth closed on that issue.

As a unionist, I have no doubt that the terror campaign that was waged against the people of Northern Ireland was terrorism and not a war. However, it would be inappropriate for my Department to comment on the findings of a report that is not even published. The level and nature of the recent controversy highlights the contentious and emotive issues to which discussions regarding our shared past can lead. It underlines the need for this society to establish a mechanism that will facilitate that discussion. The establishment of a forum for victims and survivors may possibly provide that, but I am not sure.

However, I was glad to meet the two co-chairmen of the body and to hear what they had to say, and I will pay close attention to the outcomes of that body's work, as I suppose will everyone who really wants peace in this Province.

Notwithstanding, one thing is clear: although the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister was blamed for certain statements that appeared in the press, they were not true. We had nothing to do with a biographical note written by one of the commissioners and printed as she directed it should be printed. We have no responsibility for that. I regret that it happened, because this is a time when we should tread carefully.

It is the innocent victims who will suffer from any further delay by the victims' commissioners.

Mrs Long: Does the First Minister agree that when, in his last answer, he confused the Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past with the recently appointed victims' commission, he simply added to the public confusion about the issue? It is important that victims be given consideration in the context of the past. However, does he agree that if the thorny issues that will be raised are to be resolved to the satisfaction of those within and outside the House, the wider

implications for society must also be dealt with in the context of a shared future?

3.00pm

Mr Speaker: The time for questions is up, but I will ask the First Minister to give a quick answer.

The First Minister: If the lady has a message for those responsible, she should meet the victims' commissioners and bring it to their attention. The victims' commission was established to facilitate such an exchange of views.

I want to make it perfectly clear that there is a difference between the perpetrators of violence and people who suffer from violence. That difference will cause some weary nights and sore crying for the House and for this land of ours. Members must face up to that: I have done so in my pastoral ministry. I know what it means to stand in someone's home and see people wailing their hearts out as a result of the murders that were committed. May God give us the grace to be soft enough to forgive, but wise enough not to be taken in.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Local Procurement

1. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the progress made on (i) the issue of local procurement by Government; and (ii) ensuring this procurement is fair and equitable.
(AQO 1690/08)

Local Produce

3. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to establish the amount of local produce being served in the canteens of all buildings under her Department's control.
(AQO 1672/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I will take questions 1 and 3 together.

I am grateful for the opportunity to update Assembly colleagues on an issue that I have prioritised since taking up office. Through the sustainable procurement action plan, my officials are working with the Central Procurement Directorate to develop advice and guidance on the public procurement of food.

I am keen to explore every opportunity to use local produce as much as possible, while adhering to EU

law, which requires that all public procurement be fair and transparent. My officials are also working with the Health and Education Departments, which carry out the most food procurement, to develop awareness sessions on those contracts that are due for renewal in the near future. The main objectives will be to raise awareness of upcoming contracts, to explain the procurement process and to encourage more local companies to tender. The events will be targeted at small and medium-sized producers and processors, and they will be organised in a manner that, wherever possible, provides equal access to all.

In response to question 3, under direct arrangements the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD), rather than my Department, is responsible for managing the three Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) private-sector catering contracts. Some of those contracts, many of which run for up to three years, were agreed prior to my taking up office, and they state that the use of local produce should be considered where possible. Specific information on the source of the supply for the Department's premises is not held, but I have asked the catering managers of each to provide a breakdown of the amount of local produce currently used.

To encourage more local sourcing of produce, we must raise awareness of the next tranche of contracts. In order to encourage more local agrifood companies to tender, we must explain the process. That issue extends beyond DARD's catering contracts: it is Government-wide. Therefore, I have asked for a meeting with the Minister responsible for procurement.

Mr Molloy: What assistance on the public procurement of locally produced food can be given to producers and processors?

Ms Gildernew: DARD staff provide technical support and advice to individual farmers or processors, large and small producer groups and co-operatives to help them engage in public-sector contracts. Under the rural development programme for 2007-2013, the processing and marketing scheme provides assistance to help the agrifood sector improve its competitiveness and enable it to compete for such contracts.

Staff from the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) at the Loughry campus have supported the Central Procurement Directorate by providing advice on the specifications for public food contracts. In addition, they have contributed to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's Fit Futures initiative, which 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 that develop technical and business management skills. College staff can assist with product

specification, product development and the adoption of new technologies. In addition, the college benchmarking programmes can be used to monitor and identify opportunities for improved efficiency and competitiveness in production systems.

I have also met Michael McGimpsey and Caitríona Ruane to discuss the success of the renaissance of Atlantic food authenticity and economic links (RAFAEL) project in the north-west, which encourages local food producers to develop and successfully compete for business in the public sector, specifically in hospitals and schools. We are trying to encourage the roll-out of that initiative to other areas.

Mr McCallister: Will the Minister state what criteria she uses when sourcing local produce for her own Department's canteens?

Ms Gildernew: That issue was addressed in my answer to the main question. Procurement is the responsibility of the Department of Finance and Personnel through the Central Procurement Directorate. They set the criteria. Obviously, that issue will be considered during the next round of contract allocations, and I have asked for a meeting with the Minister of Finance and Personnel to discuss it.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Pat Ramsey. I apologise; Mr Ramsey should have been called before Mr McCallister.

Mr P Ramsey: Will the Minister meet local companies and producers, who are trying to take part in procurement policies? As some of them are new consortiums, will the Minister confirm that past records would not be held against them? Finally, given the importance of local produce, will she assist other Departments in promoting and carrying through what she has said her own Department will do?

Ms Gildernew: I am happy to meet with such people. As I have pointed out, my officials are already engaging with producers and processors to try to help them to bid for public-sector contracts and to improve their competitive edge. That work is ongoing and has worked well in the north-west region under RAFAEL.

We are trying to expand that to all Government contracts. That is why we dealt specifically with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Minister of Education, who run the two biggest Departments as regards public-sector procurement. Therefore, all of that work is ongoing. I am happy to meet anyone, and my officials are already doing that on a daily basis.

Mr T Clarke: Will the Minister state whether the term "local procurement" refers to Northern Ireland produce?

Ms Gildernew: That is obvious. I have recently launched the new round of the Northern Ireland Regional Food Programme, which aims to promote quality regional

food and to increase its consumption in Ireland and Britain. Under that programme, assistance is available to develop and expand profitable and sustainable markets by encouraging better co-operation and communications between all sectors in the food industry.

In the past 12 months, that programme has provided financial support to a range of successful events such as the Food Pavilion at the Balmoral Show, which showcased the wide range of available quality local produce and brought the industry together in a common cause.

Red Meat Industry

2. **Dr W McCrea** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what priority action she is taking to safeguard the red meat industry.
(AQO 1725/08)

Ms Gildernew: The Chairman of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development is aware of the work that my Department has been involved in with the Red Meat Industry Task Force in developing a strategic plan to guide the industry's development over the next number of years. Implementing the strategy will have major implications for the industry as a whole, and will require the main players to take on increasingly important roles for the industry.

This is not simply a matter for Government to progress; all stakeholders, including Government, need to work in partnership. The report identified actions for each of the main players, and the Department is actively playing its part in implementing the recommendations of the report. I would also welcome the Committee's suggestions on how we can move forward collectively, and I await its views.

I met Commissioner Fischer Boel on 10 January 2008, and took the opportunity to bring the findings of the Red Meat Industry Task Force report to her attention. The difficulties facing the North's red meat industry make it all the more important that we have a level playing field when it comes to competition by ensuring full decoupling of support across the EU, and by ensuring that imports meet the same high standards as domestic production, as well as providing stability in the Common Agricultural Policy until 2013.

The task force recently established two working groups, both of which are led by DARD officials. One group is tasked with targeting efforts to develop commercially viable models of beef production, and the other to scope practical options, linked to broader social and environmental considerations, which might support suckler-beef and hill-sheep farmers.

Furthermore, I met three of the major retailers — and plan to meet another very soon — and wrote to

them about the issue of rising costs for producers. Although I have no direct influence over retail prices, lower prices for consumers should not mean lower prices for local produce.

Dr W McCrea: How can the Minister claim that the red-meat sector is a priority when the additional money for her Department in the Budget was not used to help it? Why do many believe that her inaction in response to the task force report indicates her intent to close down the red-meat sector instead of building it up? Given all that the Minister claims that she and her Department do for the red-meat sector, why do farmers at the farm gate feel that she has abandoned them?

Ms Gildernew: My Department is working on a plan, and it is very hard to ask for money without knowing what the plan is. We await what comes from the working groups in the red meat task force report.

I cannot interfere with competitive issues such as retail price. The red meat task force report clearly states that the market is unlikely to deliver the 60p to 70p per kilo increase required for even our most efficient producers to break even. However, I will do all that I can to encourage constructive relationships and dialogue across the supply chain, including with retailers, to ensure joint efforts to help address the challenges that are faced by beef and sheep producers.

As I said, I met three of the major retailers and, although I have no direct influence over retail prices, we can help to influence them. The task force has also been involved in bilateral meetings with retailers, which is a practical step that will help to cement relationships throughout the supply chain. The Department will look carefully at what comes from the working group, before sourcing the necessary money to fit the requirements.

Mr O'Loan: Will the Minister confirm that she made a case for the recovery of the red-meat industry during discussions on the Budget in the Executive, and will she detail the outcome?

Ms Gildernew: Yes; as part of an ongoing engagement with the Minister of Finance and Personnel, not just in the Executive but in correspondence, I stated clearly that challenges and difficulties in the red-meat sector must be tackled. As I already said, I made the same points to Commissioner Fischer Boel. Moreover, I seek help for our red-meat industry where it can be found. That work is ongoing and targets anyone who can help find a way to alleviate the problems in the red-meat sector.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that answer. Does the Minister accept that there has been a significant decrease in the total-value output from the Northern Ireland lamb sector this year? What is she doing to stop that decline, which amounted to 20% in 2007? Will the Minister also investigate the possibility of providing direct financial support to suckler-cow

enterprises and farmers in Northern Ireland or, as some people now call it, the North of Ireland? *[Laughter.]*

Ms Gildernew: It is good to see a significant change in Tom's attitude and approach.

First, significant funding is already available to the red-meat sector; for example, the single farm payment, as Tom knows, provides direct funding to farmers — including our lamb producers — which is available until 2013 at least.

With regard to a suckler welfare scheme, my Department, as a member of the task force and the working group mentioned in the previous question, scopes practical options linked to broader social and environmental considerations that might support suckler-beef and hill-sheep farmers. The red meat task force stated that there was no economic case for long-term Government financial support and that additional funding would only mask the issues. However, my Department is focused on providing meaningful support to help the industry become more sustainable and on helping those farmers who wish to remain in the industry get a fair return for their hard work.

However, I do not rule out the need for further assistance. As I said, a marker bid was submitted in the Budget for funding aimed at the red-meat sector, and that will be used to implement any schemes arising from the recommendations of the Red Meat Industry Task Force. No funding has yet been allocated but, if necessary, the bid will be repeated in future.

3.15 pm

Dangerous Dogs Legislation

4. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide an update on the review of dangerous dogs legislation; and to confirm whether she has held meetings with the Police Service of Northern Ireland to discuss this matter.

(AQO 1710/08)

Ms Gildernew: In my statement to the Assembly on 20 November, I announced a review of dangerous dogs and dog fighting legislation. Since that announcement, my officials have been carrying out a scoping exercise on existing legislation with regard to all aspects of dog control, including dangerous dogs. That has included an examination of the wide range of comments made during the recent Assembly debate. It has also involved consideration of comments made by district councils and others on the efficacy of current legislation.

My officials also raised the issue with their counterparts in the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in Dublin at a recent meeting of the all-island animal health and welfare strategy steering group. That review is ongoing, and once the scoping exercise is complete,

I will consider several options, including what new legislation might be required and what it might cover.

Before my announcement in the Assembly, there were few calls for new legislation on the issue of dangerous dogs. Many of the issues raised centred on the enforcement of existing dog control legislation rather than calling for new legislation. Enforcement of the legislation is crucial to my review, as many of the issues raised are about public safety. As there have been calls for the PSNI to have a greater role in the enforcement of dog control legislation, I wrote to the Chief Constable on 31 October 2007 requesting a meeting to discuss the role of the PSNI in the enforcement of dog control and dangerous dogs legislation. As a result, I met senior PSNI representatives on Tuesday 22 January, and we had a constructive and positive meeting at which several proposals were discussed that will form part of my considerations.

The meeting with the PSNI is the first of several that I hope to have with interested parties. The next step will be to meet district councils, and arrangements for those meetings are in hand. My officials have also briefed the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development on the review, and I welcome the helpful comments received from the Committee.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. The Minister said that her officials had discussions with officials in the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in Dublin, and that she will be considering the harmonisation of legislation North and South, and I welcome that. Has the Minister any plans to discuss the matter with Mary Coughlan, the Minister in the Twenty-six Counties, soon?

Ms Gildernew: As I said, my officials raised dog control issues with their counterparts. As a result, the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in Dublin has written to the Department of the Environment, which is responsible for the legislation on dog control in the South, seeking information on its plans for legislation on dangerous breeds. I raised control of dogs issues with Minister Coughlan during a North/South Ministerial Council meeting in November and will do so when I meet her again. My officials continue to liaise with Dublin officials on that matter and on its new animal welfare legislation, particularly in relation to powers on dog fighting.

During my meeting with the PSNI, I was given assurances that officers already liaise closely with An Garda Síochána in relation to dog-fighting rings, which, as I said in my statement to the Assembly in November, operate on both sides of the border, and I welcome those assurances.

Mr Storey: I am somewhat confused as to the supplementary question asked by the original questioner, given the fact that she was asking the Minister about

meetings that she has had with the PSNI. Questions were then asked about North/Southery. The House should not be confused about what the Minister said about the meetings that she has had with the PSNI. It would suit the party opposite if it met the PSNI in relation to the Quinn murder and the McCartney murder to give information on them.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister's discussions with local councils centre on the dog wardens and practitioners who can give her an assessment of the real issues and identify problem breeds? That would inform the Minister about the decisions that she has to make on this important issue.

Ms Gildernew: My answer will be shorter than the question. Yes, I will meet the dog wardens, but one of the difficulties is finding a venue. We want management from the district councils and the dog wardens to be present.

The dog wardens really must be part of that engagement to ensure that we get the right answers. As part of our review, we will consider all the issues that they might raise. Therefore, I will meet with them.

Mr Burns: Will the Minister tell the House what criteria identify a dog as dangerous?

Ms Gildernew: I do not have that information with me, but I am happy to provide it in writing to the Member.

Mr Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Single Farm Payments Scheme

6. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her plans to allow farmers to join the single farm payments scheme in years 2 to 9. (AQO 1711/08)

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In order to claim single farm payment, the applicant must hold single farm payment entitlements. Those were established in 2005, and uplift was awarded to dairy producers in 2006. Except in a very few instances, I have no plans to scope or allocate new entitlements to farmers in future years. Therefore, if farmers who currently have no entitlements wish to claim single farm payment, they must obtain entitlements by means of transfer from other farmers. One of the circumstances in which it is possible to allocate new entitlements is as a result of reforms to the common agricultural policy fruit and vegetable regime. I am considering the responses to the consultation on that subject — which closed on 31 January — and I will then make a decision.

Mr McQuillan: Does the Minister agree that excluding entry after year 1 disadvantages those farmers who are

affected, and will she make urgent and strenuous efforts to rectify that state of affairs?

Ms Gildernew: Will the Member repeat the question?

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to please repeat the supplementary question.

Mr McQuillan: Does the Minister agree that excluding entry after year 1 disadvantages those farmers who are affected, and will she make urgent and strenuous efforts to rectify that state of affairs?

Ms Gildernew: My Department engaged with farmers' unions and others on that subject. They felt that reallocating entitlements would mean that the pot would be divided further. I think that that is the answer to the Member's question. We examined the matter, and the farmers' unions said that they were not keen on going down that route, given that farmers who had farmed during the period of the entitlement would receive a reduced amount.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister outline how long it takes, on average, to process an application for single farm payments? Does DARD provide technical assistance to farmers in filling out such applications?

Ms Gildernew: The window for the acceptance of applications without penalty closes on 15 May. Following initial validation checks to ensure that each claim is valid, an acknowledgement is issued to each applicant, usually within two weeks. Between the closing date and the end of June, the claim and land information that the farmers entered on their application forms will be keyed into the Department's database. A variety of administrative checks, as required by European Council regulations, are carried out to verify eligibility. Those checks can identify discrepancies or queries, which can then be followed up with the applicant where necessary. However, many queries, such as mapping issues, can be resolved by reference to information that is already held on departmental databases and without reference to the farmer.

Alongside the administrative checks, a minimum of 5% of claims are selected for on-farm visits to confirm claim details, land and cross-compliance requirements. When all the information that is required to confirm eligibility is available, a payment is authorised. EU rules permit payments to commence from 1 December onwards and require 96·15% of the budget to be paid by 30 June of the following year. All possible steps are taken to complete verification checks and make payments at the earliest possible date within the payment window that is provided for in the EU regulation.

DARD issues all single farm payment applicants with a guidance booklet, which sets out details on how to complete the application form and provides key pieces of scheme information. Every year the

Department runs comprehensive training sessions for around 140 form fillers. In addition, if an applicant requires clarification on either the form or the scheme rules, he or she can contact staff in either Orchard House or the county offices. Contact information is clearly stated in the guidance booklet.

Mr Savage: How much money from the single farm payments has been withheld from farmers since the scheme's inception? Could that money be used for new entrants to the scheme in years 2 to 9?

Ms Gildernew: I do not have that figure before me, but I am happy to write to the Member. If we do not claim the money or are unable to use it, Europe will withhold it. We do not have a pot of money that has not been claimed or that farmers have not received.

My response with respect to new entrants is similar to that which I gave to the earlier question. The new entrants' allocation was discussed as part of the consultation, and it was decided — with stakeholder support, including that of the UFU and the Young Farmers' Clubs — that new entrants commencing farming in a direct-subsidy supported sector, on or before 2 November 2004, should be allocated entitlements. However, it was felt that the case for allocating entitlements to new entrants to farming after that date was weak, given that they would have been aware of the existence of decoupled support arrangements and that agricultural production was no longer linked to subsidy payments. Furthermore, any new entitlements allocated will have to be funded out of the national reserve, which will mean additional scale-back of entitlements held by existing farmers.

New entrants can claim entitlements by transferring cases of retirement or inheritance as well. My Department supports new entrants through its new entrants' scheme, under which participants are encouraged to come forward with innovative agricultural projects that will add value and make a positive impact on the farming industry in the rural community. During its first 18 months, the scheme has encouraged and supported over £6.5 million in capital investment in agriculture.

Drainage Improvement Scheme, Blackstaff River

7. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the proposed drainage improvement scheme for the Blackstaff river.

(AQO 1763/08)

11. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the proposed drainage improvement scheme for Whiterock stream.

(AQO 1762/08)

Ms Gildernew: With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle. I will take questions 7 and 11 together.

The Whiterock stream is a tributary of the Blackstaff River, and therefore the proposed works will improve drainage in the Blackstaff catchment area. The proposed scheme on the Blackstaff River relates to the repair and refurbishment of a 20 m masonry arch culvert, which passes under the Glen Road, close to St Theresa's Primary School. In November 2005, emergency works were carried out after the collapse of the roof of the culvert, which resulted in the collapse of the road surface and caused severe traffic disruption.

The works now proposed will provide a permanent repair, to prevent further collapse along a particularly busy thoroughfare. It is proposed to reline the culvert, without excavating in the roadway or footpaths, thereby avoiding the difficulties presented by underground services and traffic management. That will effect cost savings and reduce disruption. Some excavation will be necessary for access purposes in the grounds of the nearby primary school, but that is not expected to be extensive.

The works on the Whiterock Road stream will consist of the replacement of the structurally defective 450 mm culvert with heavy-duty, reinforced concrete pipes, 600 mm in diameter. The works involve the excavation of roads and footpaths on both the Whiterock Road and the Springfield Road, and are required to reduce the risk of flooding and liabilities due to the possible collapse of structurally defective pipelines.

Mr F McCann: Does the Minister agree that the river ways of Belfast offer great potential for tourism in the city, not least because the city takes its name from a river which flows through the West Belfast constituency? Will the Minister say when the drainage improvement scheme is scheduled to commence?

Ms Gildernew: Well done, and I agree with the Member.

The schemes will represent an estimated £300,000 capital investment on drainage improvement works in the west Belfast area — a tourism Mecca. The works are at design stage and are planned to commence in spring 2008. It is anticipated that both schemes can be completed in the 2008-09 financial year.

Ms S Ramsey: Will the Minister state what measures will be taken to minimise disruption to local residents and schoolchildren? Have local residents or community groups been informed or consulted about the scheme?

Ms Gildernew: Rivers Agency displayed proposals and consulted with interested parties, as required under drainage legislation. The scheme was displayed locally at the Whiterock leisure centre. Works are planned to commence in spring 2008 and are mostly below ground. The Glen Road will be kept open so that there

will be minimal disruption to traffic, as access to the culvert is via school grounds.

Alpha-Nortestosterone Virus

8. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what action she proposes to take to implement the Assembly resolution on compensation for farmers who were incorrectly penalised in relation to the alpha-nortestosterone virus. (AQO 1766/08)

Ms Gildernew: When the issue was last debated in the Assembly, I outlined the actions that I had taken and explained why my Department would not pay compensation to the farmers affected.

Although many of those events occurred long before I became Minister, I made it a priority to deal with the issues quickly and proactively. I met the farmers who were involved, face to face, and apologised for the distress and trauma that the on-farm searches had caused. The Department also apologised for that trauma. I went beyond my statutory obligations and authorised a goodwill payment to farmers to cover the cost of condemned animals, paying out over £87,000 to 139 farmers. I initiated a review of DARD's handling of the matter in order to establish what lessons could be learned, and I accepted the report's recommendations in full. Those recommendations are being implemented by the Department in order to improve future arrangements.

3.30 pm

Legal advice confirmed that, under EU law, DARD must remove from the food chain male cattle that test positive for alpha-nortestosterone, regardless of whether evidence of illegal administration has been found, and carry out appropriate follow-up investigations on the herd of origin. Legal advice was clear that DARD can discharge that responsibility without incurring liability to pay any compensation. I reiterate that important point: although I understand the farmers' anger at having their homes searched, and I have apologised for that, my Department has no statutory power to pay compensation in those circumstances. The fact is that DARD acted in accordance with EU legislation and on the best scientific advice that was available at the time. DARD has a statutory obligation to protect public health and maintain the reputation of the local livestock industry.

I have considered carefully the Assembly's resolution. I respect the strength of feeling among Members who supported it, but I believe that some of the media misrepresented my position during that debate. Members are aware that I opposed the raids when they happened. I still believe that they should not have happened. However, I am focused on ensuring that such a situation does not come about again. The Ruddock report

concluded that DARD's actions were reasonable and complied with legislation. However, the report also made several recommendations on how DARD could improve its handling of similar situations in the future. I have accepted those recommendations in full. They are being implemented by the Department.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Mr Speaker: Before questions to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, I wish to respond to a point of order that was raised earlier by Mr Campbell in respect of a question to the Minister. I have considered the manner in which the question was expressed and I have concluded that it could have been put in a more measured fashion, without diminishing its effect. Although that does not rule the question out for answer by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure this afternoon, it certainly comes close to it.

50-Metre Swimming Pool: Northern Ireland

1. **Mr McCausland** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide an update on the development of a 50-metre swimming pool for Northern Ireland and a timescale for completion of the project. (AQO 1752/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): In June 2006, North Down Borough Council was notified that it had been selected as the preferred developer for Northern Ireland's first 50-metre swimming pool as a result of the first elite-facilities capital programme competition. As part of that process, North Down Borough Council was asked to produce an outline business case, which is going through the normal approval process. On 23 January 2008, I met representatives of North Down Borough Council to discuss the project's progress. It is hoped that the pool will be built and in operation by spring 2011.

Mr McCausland: Does the Minister agree that swimming is a particularly popular activity in Northern Ireland at club, recreational and competitive levels and at mini galas? Does he agree that a coherent strategy for swimming in Northern Ireland would be beneficial? Will he undertake to meet Sport NI, other interested bodies and key stakeholders in order to determine whether such a policy or strategy could be advanced?

Mr Poots: At present, swimming's governing organisation is Swim Ireland. Its structure in Northern Ireland is called Swim Ulster. I am happy to work with Sport NI to develop strategies for swimming, particularly in view of the fact that the Department intends to develop

a 50-metre facility, which is currently unavailable in Northern Ireland, and maximise the benefits of that facility right across the country.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Can the Minister tell the House how many 50-metre swimming pools there are in the Twenty-six Counties? Can local athletes access those facilities in the South?

Mr Poots: My responsibility is for Northern Ireland. At present, there is no 50-metre swimming pool in Northern Ireland. The new pool will be the only facility of its type that will be available for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Burnside: I am sure that the Minister will agree that a 50-metre pool is exactly the sort of facility that will attract training and competition prior to large international events. Obviously, the new pool cannot be squeezed in before the 2010 Olympic Games. However, what discussions has the Minister had with the managers of our existing facilities about possible training and competition in the Province prior to the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games?

Mr Poots: I take it that the Members is referring to the 2012 Olympic Games. We are not having discussions with managers of existing facilities because those facilities do not reach the standards required. Fifty-metre pools are required for training facilities. Therefore, we would not benefit, as regards swimming competitions, by having discussions at this early point.

Community Sports Facilities

2. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline how much money is available in the Budget for investment in community sports facilities. (AQO 1699/08)

Mr Poots: The Budget for 2008-11 provides £145 million for sport. That money will be used to implement the draft strategy for sport and physical recreation 2007-17, which seeks to increase participation in sport and in the provision of sporting facilities at community level. The amount of money to be allocated to community sports facilities thereafter will be a matter, in the first instance, for Sport Northern Ireland to consider.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister for his response. How much of the extra £2 million, which the Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure won in the final Budget round, will be allocated to sport? The Minister said that subsequent allocations will fall to Sport Northern Ireland. Will he confirm that the Department has no specific budget headings for allocations to, for example, Gaelic athletics, rugby or hockey?

Mr Poots: Most of the £2 million will be allocated to arts and libraries. The baseline figure for sports for

2007-08, which excludes the soccer strategy, was £7.4 million. That figure will increase in the coming year to £8.9 million, and it will increase in the following year to £10.3 million. In 2010-11, the figure will increase to £14.5 million.

Doubling the baseline figure in a three-year period should be regarded as good news for sport. I am satisfied that we can move ahead with the development of sport and with the sports strategy for Northern Ireland with those baseline figures and seek to build on them in the next spending round.

Lord Browne: Two of the main objectives of Sport Northern Ireland's pilot community sports programme, which was funded by the Department, were: first, to remove barriers, including access to facilities, to participation in sport in the community; and, secondly, to establish links between schools, sports clubs and the wider community. Will the Minister inform the House whether those important objectives were achieved?

Mr Poots: The objectives can be achieved. A start can be made on the basis of this Budget in association with the draft sports strategy. Obviously, the strategy has not been finalised. However, the Department has received all the submissions, which are being assessed. The Department will be able to produce a final draft sports strategy for Northern Ireland and work to achieve its objectives on the basis of what was stated by the Member.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle agus a Aire.

Will the Minister confirm that the budget for the building sport programme, which supports capital investment in community sports facilities, was frozen last year because of insufficient funds? Will he assure organisations, including GAA clubs in west Belfast and the South Antrim Camogie Board, which applied to that fund but were stalled, that they will now be eligible for any new investment for community sports facilities, and that those facilities will not have to be named after the Minister's favourite cultural or political icons to secure funds?

Mr Poots: Those applications came in from the Big Lottery Fund and the funding was provided by that fund. Therefore, if that funding were to be identified, it would have to come from my Department in the absence of lottery funding. A substantial amount of money has been allocated as part of the capital development budget, and it is yet to be finalised how that will be spent. The development of a sports stadium or upgrading of sports stadiums will be taken into account, along with the safe stadiums and elite facilities programmes. Those should not be funded wholly and exclusively to the detriment of community facilities. In the absence of lottery funding, we must consider other ways of developing those facilities.

Northern Ireland Events Company

3. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide a timescale for reporting on the review findings of his Department in relation to the deficit accumulated by the Northern Ireland Events Company. (AQO 1659/08)

Mr Poots: 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 on the findings of that review at the earliest opportunity. The current expectations are that the review will be completed by the end of February 2008. I will make a statement to the House as soon as possible after I have received the review report and considered it carefully.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for his response. I am glad to hear him say that it is an:

“independent review of all the circumstances”.

I assume that that means going beyond considering only the figures. Will the Minister agree that there are grounds for looking behind the figures in case there was any element of favouritism in the awarding of a contract or contracts and the allowance of spending, which resulted in spending of up to seven times the agreed budget amount on one event in particular?

Mr Poots: I fully agree with the Member's sentiments. I wish to go down that route.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister is aware that, when the Events Company was accruing the deficit, it approved substantial funding to Féile an Phobail. As a director of Féile an Phobail, I declare an interest. Will the Minister give a clear undertaking that his Department will ensure that Féile an Phobail gets the moneys that are owed to it? Will he accept that there has been a massive reduction in the funding that has been made available to Belfast community festivals this year? That shortfall is unlikely to be met by the private sector, and it will have an adverse impact on those festivals. Finally, will the Minister join me in congratulating the Antrim footballers and hurlers on their weekend victories?

Mr Poots: Féile an Phobail, and all other organisations that are owed money, will be paid after that is verified and checked. I have given that assurance to the House and that assurance continues to stand. I offer my congratulations to all sporting organisations, including Linfield Football Club, which had a great success in the CIS Cup last Saturday.

Mr Dallat: The independent inquiry that the Minister has ordered is extremely welcome. I understand that it will report at the end of February 2008. Will the Minister assure the House that that inquiry will consider all the

people who had a role to play in the Events Company, and that it will not make scapegoats of one or two people?

Mr Poots: I understand the underlying sentiment of the Member's question. It would certainly not satisfy me to identify a couple of scapegoats from the Events Company. If people in my Department, for example, have not been doing their jobs correctly, I want to know about it and I want to know why that has been the case. We should not come down on individuals in one organisation if others have not been doing their jobs correctly. It is not a case of looking for individuals who have not done their jobs correctly and omitting others; I want to identify anyone who has not carried out his or her procedures correctly and ask him or her the relevant questions. If I do not ask the relevant questions, I am sure that the Public Accounts Committee will, along with the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure and the press. Let us get to the bottom of what went wrong; there must be no hiding place for those who allowed it to happen.

Creative Industries Market

4. **Mr O'Loan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the implications of the Budget in relation to the ability of Northern Ireland to compete in the creative industries market. (AQO 1782/08)

3.45 pm

Mr Poots: The increase in arts revenue funding of almost £10 million over the next three years will help to support and nurture creative individuals and businesses. I have also secured £5 million over the next three years from the innovation fund to establish a creative industries seed fund to support business enterprise in the creative industries sector. That will help creative entrepreneurs in business planning, marketing, advice on access to venture capital and intellectual properties use, as well as start-up finance.

I have also secured continuity funding for the three creative learning centres — the Nerve Centre in Londonderry, the AmmA Centre in Armagh and Studio ON in Crossnacreevy — to equip young people with the skills to move into the growing digital technologies industry. Invest Northern Ireland will also continue its support of the creative industries, specifically in the areas of software, digital content, film and television, and music.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Minister, and I welcome those initiatives. Does he agree that we have a talented arts sector but that it needs support to realise its business potential? Given the lower level of funding per head here, compared with Britain and Ireland, how can we compete with those better-funded regions?

Mr Poots: I have inherited the current situation. However, the increases that I have identified and secured, with the assistance of the Minister of Finance and Personnel, will allow us to commence to close the gap, but it will not happen overnight. This year, England has been allocated around £8.51 per head of population, as opposed to £8.14 last year, and Northern Ireland has been allocated £7.09 per head of population this year, as opposed to £6.04 last year. Therefore, although the gap has not closed, inroads are being made to address it, and we will continue to work on that.

Ms Lo: Will the Minister clarify the Minister of Finance and Personnel's comment about the Arts Council's figures on funding being misleading?

Mr Poots: When a Member talks about finances and figures, he or she should address their questions to the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Minister outline what microbusinesses have been developed in the past three years as a result of the unlocking creativity initiative?

Mr Poots: I suspect that Ken Robinson is trying to get an answer to a question that he has tabled for a later point — question 17 or 18. I cannot inform him of every microbusiness that has been established: unfortunately, my depth of knowledge does not stretch to that extent. However, microbusinesses have been established to the extent that, in Northern Ireland, 34,500 people are involved in the creative industries. The innovation package that we have secured — £5 million over the next three years — will assist in developing further microbusinesses in the creative industries.

Cricket Clubs in the North-West: Funding

5. **Mr Bresland** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount of funding granted to cricket clubs in the north-west by Sport Northern Ireland in the past three years. (AQO 1658/08)

Mr Poots: Sport Northern Ireland is responsible for the development of sport and the distribution of funding. Over the past three years, it has received two applications for funding from cricket clubs in the north-west, under the building sport programme. In May 2007, Bready Cricket Club in the north-west received capital of £1,570,694 towards a centre of excellence and revenue of £125,000 towards the employment of a multi-sports cricket development officer for five years. In addition to that, an application from Limavady Cricket and Rugby Football Club is under consideration, but no award has yet been made.

Mr Bresland: I thank the Minister for his response, and I welcome the level of funding awarded to the cricket clubs in the north-west. Will he assure me that cricket

will be valued by his Department and that sufficient funding will be made available so that cricket in Northern Ireland can reach its full potential?

Mr Poots: I recognise the rich cricketing tradition that exists in west Tyrone. Bready Cricket Club received the award in recognition of its work over the years. I look forward to visiting the area to see what is happening at first-hand. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will continue to look at cricket, in association with the other applications that come in, fairly and equitably to allow the sport not only to survive but to thrive.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I join with the Minister in wishing Bready Cricket Club all the best in the forthcoming sporting year. Will the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure make capital funding available in the next three years for sporting clubs in the north-west — whether cricket, boxing, football or Gaelic sports — that may have projects ready to go?

Mr Poots: The Department will have to make a full assessment of all applications. One hundred and eleven million pounds has been set aside for capital, but, as I said earlier, we have to look at stadium development and refurbishment and elite facilities. Beyond that, we want to further develop capital infrastructure in communities. If those developments are ready to go — as the Member suggested some might be — and if they have been granted planning permission and have in place a business plan, the Department will consider them and be inventive in its response.

Mr Gardiner: Are there any indications of the success of the two cricket development officers appointed by the Northern Ireland Cricket Association in 2006? Has the Minister been asked to fund any initiatives developed by them?

Mr Poots: Their success was demonstrated in last year's world cricket finals when Ireland beat Pakistan; several players from Northern Ireland participated in that team. Members should, therefore, recognise the success enjoyed by the cricket team on the world stage in the past year, and the work that has been done in the development of the sport since 2006 contributed to that.

Sporting Clubs: Financial Support

6. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the financial support, including capital funding, that is available from his Department, in relation to development proposals brought forward by sporting clubs. (AQO 1795/08)

Mr Poots: Under the recently announced Budget settlement, the sporting allocation for the next three years is approximately £145 million. That includes

£111.6 million for capital funding, and the sum also includes provision for the proposed multi-sports stadium and the elite facilities programme. We are in discussions with Sport Northern Ireland on the allocation of the available capital. Meanwhile, any sporting club that requires financial support, including capital funding for development proposals, should approach Sport Northern Ireland in the first instance.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. What benefits will the 2012 London Olympics bring to the North of Ireland? Furthermore, will money be diverted to the Olympics and away from much-needed community sports facilities?

Mr Poots: There are benefits as well as detrimental effects from the Olympic Games being held in our national capital. One negative effect is that our National Lottery funding has been reduced, and as a consequence, events that might have happened in Northern Ireland will be delayed. However, we will benefit from elite athletes coming to train in Northern Ireland, and we hope to develop the elite facilities in association with that. People here will also benefit from the chance to volunteer to become involved in the Olympic Games, and they will be able to go to London to participate in the world's biggest sporting event. It is hoped that more young people will participate in sport as a result of the elite athletes coming here to train. Furthermore, they will have the opportunity to visit London during the Olympic Games to watch athletes perform at the highest level.

There are also benefits to local business. Many of our companies are getting substantial work through the London Olympics. There is a £21 billion spend, and I encourage companies from across Northern Ireland — regardless of whether they are involved in sport, building or computer software — to take advantage of the opportunities to benefit from the Olympic Games.

Mr Moutray: Following the Minister's recent meeting with Waringstown Cricket Club representatives, my colleague David Simpson and me, has there been any progress with funding for an AstroTurf training pitch and bowling nets? I am sure that the Minister is aware of the rich cricketing history in Waringstown, Lurgan and throughout the Upper Bann constituency.

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question and for his lobbying on behalf of Waringstown Cricket Club. We can now award the £40,000 that that club requested in order to proceed with the project that he mentioned, which ties in nicely with what I said about my Department's support for cricket.

Mr P Ramsey: Although I welcome the Minister's response, is there any other ring-fenced money — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr P Ramsey: The Minister referred to £111 million that is available for capital expenditure — £80 million of which is for the Maze project and £35 million of which is for elite facilities. Is there any other ring-fenced money, or will the Minister confirm what the Department told the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure that the only chance for community facilities funding would be if the Maze stadium plans were ditched?

Mr Poots: Some £70 million has been set aside for stadium development, and the rest is for other development projects. We have agreed with the Department of Finance and Personnel that if we proceed with the full business cases for elite facilities, we have planning permissions, and there is slippage money, that slippage money will be made available to us. Given the inevitable slippage in an annual capital spend of £2 billion, we believe that a shortfall of perhaps £10 million or £20 million can be found.

Audience Development Agency

7. **Mr McFarland** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what is his assessment of the success of the audience development agency in the past eight years; and to outline what plans he has in relation to future developments in this area. (AQO 1727/08)

Mr Poots: Audiences NI — the audience development agency for the arts — was established in 2004, and its role is to improve the capacity of member organisations in the arts and culture sector to increase and diversify audiences. Audiences NI's membership has increased from 15 in 2005, to 37 in 2008. A recently completed, independent evaluation found that Audiences NI has offered value for money in the delivery of professional services and has had a major impact on the audience-development capabilities of its members.

Audiences NI is preparing a new business plan that will target smaller community and voluntary organisations as well as galleries and publishing houses in order to broaden its membership base.

Mr McFarland: I thank the Minister for his answer. Has he considered the Not for the Likes of You initiative for developing audiences and participation in the performing arts that has been employed by the Scottish Arts Council?

Mr Poots: The Scottish Arts Council is mirrored by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and, therefore, the responsibility for considering that initiative rests with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. However, I am happy to refer the Member's query to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland so that it might follow up that matter.

Mr Speaker: Mr P J Bradley is not present in the Chamber to ask question 8. Therefore, I call Mr Brolly.

Irish-Language Act

9. **Mr Brolly** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his plans to restore confidence in him and his Department among Irish-language speakers following his failure to support an Irish language Act. (AQO 1750/08)

Mr Brolly: Ceist uimhir a naoi.

Mr Poots: I am not sure what was said there, but I do have a response to a question from a Mr Francie Brolly MLA.

As stated in the House on 16 October 2007, my assessment was that the political sensitivities surrounding an Irish-language Bill would be divisive throughout the community and would be incapable of securing a sufficient consensus in the House.

Since then, my focus has been on developing a strategy for indigenous languages that will meet the obligations placed on the Executive by the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006 and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

4.00 pm

Mr Brolly: Do the Minister's plans to restore confidence among Irish speakers have a time frame, and do they include the allocation of some portion of the £4 million increase in his departmental budget to the funding of the Irish language, and, in particular, to restoring funding for Irish-language broadcasting next year?

Mr Poots: I can only do that on the basis of accepting that I have, in some way, damaged confidence in the Irish language community. I have not done anything to prevent people who enjoy speaking the Irish language, and who cherish that right, from doing so, nor have I diminished the opportunity for those people to continue to speak the Irish language. I do not accept the premise of the question in the first instance. Therefore, I cannot respond to the question in the manner in which the Member might wish me to.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ar an ábhar nár éirigh leis an Aire Acht na Gaeilge a thabhairt chun cinn, an féidir leis insint dúinn inniu cad é a dhéanfaidh sé le ceartha Gaeilgeoirí a chosaint agus a chur chun cinn i dTuaisceart na hÉireann, go háirithe sna rannóga Rialtais?

Mr Speaker: Will the Member translate his question into English?

Mr D Bradley: Cinnte, a Cheann Comhairle. I beg your pardon, Mr Speaker. I will provide a translation free of charge to the House.

Bearing in mind that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure has not advanced Irish-language legislation, will he tell the House what action he intends to take to protect and advance the rights of Irish speakers? Furthermore, what steps will he take to

ensure that those rights are respected across all Departments? Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Speaker: I will allow the Minister to answer.

Mr Poots: Had the Member attended last week's meeting of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure he would have heard what I had to say. I refer him to the Hansard record of that meeting, in which I encouraged the Committee to work with me in developing a strategy for indigenous languages.

Mr Speaker: That ends today's Question Time.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: Mr Ford, did you want to raise a point of order?

Mr Ford: At the weekend I received in my mail the minutes of proceedings of the Assembly meeting on 10 December. Those minutes recorded the questions that were put to, and answered by, three Ministers. Bearing in mind the display that we have had yet again today of Ministers who may respond to, but rarely answer questions, could you perhaps determine whether an alternative form of words might be more appropriate?

Mr Speaker: I must inform the Member that the records of the proceedings of the House are accurate. I do not know how much more we can do about the issue. I am not responsible for the way in which Ministers answer questions. There are times when Members ask multiple questions of Ministers, and the Minister may answer one, two, three questions or none.

Mr Ford: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. We know that you are seeking to make better use of Question Time by changing the way in which supplementary questions are taken, and my group fully supports that. Is there not also a case for ensuring that Ministers respond to the questions that are asked, and not just give pre-prepared answers to questions that come from their own Back Benches?

Mr Speaker: I keep repeating to all sides of the House that I am not and could not be responsible for the way in which Ministers answer questions or supplementary questions. It would be impossible for any Speaker to rule on that issue. Nevertheless, I have watched today's proceedings very closely. I have already warned the House that, on occasion, some Members ask supplementary questions that do not relate in any way to the original question. When I asked a Member on three occasions to take his seat today, he challenged the Speaker. Should that happen in future, that Member will neither be called for a question nor for a supplementary.

Mr Storey: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Rather than giving a warning on this occasion, can the Speaker actually deal with the particular Member who clearly indicated that he was not prepared to take his seat when he had been ordered to do so?

Mr Speaker: It is really up to the Speaker to decide how to deal with the issue. I must say to all sides of the House that, on at least three occasions, I have said individually to Members who, for whatever reason, have refused to take their seats that I will deal with the matter appropriately.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the draft Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2007

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Report of the Ad Hoc Committee set up to consider the draft Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2007, should be submitted to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland as a Report of the Northern Ireland Assembly. — [*Chairperson, Ad Hoc Committee on the draft Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 (Dr Farry)*].

Mrs I Robinson: I too welcome the opportunity to speak on this important matter. Much of the content of the draft Order is sensible and uncontentious. However, other specific measures could have been included. Some are referred to in the report and have also been mentioned by Members who spoke earlier in the debate.

Harmonisation of our position with that of the rest of the United Kingdom is, in the main, to be welcomed, although devolution affords us the opportunity to take a slightly different approach to some matters. Some societal differences are particular to Northern Ireland. Our value system remains based on a Judaeo-Christian framework that guides our thinking on many matters, including some that are contained in the proposed legislation.

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

Perhaps the most notable aspect of the Committee report is that it opposes a reduction in the age of consent. Research that was published a couple of years ago showed that almost 80% of young people in Northern Ireland were delaying having sex for the first time until they were beyond the age of consent. The age of consent protects children from abuse or exploitation by adults. As far back as 1950, child protection was the motivation for having the age of consent increased by the Children and Young Persons Act (Northern Ireland) 1950. In Christian terms, our Saviour, in several parables and utterances, showed very clearly the importance of protecting the innocence and well-being of children and young people. That remains the same for those of us who believe in that Word.

All parties in the Assembly will no doubt support the changes that will ensure that all non-consensual sexual activity is criminalised and sufficiently heavily penalised, with appropriate sentencing to reflect the seriousness of the crime. The same must be the case for sexual activity that involves children and vulnerable individuals. For instance, it is important that those who have mental-health problems and learning disabilities are fully protected. The draft legislation also revises terminology to encompass a broader series of offences. Furthermore, preparatory offences, such as administering

drugs or alcohol with the intention to commit a sexual offence, are also included in the draft Order.

It has been proposed that if someone has sexual intercourse with a child who is under the age of 13, the offence will automatically be defined as rape. The logic behind that is that a child who is under the age of 13 does not, under any circumstances, have any capacity to consent to any form of sexual activity. I greatly welcome the acknowledgement of that particular principle, but I still wonder whether the age that is required for capacity to give consent should not be higher than the age of 13.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises a child as a person who is under the age of 18, due to their evolving capacity. It is important that “capacity” is clearly defined. Capacity evolves in each child. Society has a role to play in protecting immature children from decisions that they lack the competence and experience to make themselves.

Regional child protection policy and procedures pertaining to underage sexual activity in Northern Ireland already exist. Section 9.47 of the Area Child Protection Committees’ Regional Policy and Procedures states:

“In all cases where the sexually active young person is under the age of 14, there must be a discussion with Social Services who will make the necessary enquiries and will consult with partner agencies, including the Police, as appropriate.”

That has not always happened. Some argue that confidentiality for the young person should be paramount, and that if the child felt that others — apart from that one health professional — might be informed, they may be discouraged from being open about their sexual behaviour. Health professionals are certainly entitled to make that case if they wish. However, we cannot have the laws and procedures being ignored. If that were the case, we would be better off without those laws and procedures rather than pretending that they are being enforced when they are not.

It is my contention that the child’s best interests should supersede his or her desire for confidentiality. Failure to disclose such knowledge to the social services also places the health workers involved in a potentially perilous position: in the event, for instance, that the young person has been involved in a relationship with a much older adult.

Pursuant to the legislation, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety must strengthen existing child protection guidelines to ensure that in all cases of a young person under the age of 13 being sexually active, multi-disciplinary child protection guidelines will be implemented by all those working with young people and that a full risk assessment is carried out. Practice across the Province should be audited to ensure that

child protection procedures are being adhered to. I support the motion.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I too support the report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the draft Sexual Offences (NI) Order 2007. The proposals in the Order are the result of the first comprehensive review of sexual offences here, and they are to be welcomed. First and foremost, the Order puts children and young people at the centre of its proposals, and it defines new offences that are designed to protect the most vulnerable.

New offences protect children from abusive behaviour in the home, where child sexual abuse is most prevalent. The Order also ensures that other vulnerable groups will benefit from the added protection. Consent is removed as a defence for engaging in sexual activity with a child under the age of 13, and I welcome that such activity will now be regarded as rape.

The Order’s removal of the defence of reasonable belief, when a child is between the ages of 13 and 18, offers greater protection to children and young people and must be implemented. Some proposals relate to situations in which adults are in a position of trust, such as in residential homes, detention centres or educational establishments. As sports coaches are not included in the legislation, constant monitoring is required.

The Minister has committed to holding a round-table discussion to bring together organisations from the voluntary and community sector, and they will continue to be involved in the development and outworking of the legislation.

It is most regrettable that Mr Ross used such an important issue to be disingenuous. The Committee reached consensus on everything apart from the age of consent. It is interesting that Mr Ross and his DUP colleagues do not want parity with the UK on this issue: their desire for parity is selective.

Sinn Féin voted to lower the age of consent to 16 to ensure that young people are not inappropriately penalised for consensual and non-abusing sexual activity. If 17 were to remain the age of consent, 16-year-olds could, theoretically, be criminalised.

Mr Wells: Many of the Member’s comments seem to be diametrically opposed to what he said to UTV and other media during the deliberations on the Order, when he pointed out that the age of consent in the Irish Republic is 17. He said that if the law were to be changed here, people would come into Northern Ireland to avail of the less strict legislation to commit offences. Has he changed his mind or has he been told to change his mind?

Mr Brady: With respect to the Member, I have not been told to do anything other than to air my views on the subject.

Mr Ross: The Member said that he did not want 16-year-olds to be “criminalised”. Does he not acknowledge that the list of recommendations in the report that he helped to compile includes:

“The Committee is of the view that Section 5 of the Criminal Law (Northern Ireland Act) 1967 should be amended to ensure that young people are not inappropriately penalised for consensual and non-abusing sexual activity.”?

Did he read that part of the report?

Mr Brady: I certainly did, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I am not sure whether the Member was listening to what I said. I said that 16-year-olds could, “theoretically”, be criminalised; there is a difference between being criminalised and theoretically being criminalised. Perhaps the Member and I should call it a one-all draw. *[Laughter.]* I will move on.

Overall, the codification of the law on sexual offences in a single statute, the increased tariffs for offences and the move to gender-neutral offences are to be welcomed. The Order clarifies the law on rape, which was, hitherto, difficult to define. In general terms, the sweep of the legislation is sound, and any laws that protect the weakest and most vulnerable are welcome. I commend the report to the House. Go raibh maith agat.

4.15 pm

Mr Simpson: I rise to speak in the hope that others who, until now, have felt that they would speak and vote differently are prepared to think again. The age of consent was not set at the current threshold by way of a liberalising approach or by way of reduction; rather, it was set at the current level in order to afford greater protection for young people. Any Member minded to vote today to lower the age of consent needs to be sure that there is no longer any need for that kind of protection and that the circumstances in society are such as would make such a change desirable and beneficial.

Does such a set of circumstances exist? In England and Wales the age of consent is 16. Many more young people engage in sexual activity below the age of 16 there than in Northern Ireland. The rate of conceptions among 15- and 16-year-olds is much higher than in Northern Ireland, as is the rate of sexually transmitted infections (STI) among under-16s.

Some people have argued that setting the age of consent at 17 contributes to high teenage pregnancy and STI rates. They claim that it stops young people from seeking advice and treatment. However, all of those arguments fall down when we consider mainland GB, where the age of consent is 16, and all of the supposed adverse affects of Northern Ireland’s age of consent being 17 do not apply. They have far higher rates of conception and STIs among teenagers.

Mr Moutray: I thank my honourable friend for giving way. Does he agree that rather than reducing the

age of consent, we should be promoting more education in schools about respect and abstinence, as advocated by organisations such as Love for Life?

Mr Simpson: I agree. Love for Life, which is based in the Upper Bann constituency, does a remarkable job. It also does a lot of work across the Province.

Setting the age of consent at 16 clearly does not work in the way that people suggest. Setting the age of consent at 17, far from having an adverse effect, has clearly been beneficial. If we are dealing with what is beneficial, we have to conclude that to vote against this report, and to advocate a reduction in the age of consent, is beneficial neither to young people nor to society as a whole. Rather, it is more liable to have the opposite effect.

What about the original thought that resulted in the raising of the age of consent in the first place? I refer, of course, to the desire to protect young people. Do young people no longer need the kind of protection that they previously required? In part, the age of consent was originally raised to combat the misery of human trafficking in the late 1800s. That applied particularly to young girls being trafficked for the sex trade.

I suggest that there is not a single MLA in this House who does not have, buried away in the marrow of their bones, the nagging thought that amid the explosion of prostitution in Northern Ireland — especially involving eastern European girls — that very kind of vile trafficking is probably being practised. Maybe it is happening rarely, and in only a small number of cases. However, I challenge any Member, of whatever background, to stand up in this debate and say that they are confident that it is not happening. There will not be a single taker, and everyone knows that that is so.

Why would we remove any protection that was identified by previous generations, especially at the very time that that same trade — and the need to protect young people from it — is acknowledged in the pit of every MLA’s stomach, and is likely to be more necessary with the passing of time?

I urge Members of this House, including those who have views on this issue different from mine, to vote in favour of maintaining 17 as the age of consent in Northern Ireland.

Mr O’Loan: The focus of comment on the Order is on the age of consent, but there is more to it than that. The overall purpose of the Order is sound: its main principle is to give added protection to children and young people, vulnerable people, and all who may be subject to unwanted sexual activity. The Order consolidates existing legislation, introduces a considerable number of new offences and generally increases the punishments attached to offences. All of that should be welcomed.

Members should welcome the absolute protection for children under 13 years of age in the Order, which means that they cannot give legal consent to sexual activity. We should also welcome the much-strengthened definition of abuse of trust in families, schools and other institutional settings, and the recognition that abuse of trust in a sexual context is a very serious offence.

The Order deals with commercial sexual activity, including trafficking and offence given to the public, which must be welcomed.

I agree with the statement in the report that the onus of proof for the argument for changing the age of consent from 17 to 16 years of age rests with those who want to make the change. That proof has not been provided. Much social damage comes from sexual activity that occurs too early. The connection between the legal age of consent and sexual activity can be overstated, but there is some connection. I advocate a cautious approach and support the conclusion of the report to retain the age of consent at 17 years of age to protect some children.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate, and I broadly welcome the draft Sexual Offences Order 2007.

The Order is long overdue, and any law that offers greater protection to children and young people must be welcomed. Sexual abuse is the most traumatic form of abuse that any child can face. When a child or young person is pressurised, forced or tricked into taking part in any type of sexual activity with an adult or young person, there can be a long-term impact on that child's life. The impact and effects of rape and sexual assault are far reaching, and may include a loss of self-esteem and self-worth, the onset of mental-health problems, nightmares, panic attacks and anxiety, and disengagement from family, social and community life. It is important to remember that during the debate.

Child-sex abusers can come from any profession, gender, race or religious background. Abusers are not always adults — children and young people can also behave in a sexually abusive way. Usually, the abuser is a family member or someone who is known to the child, such as a family friend. Abusers may act alone or as part of an organised group, and, after the abuse, will put much pressure on the child not to talk about it. They will go to great lengths to get close to children and win their trust. Children and vulnerable adults must be protected from that form of sexual abuse.

It is a positive step that all sexual offences legislation is provided for under one statute, through the Order. Other positive elements include the removal of consent as a defence for sexual activity with a child under 13 years of age, clarity on the definition of rape — particularly

in instances in which violence or drugs are used — and an increase in the tariffs for sexual offences. However, there are some aspects of the Order that could go further, such as the inclusion of sports coaches, who are in positions of trust. Sinn Féin wants such provisions included in the Order.

The reporting of rape must be encouraged, and support mechanisms for victims must be implemented. Much has been said about lowering the age of consent, but that is only one element of the Order. The age of consent was discussed by the Committee, which heard evidence from a number of well-respected and well-informed organisations on the issue. The protection of children and young people is crucial. The preferred option is for young people not to engage in any type of sexual activity until they are mature enough.

However, a significant number of 16-year-olds do engage in sexual activity. They should not be criminalised or prevented from seeking advice on sexual health matters; rather, older sexual predators who exploit young girls and boys should face criminal prosecution and the full rigour of the law. There must be consultation with the relevant children's sector groups and organisations to ensure effective policy and practice in that field.

Sinn Féin also supports the proposal for round-table talks to provide guidance to the Public Prosecution Service. A raft of work outside the draft Sexual Offences Order that must be put in place to help victims and survivors of rape and sexual assault, and any development to that end, working alongside voluntary and community organisations, must be welcomed. Sinn Féin hopes that that will be taken forward without delay. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Shannon:

"My faith is my life, it defines me; my faith does not influence my decisions, it drives them. Real faith makes me humble and mindful, not of the faults of others, but of my own."

Every so often in Stormont an issue comes to the fore that captures the eye and the attention of the public and shows that people will go to great lengths to highlight their views and express their opinions. This is one such issue. I have received a high volume of calls to my office, emails, telephone calls and letters from people saying that they do not want the age of consent to be lowered through the draft Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order. Their reasons are wide-ranging, and I will relay some of them to the Assembly.

The normal, everyday people of the Province looked at the situation and want to see the age of consent retained. People are opposed to the age of consent being lowered from 17 to 16 years of age. I do not understand Mr Brolly's comments: I suspect that he has a theoretical opposition, although I do not know what that means.

The reasons for retaining the age of consent are numerous and are based on common sense and fact.

Not so long ago the House debated a motion to raise the minimum legal age for smoking to 17, the main reason being that at 16 years of age a person is still a child and too young to process the negative effects that smoking would have on his or her life. The Assembly agreed to the motion and decided that the age limit for smoking should be raised to 17. That being the case, it seems absurd that the age of consent to have sex should, according to some people, be lowered to 16.

As with starting to smoke, one of the deciding factors is peer pressure and the feeling of youngsters that if everyone else is doing it, then so should they. My view, and the opinion of many of my constituents, is that peer pressure to have sex at a young age is even more intense. I have been contacted by numerous teachers and youth workers who tell me that, in their reasoned opinion, and based on their work with young people, lowering the age of consent will have a negative effect and will mean that more young people will have sexual intercourse before they are mature enough to do so.

Many people will say that if young people are enthused and in love, the age of consent will not make any difference, and that they will go ahead anyhow. Nevertheless, I am reliably assured by those who work with young people that it will make a difference to the mindset of the child who feels that he or she has not yet experienced something that he or she is allowed to do. Not only will young people experience peer pressure, they will experience the pressure of knowing that the Government has told them that they are old enough to make that decision, but that they are too young to decide whether to smoke. That is far too confusing, and not the signal the Assembly wishes to send.

The issue of child protection has been raised by the Christian Institute. It says that the age-of-consent law is a child protection measure. In cases of abuse it spares children the horror of cross-examination over whether they consented to sexual activity. Reducing the age of consent to 16 will remove that protection from 26,000 youngsters in Northern Ireland and, for those reasons, the Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre in Belfast has strongly criticised the plans.

The current law also sends out a clear message that sex under the age of 17 is not a good idea. Surveys show that the majority of girls who have underage sex later regret it. In our increasingly over-sexualised society, we should give our youngsters some moral guidance and empower them to say no to premature sexual activity.

The Northern Ireland Office said that lowering the age of consent will help 16-year-olds to seek contraception and sexual-health advice. That approach has been an utter disaster in the rest of the UK — and I am sure that the Member who speaks at the end of the debate will comment on that. In England, Wales and

Scotland, twice as many youngsters have sex before their sixteenth birthday compared to those in Northern Ireland. Rates of sexually transmitted infections are more than double, and teenage conceptions are significantly higher. Do we want to see that happening in Northern Ireland? No, we do not.

4.30 pm

Although other provisions in the draft Order are beneficial, such as the introduction of a prison sentence for running a brothel, it is clear that lowering the age of consent cannot be acceptable in the Province. That provision must be omitted from the final draft in order to leave in place the protection for our children.

The Christian Institute, which is well versed in the law, has stated that lowering the age of consent will not be of legal benefit to anybody except the perpetrators of sexual crimes against children and young people. How can we even consider allowing this law to be passed, when one year can make all the difference in such cases?

What message do we want to send to our children? I am sure about the message that I wish to send, and I hope that the Assembly will send it as well. Let the Assembly state that it wants to protect children, secure their future and ensure that there is no further corrosion of the moral standards that people adhere to in all sections of our community. We must send the right message that the care of our children and youth is our most important concern. If we do that, we will know that we will have done the right thing and the best that we could for all of our children. I support the motion.

Mr Ford: I welcome the fact that — three or four years after it should have happened — we have finally got around to codifying the law on sexual offences in Northern Ireland, largely in line with that in GB, because a huge backlog needed to be addressed. I also welcome the fact that there is near unanimity in this Chamber on all issues but one. If I may quote from a letter from Love for Life:

“While much of the discussion around the Draft Sexual Offences Order has focussed on the proposed lowering of the age of consent, we believe that there has not been enough focus on broader child protection issues with regards to underage sexual activity.”

That is the nub of the argument between the two sides on the one issue that has been debated today. Most of the representations that have been made, such as that from Love for Life, detail concerns for the protection of children and vulnerable adults, and, surely, we all agree on that.

Strengthening the law with regard to children under the age of 13, in particular, is to be welcomed. The doubt expressed from all corners of the House about the so-called reasonable-belief defence — the belief that somebody might be over 18 when they are patently not — must be carried forward to the Northern Ireland Office,

as must the point about those who are in a position of trust. Although it may be easy for Governments to define positions of trust with regard to certain statutory occupations: that is clearly inadequate. People such as sports coaches have been mentioned in the debate; and similar occupations must also be taken on board.

However, the question of whether the age of consent should be 16 or 17 remains. It divides opinion in society, in the Assembly and, indeed, in my party. Members may have heard Mr McCarthy heckling Dr Farry earlier today. That shows the diversity of views that exist and, to some extent, the strength with which they are held. I will give my opinions on a purely personal basis, while acknowledging that there are a range of opinions, even among my colleagues. My opinion is shaped by my experiences as a social worker over the years. I find, on balance, that the arguments put forward by organisations such as the NSPCC and Barnardo's have the right approach.

There are no prosecutions of young people who are just under the age of consent and who engage in sexual activity with other young people. Therefore, the issue is not what we might seek to promote as an example of the best kind of lifestyle, it is whether we should look to criminal law to address social problems.

It seems to me that the proponents for keeping the age of consent at 17 assume that somehow that will make all the difference. They produce, not unreasonably from their position, the example of what happens in England and Wales. Yet, by the same token, people could give the example of what happens in the Netherlands, where the age of consent is 16, and the teenage pregnancy rate is significantly lower than that in any part of the United Kingdom. We can welcome the fact that our teenage pregnancy rate is decreasing —

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ford: Certainly, if the Member is brief.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for giving way. He mentioned the Netherlands. However, the evidence suggests that the major difference in the Netherlands is the family set-up, or some sort of moral code in that country. Does he recognise also that Northern Ireland is different to the rest of United Kingdom in that there is a stronger family base here? Maybe there are moral differences in this country compared to the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr Ford: That is a fair point, because it seems to be not only a matter of family structures, but of the active promotion of proper educational mores and ensuring that those sorts of values are carried through, as opposed to the relatively lax regime that one finds in the rest of the United Kingdom, where people attempt to pick up such values only when problems arise.

There are serious issues about the resources that must be put into health and social services, and education, in this field. That will be a challenge for those parties that have Ministers in Government and who control the Budget.

Recently, we have seen positive developments in the reduction of teenage pregnancies in Northern Ireland. However, that is not related to the issue of the age of consent but to the success of an active programme to reduce the rates of teenage pregnancies.

I am confused by remarks made from the DUP Benches by Mr Simpson. Members are asked to approve a report that states that there is a breadth of opinion on the issue, although the majority is of one opinion. As somebody who has just taken the minority view on that, I have no difficulty in accepting the report. Mr Simpson seemed to think that Members are being asked to vote on the age of consent.

The issue is protection of the vulnerable. The key parts of the draft Order and the report deal with that issue, whether with regard to underage children or vulnerable adults. We should concentrate on that issue and reach unanimity across the House.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Draft Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 (Mr Wells):

This has been a good debate on a complex and diverse piece of legislation that, I hope, will form the law on sexual offences in Northern Ireland. We had many varied contributions, and interesting points were made. I particularly appreciated the contribution of Mr Ross, who succinctly summed up the argument in favour of retaining 17 as the age of consent. He set the tone for many speeches.

Ms Sue Ramsey broadly welcomed the draft Order and made the valid point that there is much more to it than the age of consent. She highlighted a series of issues, including that of sports coaches. The Ad Hoc Committee did not get a satisfactory answer from Minister Goggins or the Northern Ireland Office on that matter. The NIO should reconsider the issue. It is not beyond its capability to define the status of a sports coach, and, as we have all seen, there have been many examples of people in such positions abusing that status with tragic consequences.

I welcome the strong support of Declan O'Loan and Dolores Kelly of the SDLP. That party has considered the issue in detail, and it has agreed to throw its weight behind the report — as did John McCallister of the Ulster Unionist Party.

Iris Robinson and David Simpson gave robust support for the work and comments of Love for Life. I will return to that later, because Love for Life made an interesting contribution to the debate.

Mr Shannon gave an impassioned speech based on his own moral stance. For many of us, this is a moral

issue. I pay tribute to the work of the Christian Institute; I declare an interest, because I was one of those people who wrote a letter, at the behest of the Christian Institute, when the issue initially arose. I did not know at that time that I would become Deputy Chairperson of this Ad Hoc Committee. I have been impressed with the briefing material received from the Christian Institute. Like many other MLAs who check their emails or BlackBerries, I find that I receive a plethora of comments from constituents urging us to take a stand on this issue. We welcome all the comments made by the various organisations to the Committee; however, those from the Christian Institute have been particularly welcome.

I must correct Mr Shannon on one point; Mr Brolly is a man of many talents but —

A Member: It was Mr Brady.

Mr Wells: It was indeed Mr Brady: Mr Brolly does not have the capacity to make a salient point when he is not in the Chamber. I mean Mr Brady, who was a bit of chameleon on the Committee. He made a solid point that the age of consent in the Irish Republic is 17 and that, for Northern Ireland to lower its age of consent to 16, would encourage those with such predispositions to cross the border and carry out depraved acts in Northern Ireland. There was a logic in his argument that, if the age of consent is the same on either side of the border, that is less likely to happen. Somewhere along the line, the thought police had him out for the afternoon, and we turned on our televisions to see Mr Doherty, the MP for West Tyrone, proclaiming that Sinn Féin was in favour of lowering the age of consent. At some point along the line, Mr Brady's position was amended, and, as a result, he is still showing the bruises. There was a dichotomy, but obviously —

Mr Ford: Will Mr Wells make it clear when he is speaking as Deputy Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee rather than as a member of the DUP?

Mr Wells: I can speak as both, because, as a DUP MLA, I was able to win the argument on the day. I proposed the motion that the age of consent remain at 17 years of age. I am glad to say that the majority of Committee members supported me. Therefore, the report is in line with my views.

Mr Brady: The Member has known me for approximately 25 years. I believe that he would accept that, in my previous role, the thought police never influenced my mentality nor, indeed, have the bruises ever shown.

Ms S Ramsey: That is why he is sitting on the Back Benches. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Wells: At some stage, Mr Brady might tell the House why he has experienced such a Damascene conversion.

A great deal of emphasis has been placed on the age of consent. As I have said, several Members have already

made many salient points as to why the Committee must stand firm on the issue, and it is to be hoped that the House will join it in standing firm. I shall bring a couple of extra points to the argument. First, to lower the age of consent is to give a further 26,000 children the green light to become involved in sexual activity. Those 26,000 children deserve to be protected. I cannot see any demand whatsoever to force that situation.

Secondly, people often say that the Assembly sets standards; that it sets rules. Sometimes, people break those rules, and that is true. There are rules on speeding, drink-driving, dropping litter, and so on, and many people disobey them. However, if those standards are lowered, further activity that is not in keeping with what society wants is only encouraged. The Assembly sets young people targets. It urges them to try to meet those targets. If they do not succeed, the Assembly should give them the support that they deserve. We do not, however, give them the green light to get involved in quite dangerous activities.

Northern Ireland has legislation that stops people who are under 18 years of age from drinking, from gambling and from driving vehicles at certain speeds. Those who are under 16 years of age are prevented in law from smoking. All those rules restrict what young people can do — for their own safety, as well as for that of society. Sexual activity is perhaps one of the most potent issues, yet some people want the age of consent to be lowered to 16 years of age. The arguments, which have been well made in the debate, demonstrate that there is no demand in society for the age of consent to be lowered to 16 years of age. That argument has been well and truly won.

When he appeared before the Committee, Minister Goggins made it clear there were no practical difficulties with Northern Ireland's being out of line with the rest of the United Kingdom on the matter. He did not envisage that any technical issues would arise. Therefore, the argument to retain the age of consent at 17 has been well made on all sides.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that were Minister Goggins to cast aside the report, he would be going against the will of the House, and that he should, therefore, accept it?

Mr Wells: I noticed that, during the Chairman's contribution, Mr McCarthy clearly disagreed with every word that Dr Farry said. I could see it in his body language. I admire the stand that he has taken on the issue. I am aware that he takes that stand on other moral issues as well.

The Member is absolutely right. When I asked Minister Goggins about that matter, he made two points: first, he said that the Assembly is purely consultative and that it does not have the power to change the age of consent, because it is a reserved matter; and, secondly,

he said that not only did the majority of opinion in the Assembly need to be in favour of retention of the age of consent at 17 but it had to provide a logical and pressing argument for supporting its retention. If the Minister reads the record of the debate in Hansard and examines the contributions that organisations such as Love for Life and the Christian Institute made to the report, he will see that there is a comprehensive, coherent and strong argument in favour of retaining the age of consent at 17.

He must also consider the fact that Northern Ireland has a different moral standing to that of the rest of the United Kingdom. That is reflected in the fact that, for example, the Abortion Act 1967 does not apply here. It is also reflected in the fact that licensing laws for the sale and consumption of alcohol are different in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is perfectly logical that, although Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom — I am sure that every Member in the Chamber would support that — it also has the right to diverge slightly from England, Scotland and Wales on moral issues.

One other issue arose. Love for Life provided the Committee with an excellent briefing, which has been forwarded to the Department. Unfortunately, however, due to an oversight, it was unable to give evidence to the Committee. We did not, therefore, have the benefit of its advice. Love for Life has raised important issues. In particular, it is concerned that there is no recognition of existing child-protection policy and procedures in Northern Ireland as they pertain to underage sexual activity.

4.45 pm

The procedure — according to the area child protection committees' regional child protection policy and procedures — is that:

“In all cases where the sexually active young person is under the age of 14, there must be a discussion with the Social Services who will make the necessary enquiries and consult with partner agencies including, the Police, as appropriate.”

I urge the Northern Ireland Office to read carefully Love for Life's submission. Many Members read it and included comments, in their contributions to the debate, from that submission. It is important that the strong evidence that Love for Life provided — in particular, with regard to 13- to 14-year-olds — is taken into account.

The legislation will benefit considerably from the Ad Hoc Committee's scrutiny. I thank all of those who gave evidence. I thank the Chairperson, Dr Farry, for the excellent way in which he smoothed troubled waters, in what could have been a quite difficult situation. I thank the NSPCC, Barnardo's, the Department and all of the other organisations that gave evidence. I commend the Committee's report to the House.

We all wish that the Northern Ireland Office will take the fullest account of our report and its recommendations and that it will move to implement the provisions that carry with them the rubber-stamping of the Assembly on an important issue. I hope that the country will benefit from the work of the Assembly on this important legislation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that they are voting on the overall report and not simply on one aspect of it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Report of the Ad Hoc Committee set up to consider the draft Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2007, should be submitted to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland as a Report of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Private Armies

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes for the winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. Two amendments have been received and are published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes for the winding-up speech.

Mr McNarry: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls for an immediate end to the existence of private armies.

The operation of democracy requires the elimination of all alternative power sources in a free and democratic society. There can be no place for private armies in any civil society. Only the people's voice, expressed in their legislative institutions and through their freely elected representatives, can govern Northern Ireland. There can be no valid reason for any private army to be maintained. The existence of private armies offers the implied threat of coercion and subversion of the lawful authority of the legally elected democratic Government.

Time has moved on. The political representatives of republicanism now hold high political and ministerial office in this institution. We are about to enter another political debate on whether the additional powers of policing and justice should be devolved to the Assembly. In those circumstances, how can we even contemplate such a thing if the private army of republicanism, the IRA, still exists in any potentially operational form, with its command and control structures intact?

It is, frankly, unthinkable that devolution of policing and justice should even be considered while that situation prevails. How on earth can the healing process, which is admitted by all parties to be necessary, take place against the backdrop of the continued existence of the IRA army council? How can Sinn Féin afford to take that risk? How can it afford to see its political project unravelled by the IRA's continued existence as an organisation?

Before further progress can be made in the peace process, in further devolution and in political advances, I believe that the next step must be the standing down of the IRA as a military force. My demands for the end of the existence of all private armies are not confined to the IRA. I include all private armies, all paramilitary organisations. If hostilities are genuinely at an end, then there is no need for any private, non-state-controlled paramilitary force.

The need now is for political action, which has been made possible by the design of the structures of the Assembly.

Some people entered the Assembly in 1998, unashamed of their involvement in a private army. They were hostile to any criticism of their strategy. They were prepared to negotiate on weapons, but the disbandment of their army was not on the agenda.

Mr Burnside: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNarry: No; sorry.

The process that the Ulster Unionist Party began successfully removed weapons. Now, it must also succeed in the removal of private armies. We first brought republicans into Government with their weapons and their private army intact; through the process, we greatly reduced their weaponry. Later on, the DUP, using the same process, claimed to have secured complete decommissioning. In May 2007, the DUP brought the same republicans, with their army intact, into the new Government.

Lord Morrow: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNarry: As yet, the process has not delivered disbandment, nor has there been much talk about it. I trust that my motion will rectify that, because not only do we need to talk about it, but I sincerely hope that in recognising the immediacy that is implicit in my motion, something urgent will be done about private armies. The aim could not be more straightforward: an immediate end to the existence of private armies. That is directed as much to those outside the Assembly as to those who sit in the House and who hold ministerial positions. It is fair to ask whether any MLAs belong to a private army —

Mr Burnside: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNarry: I am not convinced, nor are a large number of the general public, that some MLAs no longer belong to a private army.

Lord Morrow: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNarry: I contend that membership of a private army is a criminal offence, incompatible with being an MLA or holding ministerial office.

Lord Morrow: Will the Member give way?

Mr Burnside: On that very point, will the Member give way?

Lord Morrow: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNarry: Therefore, I question —
[Interruption.]

Mr McNarry: Mr Deputy Speaker, can I have order in the House while I am on my feet?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr McNarry: I contend that membership of a private army is a criminal offence, incompatible with being an MLA or holding ministerial office. Therefore, I question how unionists can be expected to move on when the burning questions of illegal allegiances remains unfinished work. I am sorry that the deputy First Minister is not in the House, but I question whether he is capable of doing what he urges others to do — to move on — when the private army to which he belonged, or still belongs, remains in existence. Therefore, there is good reason for the House to be informed by the deputy First Minister whether he believes that any conflict arises between honouring the ministerial code in Government and obeying a code of honour to the Provos. I want the truth and transparency to come out, because that is a key part of the process that I am willing to see work.

In last week's BBC 'Hearts and Minds' interview, the deputy First Minister said that he deals with the Ian Paisley that he has known since 8 May 2007, and that Ian Paisley deals with the Martin McGuinness that he has known since 8 May 2007. How they deal with each other and how they have — according to the deputy First Minister — managed to put the past behind them and have us believe that they have known each other only since 8 May 2007, is a matter for themselves, and for others to judge. It sounds as though Martin McGuinness is saying that Ian Paisley only knew of him after 8 May. It is important for the House to be informed by the First Minister whether he believes that his deputy First Minister has, since 8 May 2008, remained a member of a private army.

We who work here may be called many things, but none of us are stupid enough to believe that the public will tolerate a situation — which has endured since 8 May 2007 — that gives free rein for serving Ministers to continue as serving members of a private army. Nine months after that date, Ulster Unionists require the process that we began to be concluded on the issue of private armies. That applies not only to the army to which I suspect some Members sitting here belong, but, emphatically, the immediate end of all private armies.

Mr Burnside: On that point, will the Member give way?

Mr McNarry: Ending private armies draws closure on another chapter.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. It is clear that Mr McNarry does not wish to give way; therefore, Members should not persist.

Mr Burnside: He might change his mind.

Lord Morrow: He has done that often enough.

Mr McNarry: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am amazed at the flippancy that Members sometimes indulge in when such serious issues are being discussed. It says nothing for their contribution so far.

Ending private armies draws closure on another chapter, marking the transition from violence to peace. Ending private armies removes the cover of flags of convenience used by those who will not renounce violence. However, let me caution Members: for closure to have integrity, there should be no barter factor, no concessions to be wrung out of anyone, no stage-managed theatrical going-away party — private armies should just disappear.

Passing the motion will send a magnificent message from which the people of our country can draw strength and from which our young people can take relief. The immediate end of private armies would give them an alternative and, therefore, an opportunity to break out of the stranglehold that private army membership puts on them, thus giving our young people and the rest of society time and space to enjoy a greater prospect of certainty for their future. I trust that we will endorse that message. I will now give way to the honourable Member for South Antrim.

Mr Burnside: I thank the Chief Whip of my party for giving way, proving that he is a Chief Whip who does not instil total discipline on our group.

In proposing the motion, the Member has understandably concentrated on the position of the deputy First Minister. Does he agree that the major problem with membership of private armies arises when a Member of the Assembly, such as the president of Sinn Féin, says that he was never a member of the IRA? Does that not pose a greater problem than that of the position of the deputy First Minister?

Mr McNarry: I take the Member's point; it is regrettable. Perhaps those Members will come to the Chamber to answer our questions. With the Deputy Speaker's permission, I will give way to the Chief Whip of the Democratic Unionist Party, the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Lord Morrow.

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

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

"notes the most recent report by the Independent Monitoring Commission on the activities of illegal organisations; calls for their disbandment; and further calls for full co-operation on all crimes by all in the community."

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom leasú 1 a mholadh.

The fifteenth report of the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC), which was published in April 2007, listed seven private armies operating in Northern Ireland. Since then, an eighth army has emerged in north Belfast. Most of them are formally on ceasefire; all of them are involved in crime and violence; and none of them has gone away. They will not go away until we, the democrats, make them go away.

The republican and loyalist private armies are deeply dug into our society at many levels, and some have protectors at the highest level. They continue to have a major impact on our society. Some of that impact is obvious and much of it is secret, but it is all negative and severely damaging to our communities and to our political system. From experience in my constituency of Newry and Armagh, the biggest and most organised army is the Provisional IRA. We have been told that it has been stood down; that volunteers have been ordered not to break the law; that its army council is a force for stability, which is solidly behind the power-sharing arrangements, accountable policing; and so on. The active paramilitary side that planned, organised and carried out offensive guerilla activities has been stood down. However, there is no reason to believe that any structures have been dismantled, and there is every reason to believe that those structures are still being used for community control.

5.00 pm

Since those structures are still being engaged to commit murder and violence, it is unacceptable that we should be grateful that they are no longer engaging in large-scale killing and destruction. People know all too well the damaging effects of continued community control. We saw it at its crudest recently on the Shankill Road, but there are more subtle forms of control going on — even in middle-class communities. In my constituency of Newry and Armagh, local Provisionals have taken it upon themselves to police our young people; we have developed a sort of warrior class. They are issuing bans of various kinds and their own versions of ASBOs. It does not usually require violence — when one has a reputation for violence, one does not need to hit people all the time.

Such activity goes unreported; it will not appear in police statistics or in the IMC reports. The young people on the receiving end keep quiet, but, increasingly, people are prepared to talk. In the past few weeks, a number of young men were told to come to the mart yard in Crossmaglen for a chat with some masked men. After the interview, they were told to return another night for administration of the so-called ASBO, and they went.

These events are happening while Sinn Féin is formally — if somewhat ritualistically — telling people to co-operate with the police and chairing the local DPP in Newry and Mourne. However, a number of community alert or community safety groups set up in south Armagh by the Provisional movement are not co-operating with the police as they should be. There are good people involved in those groups — often, people who believed that they were a way of stopping punishment beatings — but it is time for them to move on. They must not operate as a referral agency for the masked men in the mart yard.

It is difficult to believe that none of those groups has ever heard of the punishment beatings, and warnings of beatings, that are still going on. None of those groups has ever highlighted or spoken out about the beatings or paramilitary community control. I have no record of their calling for co-operation with the police.

What should we do about private armies? Some people might say that, as politicians, we have to live in the real world, and that during a peace process, we are sometimes required to engage with people with whom we would prefer not to deal. However, we must draw a line somewhere. Minister Margaret Ritchie drew her line as clearly as possible when she said that she would not fund schemes that were connected to the UDA. Although there was contention on some of the detail, there was great support in the House — and beyond — for her courageous stand for decency and a lawful society.

At the other end of the scale, a Member of the House has consulted with leaders of a private army. He is a Minister of the Executive, no less, who intervened politically in a murder investigation to exonerate members of a private army; a Minister of the Executive who got what he called “very solid assurances” from the Provisionals that they did not murder Paul Quinn.

It is not the job of any Member to assess the value of “solid assurances” from the leaders of private armies who may well be suspects in a murder investigation. That is the job of the police. It is not the proper role of a Member or a Minister in the Executive to slander the victim of a murder and call him a criminal. If we want to rid our society of private armies, we must show that we can put our own house in order. We should condemn the Member who consulted with the leaders of a private army in the middle of a murder investigation.

Conor Murphy says that the Provos must continue to exist because we are in a state of transition from conflict to peace. How much longer will this transition take? How many more young men will have to die? The time for transition has long since passed.

We can no longer give private armies, no matter which flag they hide behind, the freedom to control our communities. Peace must not be just the absence of organised, large-scale violence; freedom must come with peace — saoirse. There must be freedom from violence, the fear of violence and from overt and covert intimidation.

We must now complete the transition to a completely lawful society. Mere lip service in support of the police and the institutions of law is not enough. There must be full co-operation to solve all crimes by all in the community. The only solid assurances that we should seek — or receive — from private armies is proof that they have disbanded once and for all. Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Lunn: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after 'of' and insert:

"the structures and activities of all paramilitary organisations."

The Alliance Party welcomes the motion tabled by Mr McNarry, because it is important that the House sends a clear message to those who still claim membership of, or give any kind of legitimacy to, what the motion describes as "private armies".

The purpose of our amendment is to clarify the description of the organisations to which the motion refers, because the use of the word "armies" is not appropriate in that context. The organisations referred to style themselves in various ways: forces, in some cases, armies, or, bizarrely, associations. However, it is inappropriate for Members to use the word "armies". The Assembly should not pass a motion that might give even a semblance of credibility or legitimacy to the idea that any of the organisations involved had the support of the people to conduct any type of war. Plain and simply, they were terrorists.

The issue is not just about the existence of paramilitary groups; we must focus on their activities and structures. Any legitimate army would be ashamed of the type of activity carried out by the paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland. Legitimate armies do not deal in drugs; they do not operate fuel-smuggling rackets; they do not operate protection schemes in the areas that they dominate; and, most importantly, they are required to observe the rules of the Geneva Convention and, therefore, should not be involved in torture, intimidation, the taking of hostages or the targeting of civilians — all of which are examples of the actions of our paramilitaries — to say nothing of bank robberies, the ultimate obscenity of the use of proxy bombers, and the gruesome beating to death of civilians who have offended against their rules. I will not mention any organisation by name, because the only difference between them is the level and scale of their criminality — the activities are common to all of them.

The question is what the Assembly can do to end such activities. The simple answer is nothing, unless we have the necessary powers of policing and justice. The police and the courts must be able to deal with criminal gangs, which are what they are — there is nothing political about them; they are just a mafia indulging in gangsterism for personal gain.

There are also children's rights to be considered. Is there a more obvious or contemptible abuse of children's rights than their recruitment at an early age by paramilitaries? Does anyone really believe that such children are volunteers?

As Mr Dominic Bradley said, the Executive have been ambiguous in their support of Margaret Ritchie's decision to end the funding of paramilitary groups, which is one of the few measures available to the Assembly

to tackle the problem. I wonder why there is a continuing lack of agreement. The Alliance Party looks forward to the day when this type of debate is no longer required, but I doubt whether any of those organisations will go away of their own volition. Therefore, the sooner effective powers become available — and are used — the better.

The intention behind our amendment is to correct an ambiguity in the motion caused by the term "private armies". Given the Ulster Unionist Party's refusal to acknowledge that there was a war rather than a terrorist campaign here, I am surprised that the motion was so worded. One might fasten on the perception that it was a war. The Alliance Party agrees with the thrust of the motion and offers the amendment as a sensible correction, which I hope the motion's proposers will, on reflection, accept.

Mr G Robinson: I take it as read that when the Member who proposed the motion refers to private armies, he means terrorist structures that have the capability to support political objectives by violent means and that fund their activities by criminality. On that basis, I have no hesitation in supporting the motion. Private armies or terrorists have no place in a law-abiding, peace-loving society. They can only be seen as a throwback to past dark days — which I had hoped were consigned to history — and as a tool to keep individuals and communities subjected to the law, as those private armies saw it.

How did they achieve that? The answer is simple: fear. No one in Northern Ireland, or anywhere in the world, should be subjected to that type of fear, but as a realist, I accept that not everywhere in the world can have that luxury. However, I no longer see Northern Ireland in that category. Northern Ireland had, I thought, left the days of the private army behind. Sadly, I have been proved wrong.

The questions that must be asked are simple. Why is there a need for private armies? There is no need or place whatsoever in today's Northern Ireland for that type of organisation. Why are so-called command structures still in place? That question has an equally simple answer: the hawks in some organisations cannot see the future in anything other than the context of the past. They are so blinkered that they refuse to decommission their command structures and are thereby jeopardising the future by creating mistrust — one thing that this Assembly is trying to overcome.

How do those private armies impact on society? Every one of us is paying for the policing of all areas of Northern Ireland. Private armies have an impact on the youth of society through their criminal links to drugs and racketeering. I have a message for the private armies: the vast majority of people do not want them around.

They want them to become a part of history. I bet that the party opposite will not want to hide that history.

I call on the private armies and their command structures to disband, to go away, and to leave the people of Northern Ireland to build the peaceful and prosperous future that we all want. I support the motion, and I do not necessarily oppose the two amendments.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin's position on private armies is clear. Our objective is to create the conditions in which private armies are a thing of the past. My party has been steadfast in its efforts to take all guns out of Irish politics.

Since the inception of the Six County state, a series of private armies have sought to legitimise Unionist majority rule. The B-Specials, the RUC and the UDR were all private armies of a State that was built on injustice and discrimination, and which systematically engaged in human-rights abuses against nationalists and republicans. During more than three decades of conflict, successive British Governments employed shoot-to-kill operations. They used rubber and plastic bullets. They used various unionist paramilitary organisations to wage a war of terror against the nationalist and republican people. The decision to pursue that approach was taken at the highest levels of the British state. In some instances, the orders to kill came directly from Downing Street and were subsequently publicly defended by British Ministers.

In recent years, a series of reports by the Police Ombudsman's office and by international jurists into scores of killings have exposed the extent to which British intelligence, MI5, the UDR and the RUC Special Branch managed private armies through a policy of collusion. Collusion could work only with the knowledge of all its participants, which included MI5, British military intelligence and the British Cabinet. The Joint Intelligence Committee is directly responsible to the British Prime Minister, and has overall control of all security issues. Therefore, the British Cabinet, including the Prime Minister, is aware of everything that is happening in intelligence circles.

The Cory Report, the Barron Report, all three reports of the Stevens Inquiry, the Stalker Inquiry and a number of other reports and inquiries have found that collusion went to the heart of the British establishment.

5.15 pm

An inquiry by a team of international lawyers into dozens of murders in the 1970s showed that Government officials were aware of collusion between members of the UDR and loyalist killer gangs. Up to 15% of UDR members were directly linked to loyalist paramilitary organisations, and UDR weapons were used in the murder, and attempted murder, of many Catholics.

It has now been established firmly in the public domain that the British Government armed loyalists and that British intelligence directed them to kill people. It was part of the British Government's military offensive against the nationalist people. The use of private armies by the British Government gave their armed forces cover to operate secretly in an illegal arena in which the Crown forces could not be seen or risk being caught. It is obvious to most reasonable people what the British Government were at.

We must all look forward to building a society based on equality, justice and peace — a society in which no private armies exist. Our party has no problem with saying that it is looking forward to living in such a society. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCausland: There can be no place in our society for paramilitary organisations or terrorist armies. That is true for all such organisations, whether they be loyalist or republican, mainstream or dissident.

We have come a very long way, but there is still more to do, and there is still a way to go. The issue stretches across political divisions and community boundaries, but it has a particular relevance for the party opposite, Sinn Féin. One has only to consider how many Sinn Féin Members have been convicted of the most atrocious terrorist crimes to see that relevance.

Down through the years, paramilitarism has polluted politics in Northern Ireland. The bargaining power of Sinn Féin, as the party itself admitted, came from the firepower of the IRA. It was the old policy of the Armalite and the ballot box, as Danny Morrison summed it up. However, I think the other expression makes it clearer; on the one hand, political bargaining power, and, on the other, military firepower.

Paramilitarism has not only polluted politics, it has ruined communities through criminality, gangsterism and drug-dealing, and has deprived families of loved ones. It has deprived children of fathers and mothers, and it has deprived mothers and fathers of their children. It has left us a legacy of denial. There are those who denied that they ever were IRA members, including the Sinn Féin president, who has a considerable capacity for remembering speeches but who somehow cannot remember whether he was ever involved in the IRA. There are those who will admit that they were members of the IRA, including, of course, the deputy First Minister, but who refuse to admit what terrorist crimes they committed. That legacy of denial must be highlighted.

The problem of paramilitarism spans all communities, but the particular significance with regard to Sinn Féin is that it is the largest nationalist party. It is represented strongly in the Assembly; it has come here with the votes of nationalists, but it has a special relationship with the IRA.

Dominic Bradley mentioned punishment beatings.

Dr Farry: Does the Member agree that the term “punishment beating” is totally inappropriate because the word “punishment” implies that there is some legitimacy in the actions of those who act as judge, jury and executioner, when, in fact, only the courts can dole out punishments?

Mr McCausland: I agree entirely with the Member, and I am about to reinforce his point.

Some years ago, when the Minister of Education, Caitríona Ruane, was the director of the West Belfast Festival, she encountered a problem. Sinead O'Connor had been due to appear at the festival, but refused to take part because of punishment beatings in west Belfast. When questioned on the radio, Caitríona Ruane said that punishment beatings were not a black-and-white issue. That has stuck in my mind as an interesting statement — the current Minister of Education said that punishment beatings were not a black-and-white issue.

Mr Kennedy: It is more of a black-and-blue issue.

Mr McCausland: Mr Kennedy is correct. That is a more accurate description to the people who have been beaten black and blue with a baseball bat, or whatever.

Private armies have been winding down their activity, but they must be completely dismantled. There must be an end to the eulogising of those who committed terrorist crimes as members of those terrorist armies.

The legacy remains of the killing of Robert McCartney in Belfast and the more recent intimidation by republicans of members of a cancer screening unit in the Markets area because a sister of Robert McCartney was one of the nurses. Alex Maskey will be aware of that incident because it happened in his constituency.

Most recently, Paul Quinn was murdered near the border. The Programme —

Mr A Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I advise the Member that before he continues in that vein, he should speak to the Health Minister and hear his report of what happened in the Markets.

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

Mr McCausland: That was not a point of order. However, it is significant that Mr Maskey became rather nervous when I highlighted that incident.

There must be a future without paramilitary organisations, including those in the Markets area who intimidate people working in cancer screening units. The Programme for Government speaks of a shared and better future —

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

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. David McNarry's motion has more to do with the battle between the Ulster Unionist Party and the DUP for the hearts and minds of the unionist community

than with private armies. It is yet another waste of time to come from that source. What will be achieved by today's debate, other than that there will be handbags at dawn between the two unionist parties opposite?

The Ulster Unionist Party had a poor record during the peace process. Mr McNarry lectured the Assembly on how he brought the IRA to the point where it got rid of its guns, etc. The Ulster Unionist Party delayed the removal of guns from Irish politics, and it delayed the progress of the entire peace process, because it had neither the moral courage nor the mettle to move forward.

Peace processes are about people having the moral courage and the mettle to move forward — and we have moved forward. It is as difficult for some Members on this side of the Chamber to be involved in the new arrangements as for those opposite. Peace processes are about compromise, and Sinn Féin is 100% behind the process and will make it work. Silly little motions like this one have no role to play. Of course, private armies should be removed. However, some unionist politicians, and indeed some nationalist politicians, do not want to move forward, are incapable of moving forward and cannot handle the new political reality. Politics on this island has changed for ever. Sinn Féin is not going away: the party is here to stay.

Mr Campbell: What about the IRA?

Mr O'Dowd: I will come to that in a moment.

Let us grasp the political reality and use our time in the debating Chamber to deal with those issues that we can. In the Village area, there are members of the unionist community living in the worst housing conditions that I have ever seen. I was about to say that they are sitting in front of the fire or in indoor bathrooms, but they have neither. The houses are damp, prone to flooding, and so forth. I doubt that those people are worrying about an unarmed IRA. Are they worried about an inactive IRA? Of course not.

They are worried that for 80 years their elected representatives failed to provide them with adequate housing. The Ulster Unionist Party — a single party — was in power for 50 years and still could not provide those communities with adequate housing. Now they come up with this rubbish motion.

Dominic Bradley outlined a picture of mass intimidation by republicans in South Armagh. Why, then, when it comes to elections in South Armagh, for every one SDLP vote does Sinn Féin get three? Why do those people — who according to Mr Bradley are intimidated — go into the privacy of a polling booth and vote for Sinn Féin? Why do they return more Sinn Féin councillors, more Sinn Féin MLAs and a Sinn Féin MP? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr O'Dowd: As has been shown in three recent court cases —

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No. It has been shown in three recent court cases that the SDLP makes statements that have absolutely no basis. Today, Dominic Bradley has made another statement that has no basis.

The people of South Armagh have given Dominic Bradley a message; they have told him who they want to represent them. As far as politicising the murder of Paul Quinn is concerned — catch yourself on. No other Member of this Assembly has politicised the murder of Paul Quinn. The murder of Paul Quinn was wrong; it should never have happened, and those responsible should be locked up in jail.

I commend the 400 people who co-operated in the investigation and invited the guards and the PSNI into their homes, and I commend those 1,200 people who gave the guards and the PSNI leads in their investigation. Contrary to what Mr Bradley and others tell us, the people of South Armagh will stand up to any one who intimidates them, and they have done so for over 30 years. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr I McCrea: I welcome the motion, which is not petty. There should be an immediate end to all private armies, regardless of their paramilitary persuasion. True democracy demands that any party that wishes to be in Government for the long term cannot hold on to a private army at the same time.

The bone of contention for true democrats in this House is that Sinn Féin is in Government while the IRA army council continues to exist. Not only is the existence of the IRA army council an insult to democracy, but it will ensure that devolution of policing and justice powers to this Assembly is totally out of the question for some time. That will be the case until the Provisional IRA ceases to exist, and, indeed, until the community has full confidence that Sinn Féin is committed to policing — not just by its words, but by its actions.

As a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, I make it abundantly clear that the DUP will not agree to set any date for the devolution of policing and justice, and certainly not any date in the near future.

Mr Burnside: That is a clear message to the House. Does that mean that so long as the army council of the Provisional IRA continues to exist — which the Member and I know is still the case — our side of the House will not agree to the transfer of policing and justice powers?

Mr I McCrea: I have no doubt. I am 100% in my demand that the IRA army council has to be done away with before policing and justice powers can be devolved to this Assembly.

In October 2007, Paul Quinn, a 21-year-old man, was murdered in County Monaghan. His family believes that the Provisional IRA was responsible. However, to date, no one has been arrested. Once again, how can we trust Sinn Féin while the IRA army council remains intact?

In recent months, we have also witnessed the attempted murders of two PSNI officers in Londonderry and Dungannon. Again, I wait to see who will be charged and brought before the courts for those actions.

5.30 pm

Sinn Féin, which everyone knows is the political wing of the Provisional IRA, cannot be trusted in a democratic institution until its members prove to the people of Northern Ireland that the days of IRA terrorism are over once and for all; that they have renounced terrorism; that the days of the Armalite and the ballot box are gone; and that they are committed to democratic and peaceful means alone. They can prove to the people of Northern Ireland that that is now the case only by disbanding the IRA army council and by bringing the Provisional IRA's threat to the people of this Province to an immediate end.

The ball is now in the hands of Sinn Féin: if it wants to be accepted as a truly democratic political party, then now is the time for its members to stand alone, free from a private army, and stop holding the people of Northern Ireland to ransom through the existence of that army.

Mr Armstrong: I welcome the debate and the opportunity to speak in it. For far too long, Northern Ireland was cursed with private armies. The IRA sought to destroy this country — they bombed towns and cities in an attempt to bring Northern Ireland to its knees economically. The same people would then complain about the lack of employment prospects. They murdered anyone who stood in their way — policemen, soldiers, civilians young and old, anyone whether Protestant or Roman Catholic. Those who dared to take a stand against the IRA were considered fair game.

The so-called dissident republicans picked up where the Provisional IRA left off. They bombed Omagh, murdering 29 people, and in the last few months they have attempted to murder off-duty police officers in Londonderry and Dungannon. The arrests in Lithuania were further evidence that they have yet to get the message that their ways are over, with dissident republicans attempting to buy explosives. The weekend media reports suggest that they are to step up their campaign of targeting the Police Service of Northern Ireland, as well as undertaking a campaign of fire bombing.

The murder of Paul Quinn in County Monaghan has raised serious questions about whether the Provisional IRA — Sinn Féin's own private army — has really wound up its operations.

Rather than sit back and watch helplessly as Northern Ireland slid into anarchy, I chose to join the forces of law and order and served part-time with the RUC for 15 years. I made my choice, as did others. My conscience is clear.

The Belfast Agreement ended the deadlock. After a number of false starts such as the Sunningdale Agreement and the Prior Assembly, politics was finally given a chance to work, as the private armies took a back seat. That was too much for some republicans, and as the Provisional IRA came to realise that its armed campaign would not achieve the aim of a British withdrawal, elements drifted away to form the so-called Real IRA and Continuity IRA. Those people have not learnt the lesson that society neither wants nor needs self-appointed private armies.

In the past, republicans variously claimed that they were fighting for a united Ireland and a British withdrawal and that they had a mandate from their community. Some Protestant groups claimed that they were fighting against republican violence, claiming to be the defenders of their communities, while conveniently ignoring the fact that they were oppressing the very people they were claiming to defend.

Since 1998, both factions have been stripped of any possible excuse for violence. Republicans were elected to the Stormont Assembly in sufficient numbers to be able to deal with grievances, real or perceived, and achieve their ends by political means. Loyalists failed to gain much electoral success, but the ending of the IRA's campaign meant that they could no longer use the excuse that they were only reacting to IRA violence.

The ending of the Troubles meant that those who once had power and status in their communities due to their involvement in private armies had to face a new reality. It has proven too much for some, and the lure of easy money through criminal enterprises, such as fuel smuggling or drug dealing, proved too tempting. Such activities had occurred before the Troubles ended, but then the groups or individuals involved had claimed that it was for "the cause". It is now clear that it was only for personal gain.

Some Members in the House now speak against private armies from a position of respectability, yet they seem to have forgotten that once upon a time they were a little too close to paramilitaries for comfort. Some now very senior DUP politicians were very closely associated with fairly unsavoury characters. However, like new Labour, the watered-down, power-hungry, new DUP, bears no resemblance to the DUP of old, pre-2007. *[Interruption.]*

I reject the DUP's charge that the Ulster Unionist Party somehow failed to address the big issues during the inter-party talks that produced the Belfast Agreement in 1998. I would never claim that that agreement was

perfect, but it represented the best chance to bring about an end to a widespread campaign of murder and mayhem on the part of private armies, republican and loyalist. The Belfast Agreement broke the political deadlock and saved lives. I have always believed that, if the DUP had chosen to participate in those talks and strengthen the unionist representation at the talks table, we might have achieved a better deal for the unionist people. There is no place in Northern Ireland for any private armies.

Dr W McCrea: Having listened to the previous speech, I must confess that I did not have a clue what the Member was trying to say — probably, in truth, when he read it, neither had he. I am delighted that the speech was written for him; he certainly could not have made that up on the hoof.

However, I compliment his colleague Mr McNarry on proposing the motion, with which I have no problem associating myself. The House would be wise to support the motion, for which I trust there will be unanimous support.

There are still questions in the minds of the people of Northern Ireland in respect of those Members of the House who retain an association with the army council of the Provisional IRA. Those questions will not go away, and they must be dealt with head-on. There is a clear demand on the part of any democratic institution that presents itself as such that no one should be able to call himself or herself a democrat while being part of — or fronting — a terrorist organisation. That goes for the Provisional IRA.

In many ways, the Provisional IRA was never an army. In my opinion, its members were similar to rats that crawled out of the sewers. They threatened and intimidated the people of Northern Ireland for 30 years until they realised that they could no longer get their way.

Some in Sinn Féin faced the reality that the day of the gun and the bomb was over. The sympathy for republicans in America, Europe, and London — and certainly in Dublin — was finished, particularly in the wake of the 9/11 atrocity, which every one of us condemned. We must equally condemn the Governments that were happy to play along with those who committed one atrocity after another, particularly in the border areas of Northern Ireland, where there was deliberate genocide and a calculated destruction of the families who lived there. The Protestant community was destroyed along the border, and there was a deliberate policy to drive them back and to push back the border. Thankfully, all those efforts failed, and many good, strong unionist people still live in the border areas. I commend them and their families for their courage in standing against all the intimidation and threats that were levelled at them.

My honourable friend the Member for Mid Ulster rightly pointed out the current prominence of policing and justice issues. Without equivocation, I make it abundantly clear that if Sinn Féin or any other group imagine that, somehow, in May or October, policing and justice powers will be devolved, they are up a gum tree. There will be no movement on that issue until all paramilitary organisations — not just those from one side of the community — are dealt with. All paramilitary organisations must be destroyed. *[Interruption.]*

Sinn Féin Members should not shout too loudly. They know all about terrorism, and they know what it is to blow people asunder. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Dr W McCrea: With the greatest respect, Mr Deputy Speaker, I know that you are simply on your feet to tell the Member who is smarting to keep quiet. He knows fine well that, for some of his colleagues, the chickens are coming home to roost. In the past, the IRA may have intimidated people and delighted in trying to make people kowtow to it, but one thing is for sure, and that is that this Member for South Antrim will never kowtow to any IRA scum. *[Interruption.]*
No one in the IRA —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Order.

Dr W McCrea: No one in the IRA will ever make me kowtow. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please, Members. Order.

Members should be very careful about what they say. Their comments could lead to Standing Order 60 being invoked, and we do not want that.

Dr W McCrea: I am clear on what I have said, and it may be read in Hansard. Some other Members, however, may not want some of their words read, because, as far as I am concerned, there — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, Dr McCrea, but your time is up.

Mr Burnside: To lower the emotion that is evident in the debate, I wish to say that we are all using different terms, yet we all know what we are talking about. Whether that term be “private army”, “paramilitary organisation” or “terrorist organisation”, we are talking about an organisation that exists for its own interests and that falls outside the authority of the state, and about whether it continues to exist. It is a mafia, whether that be in loyalist or republican circles.

Much of what Sinn Féin says does not generate confidence. Whether in the case of the McCartney murder, or in the case of other murders in south Armagh, will the political representatives of that one-and-the-same organisation co-operate fully with the police and

the justice system, which they said in their Pledge of Office that they would do, in order to bring those responsible to justice? They currently do not.

In questions for oral answer in the House, as well as in questions for written answer that I have submitted, I have asked the deputy First Minister whether he will co-operate with the police in their enquiries into historical crimes. He said on ‘The Stephen Nolan Show’ that he will not. That does not represent adherence to law and order, nor does it signal an end to private armies.

As I said in an intervention earlier, the president of Sinn Féin has said that he was never a member of the IRA. Therefore, what is the point in our having a debate on the subject? We know what private armies are. We know that the republican movement has moved a great way, and we know that there has been movement in elements of loyalism, although that has not happened nearly fast enough.

However, we certainly know what a private army is. We also know what a terrorist organisation is, and, on the republican side, a structure remains. Its members continue to stick together, like the Mafia, after criminal activities have been engaged in, and that is unacceptable in a democratic society.

I am glad that the DUP is making it clear that there will be no transfer of policing and justice powers. As long as the IRA army council exists, those powers should not be anywhere near this place. We do not need them; they should remain a reserved matter.

The private armies still exist and still have potential. They influence young people and intimidate them. I do not need to repeat the publicity on the McCartney murder. Who cleared away the evidence? Who did not give information? Who intimidated the family? It was the movement — the republican movement. It sticks together. The Sinn Féin leadership should look at concluding the process of moving from terrorism, via terrorism and politics, to 100% politics. The leadership should end that process completely. Moreover, the loyalist paramilitaries should get off the loyalist people’s backs.

Mr O’Dowd: What pressure are you putting on them?

Mr Burnside: Does the Member wish to make an intervention through the Chair? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Mr O’Dowd: What pressure is the Member’s party putting on loyalist paramilitaries to leave the stage? Simply that he says that they should? Let us see the evidence of what his party is doing to ensure that loyalist paramilitaries leave the scene.

Mr Burnside: We are doing a tremendous amount, as we have done throughout the entire peace process. I had no problem with meeting the UDA inner council in

north Belfast. I knew that the police were there. I argued with the UDA leadership that it should keep moving in the right direction, and I had no problem with doing that.

I am not ashamed to admit that I have talked to loyalist paramilitaries, whether proscribed or non-proscribed. How could anyone in loyalism, from our party or from the DUP, who said that they had not talked to, or been involved with, people who have been in private armies have been part of the Northern Ireland peace process? I have no shame in admitting my involvement. I hope that the loyalist paramilitaries will get off the loyalist people's backs, because, regardless of the reasons for the establishment of those groups, it is time for them to go.

5.45 pm

The motion and the amendments are good. Our colleagues from the SDLP and the Alliance Party made good speeches, and some good points were made. However, the dreadful speech on collusion, delivered parrot-like, was to be expected from Sinn Féin.

No party in the Assembly should tolerate any private armies, terrorist organisations or paramilitary organisations in our society. They should be wound up. The vote on the motion should be unanimous, but more than rhetoric or being economical with the truth — if I may use that term to describe what I really mean — is required. If people do not admit from where they came, they cannot really go all the way down the peaceful route away from private armies. I hope, therefore, that the motion will receive unanimous support.

I am extremely pleased that the DUP is to stand firm and not support the transfer of policing and justice powers, and I look forward to standing firm with the DUP on that. The Ulster Unionist Party will be at one on that subject, because now is not the right time for those powers to be devolved. Once again, I say that I hope that all Members in the Chamber will support the motion.

Dr Farry: The Alliance Party is comfortable with the SDLP amendment. It would be churlish not to recognise the progress that has been made over the past number of years, in which we have witnessed the winding-down of the IRA, Sinn Féin's support for policing, and the decommissioning of weapons. There have been positive reports from the IMC on all those matters.

However, more must be done with republicans. Concerns remain over the continuation of a command and control system, as well as over organised crime and social control. There is a great deal of unease about the murder of Paul Quinn, and that unease must be tackled. Although Mr O'Dowd condemned Paul Quinn's murder, I was disappointed that he did not go further and make it clear that Paul Quinn was not a criminal, because he is not alive to challenge the

allegations that have been made against him. It is very unfair that that allegation still hangs over that individual.

It is right to recognise that loyalists have made some movement in the past year. However, both the UVF and UDA have refused to decommission their weapons. I find that profoundly disappointing. We seem to have slipped back to a situation in which the notion of putting weapons beyond use is satisfactory. The Northern Ireland Office appears to have settled for that, but that is not good enough. The message that the weapons must go must be sent out loud and clear.

The Alliance Party amendment was tabled because we are concerned about the terminology used in the motion. Terminology is important in this society, and the use of the term "armies" is completely inappropriate, because the paramilitary organisations here are not, and never were, armies in the conventional sense of the word. Every time that I hear them referred to as armies, my colleagues and I cringe.

Every time during the peace process that someone asked the IRA to declare that the war was over, I cringed, because the IRA was never an army, and there was never a war. All were paramilitary organisations engaged in illegal activity, and their members were judged according to the criminal law in our society. Although members of those organisations may be regarded as politically motivated prisoners, they were not. They were never political prisoners, nor were they prisoners of war. They were not part of an army — they never have been and never will be. Members must be perfectly clear on that.

At a time of such controversy and sensitivity in our society over the suggestion, or over the sought recognition, that a war occurred — a suggestion that emanated from the Eames and Bradley reconciliation group — it ill behoves the Assembly to flirt with that suggestion through the motion's use of the term "armies". If we are seen to be talking about private armies, we give credence to those who want to talk about the existence of a war, and that may enable them to rewrite history.

I want to stand up for all those people in Northern Ireland — in the security forces and in the rest of society — who tried to maintain some society based around the rule of law, who tried to maintain the norms of democracy, who tried to retain some sense of a normal society, and who achieved that against great odds. When we talk about dealing with "armies" and "fighting wars", we do them all a great disservice for the activities that they engaged in.

In the same sense, the use of the term "punishment beatings" also sends out a negative message — and I am grateful that Nelson McCausland clarified that. Punishment beatings are paramilitary attacks, pure and simple, and include grievous bodily harm, attempted murder, and, in some cases, murder. In no sense can

parliamentary organisations act as judge, jury and executioner. The police investigate crime, the Public Prosecution Service brings forward prosecutions and the courts pass sentences. That is how it should be and we must be absolutely clear on that.

Finally, I will refer to the devolution of policing and justice, which is not relevant to today's debate, as we are focusing on bringing to an end all illegal paramilitary activity. My party feels that May 2008 is unrealistic. However, it wants to talk about devolution happening sooner rather than later; it should not be put on the long finger. It is something that we should look forward to when seeking to control all aspects of life in Northern Ireland where we feel that we can make a difference.

Today's issue is not so much about the bona fides of people who may be exercising that power, but about ensuring that the Executive are capable of acting in a collective, coherent and cohesive manner on sensitive issues. The Executive's handling of the appointment of the victims' commissioners does not give us much encouragement.

Mr Attwood: I thank Members who contributed to the debate. I agree with the Ulster Unionist proposer of the motion, Mr McNarry, that ending illegal organisations is one measure of the nature of the society that we are trying to create. For that reason, the debate is appropriate. From my point of view, the murder of Robert McCartney or Paul Quinn or the activities of the UDA and UVF against people on the Shankill Road a few weeks ago can never be debated enough. Perhaps some Members think that we are debating a silly little motion or that it is a waste of time.

Mr Campbell: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: No — or that it is a silly waste of time, as Mr O'Dowd said. We should never stop talking about what illegal groups have done in the past and are doing as we speak in parts of this city and beyond. That is why the motion is not silly or a waste of time. In two or three months' time we could have a debate in the Chamber about the devolution of justice and policing and, therefore, this debate is opportune and timely. Anybody who suggests otherwise is fooling themselves and trying to fool people in the Chamber and outside.

Mr O'Dowd would not take a point of information from my colleague, Mr Bradley, who would have told Mr O'Dowd that the SDLP respects Sinn Féin's mandate in south Armagh and everywhere else. Every time Mr O'Dowd talks about respect for Sinn Féin's mandate, he exposes himself to the fact that for 35 years his party unambiguously supported the IRA in its disrespect of national democracy and the mandate of the Irish people who wanted the IRA, the British Army, the RUC and the loyalist groups to stop their violence, which they carried out against the wishes of the people of Ireland.

I will talk about the UDA, because little has been said about it in the debate. Members should read the last IMC report, which stated that the UDA:

"are still involved in a wide range of serious crimes... The pace of real change remains far too slow... In our view it is hard to lay an entirely convincing claim to be irrevocably set on a peaceful path, or expect dispassionate observers to take a wholly benign view of their declared intentions, until it is at least clear that they plan to decommission and are taking active steps to that end."

That is what the IMC said late last year about the UDA and the UVF.

The IMC subsequently said:

"We concluded that unless the leadership could deliver more significant results in the very near future we would be forced to the view that it was unwilling or unable to bring about real change."

We should remember all that, because it has been 14 years since the first ceasefires and 10 years since the Good Friday Agreement. We should remember that in the coming months, because, as Mr Lunn said, some of those around the Executive table seem to have an ambiguous attitude to the UDA and its continued existence in the North.

Jennifer McCann — as usual — made a speech about the war of terror that was waged on the nationalist people. Terror was visited on the nationalist people by agencies of the state — there is no doubt about that. However, the fact that, in a five-minute speech, she did not say one word about the war of terror that was waged on the people of this island and elsewhere beggars belief.

More than anything else, one family has helped to create the situation that we are now in and a place that is better now than it has ever been. The Assembly should stand closest to that family, given that we are now in a better place. That is the McCartney family, which helped to bring us to the current situation more than any other single family, which is why we should help them to find the justice that they seek. In a Policing Board meeting on 4 October 2007 — and confirmed in an Assembly Committee evidence session on 8 January 2008 — a senior police officer said:

"I can confirm that the Senior Investigating Officer did have a number of working meetings with representatives of Sinn Féin at their request. At the last meeting, Sinn Féin members agreed to look at encouraging members of their party and witnesses to come forward. I can say that as of this date, no new witnesses have come forward."

Why was that said?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Attwood: That is an indictment on anybody —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Mr Attwood: — who does not help that family.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to check that their mobile phones are switched off, because they are causing serious problems.

As business will not be concluded by 6.00 pm, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3), I will allow business to continue until 7.00 pm or until it is concluded.

Mr Kennedy: This afternoon's debate has established certain key messages that the Assembly must send to the people of Northern Ireland, the media and the international community. First, let me say clearly that there can be no place in Northern Ireland, or in any civil society, for paramilitary organisations or private armies. The operation of democracy requires the elimination of all alternative power bases.

Secondly, only the freely elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland have the right to govern Northern Ireland; they are the only legitimate power in the Province. Therefore, there is no valid reason that any paramilitary organisation or private army would be maintained, other than to offer an implied threat of coercion to, or the subversion of, the lawful authority.

We are on the verge of a debate on whether policing and justice powers should be devolved to the Assembly. However, how can we even contemplate such a sensitive subject as the devolution of policing and justice if the private army of republicanism, the IRA, is still in any form of potentially operational existence and with its command and control structures intact? How can the healing process even take root among the people, as opposed to the political class, while private armies and the paramilitary organisations that waged war on the state and on innocent civilians is still there?

6.00 pm

It seems that political republicanism is leaving itself as a hostage to fortune, while the command and control structures of the IRA and the army council continue to exist.

Every deed of violence can potentially be laid at its door, thus undermining Sinn Féin's political standing in this place and the integrity of the whole peace process.

The whole political project, as Sinn Féin has called it, could be fatally undermined at the whim of every violent hooligan who was, or is, an IRA member and who commits a murderous and illegal deed. If the army council were not there, it would be impossible to ascribe every violent or illegal deed to it. Sinn Féin denials of IRA institutional involvement in crime and murder would have much more credibility if the IRA army council had the sense and wisdom to disband.

As long as the IRA army council exists, it is tantamount to it saying that it will see how well the political project works, and if that is not working, it will rearm and begin the campaign of violence once more. That concerns the unionist population, for unionists are logical people. With some justification, they ask

why an army structure is needed if there is a 100% commitment to peace. Before further progress can be made in the peace process, in the devolution of other matters, the next step must be the standing down of the IRA as a military force, including its army council.

If we are to present Northern Ireland credibly, particularly to outside investors, as a post-conflict society, then all paramilitarism must become history. We must have a no-tolerance policy towards it.

The proposer of the motion, Mr McNarry, posed important questions not only to Assembly Members, but also to Ministers in the Executive.

I commend particularly my constituency colleague Dominic Bradley for a brave and powerful contribution to the debate. He said many things at considerable risk to himself, and I commend him warmly for that.

I accept what Mr Lunn and Dr Farry said about the terminology of the motion and their strict interpretation of it; however, given that they have read into the record their concerns, I ask that they support the original motion before the House.

I am happy to confirm to Mr George Robinson DUP Member for East Londonderry that his interpretation is correct: we mean "terrorist structures" as well as private armies.

We had a predictable contribution from Sinn Féin's Jennifer McCann, who told us about private armies and complained about the B-Specials, the RUC, MI5 and the UDR, and how everyone had given her and her community a rotten time. It was an old and rather predictable republican rant and record.

I agree with Mr McCausland: there is no place for paramilitary organisations or terrorist structures in Northern Ireland. I agreed particularly with his point about the legacy of denial as regards republicans.

The contributions of Mr O'Dowd and Dr William McCrea, for separate reasons, reintroduced a touch of sulphur into the debate that has been noticeably absent in recent months. It was interesting to hear. However, I take no lectures — nor does the Ulster Unionist Party, nor do unionist representatives — from representatives of Sinn Féin, whose organisation was responsible for an economic war that cost millions upon millions of pounds that should have been invested, more properly, in the houses of working class people, including those in loyalist areas.

We are not in any way grateful to John O'Dowd for reminding us about poverty in certain areas, because of the cost to Northern Ireland, in real economic terms, of the IRA campaign.

I want to join with others and point out that although Mr O'Dowd condemned the murder of Paul Quinn, he did not go further and condemn the character assassination

that has been a feature of republican briefing in the aftermath of that despicable deed. He needs to reflect on that, as do others.

I welcome Ian McCrea's contribution on behalf of his party and his assertion — on which he, presumably, carries the weight of his party and its Front Bench — of the requirement for the IRA army council to be disbanded before unionists can contemplate the devolution of policing and justice. The Ulster Unionist Party will certainly find common cause on that issue with Mr McCrea and his party.

Billy Armstrong rightly reminded the House about the ongoing issues of drugs and fuel smuggling. The black economy, which is helped, assisted, aided and organised by paramilitary organisations, is, frankly, alive and well. Action must also be taken on that. David Burnside rightly described the paramilitary organisations that are involved in that activity as mafia-type organisations.

My party has listened carefully to the amendments from the SDLP and the Alliance Party. We note their comments, which have been put on record. However, my party still believes that, for maximum effect, it is better that the original motion be carried through the House unamended. I urge Members from those parties to reflect on that.

I commend the motion to the House. I hope that both the IRA army council and the Sinn Féin leadership are listening.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that if amendment No 1 is made, amendment No 2 will fall, and I will then proceed to put the Question on the motion as amended.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the most recent report by the Independent Monitoring Commission on the activities of illegal organisations; calls for their disbandment; and further calls for full co-operation on all crimes by all in the community.

Adjourned at 6.12 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 5 February 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Ms Ní Chuilín: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am wondering about the competency of the motion on the Youth Service's budget, given that one of its main components refers to cuts that were proposed in the draft Budget. Now that the Budget has been finalised, I would like to know whether the motion remains competent.

Mr Speaker: It remains very much a competent motion, and consideration of competency is the only concern that I have when motions come before the House.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill

Final Stage

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

That the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill [NIA 2/07] do now pass.

This new legislation reflects our desire to improve primary-care services for people in Northern Ireland. It introduces several measures that will enhance patient safety, and it provides for a new dental contract that will allow local commissioning of a high-quality dental service that is responsive to the needs and wishes of patients.

Mr Speaker, as you are aware, the clause in the Bill that would have enabled smoking by a performer during a performance has been removed. That clause was inserted into the Bill at the behest of the previous Administration. Members will recall that I advised the Assembly during the Consideration Stage of the Bill that, after considering carefully the arguments for and against a smoking exemption, I was not convinced that it was necessary for actors to actually smoke in order to portray an act realistically. I tabled an amendment to the Bill, which Members endorsed. I should point out that the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety was also opposed to the inclusion in the Bill of a smoking exemption.

I thank those Members who contributed to the Bill's passage through the Assembly. In particular, I thank members of the Health Committee for painstakingly considering each of the Bill's clauses and for their comprehensive report, which was published last October.

As it now stands, the draft Bill introduces provisions that are broadly in line with those that are already in force in the rest of the UK. Those provisions were subject to a wide-ranging consultation exercise in Northern Ireland, and I am pleased to say that respondents to that were generally in favour of the new policies.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): When the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill was laid before the Assembly in June 2007, it contained three main provisions: the first related to the regulation of the four family practitioner services — general practitioners, opticians, pharmacists and dentists; the second dealt with proposals to set out a legislative base for a new contract for dentists; and the third was the proposal to permit smoking by those taking part in performances.

I am pleased that the proposal for a smoking exemption was dropped at Consideration Stage; and, as the Minister said, the Committee can justifiably claim some of the credit for having that clause removed from the Bill. The Committee listened to both sides of the argument on the smoking exemption, and all members agreed to oppose the clause.

During the Committee Stage of the Bill, 24 organisations responded to the Committee's request for written submissions. Although many views expressed related to the smoking exemption, there was also a number of concerns about the other provisions.

In addition to the written evidence obtained, the Committee heard oral evidence on the regulation of family practitioner services and on the future of dental services from the British Medical Association, the British Dental Association, the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland and the Health and Social Services Council.

The Committee noted that the Bill will give the Department powers to make regulations in a number of areas, such as the conditions under which the suspension of an individual practitioner can take place; the details of rights and obligations under the new dental services contract; and the criteria under which persons not ordinarily resident in Northern Ireland will not be charged for services.

I ask the Minister to ensure that concerns expressed during the passage of the Bill, particularly those voiced during the Committee Stage and recorded in the Committee's report, are taken into consideration when the Department uses those powers to make regulations.

The Committee is content to support the Bill and looks forward to receiving policy proposals for the detailed regulations in due course. The Committee will wish to scrutinise those regulations carefully.

Mr Buchanan: I know that the Committee will be scrutinising regulations relating to the Bill. However, I wish to raise a few points with the Minister today. As regards suspensions, will the Minister agree that the Department should seek to facilitate discussions at local level before a suspension is considered? Will he also agree that suspension should never be a knee-jerk reaction? What recourse will there be for primary-care practitioners who are found to have been wrongly suspended, and what will happen in a case in which an individual is suspended locally but not by the General Medical Council? Does the Minister accept that those issues must be resolved before any legislation can be finalised, and will he do what he can to convey that message as the legislation is developed?

Mr Easton: I, too, support the Bill. My question is in the same vein as those of my colleague. Will the Minister reassure us that suspension of health professionals will not be based on reasonable doubt or

possibilities; that there will have to be hard facts; and that it will be taken as a last resort? I also support the removal of the smoking exemption from the Bill.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank the Members who have contributed to the debate for their remarks. Subject to the Bill being passed, further consultation will take place during the development of subordinate legislation that will be required to introduce provisions such as those relating to suspension. I am happy to endorse the points made by Mr Buchanan.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill [NIA Bill 2/07] do now pass.

Mr Speaker: I propose that the House takes its ease before we move on to the next item of business on the Order Paper.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. We are unable to move on to the next two items of business on the Order Paper because the proposers of the motions are not in the House. Therefore, I propose, by leave of the House, to suspend the sitting for 20 minutes.

Mr Gallagher: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you indicate whether, when business is resumed in 20 minutes, the two proposers who are named on the Order Paper will be in the House?

Mr Speaker: In 20 minutes' time, we will move to item 3 on the Order Paper, which is the motion in the name of Dolores Kelly. I hope that, by that time, the Member will be in the House.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you clarify that, after 20 minutes, we will move on to Dolores Kelly's motion — Exploitation of Migrant Labour and Human Trafficking — or are we giving the proposers of both motions a chance to turn up?

Mr Speaker: I have suspended the sitting for 20 minutes, after which time we will move on to Dolores Kelly's motion.

Mr Gallagher: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. That being the case —

Mr Speaker: I am not taking any further points of order on the issue. I am trying to help Members, which is why I have decided to suspend the sitting for 20 minutes.

The sitting was suspended at 10.42 am.

11.02 am

On resuming —

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Exploitation of Migrant Labour and Human Trafficking

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

Mr Durkan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will take your point of order after the motion is read.

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

Mrs D Kelly: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern at the exploitation of migrant labour and the growth of human trafficking; and calls for the ratification of the 1990 United Nations Migrant Rights Convention and the 2005 Council of Europe Convention on Action against the Trafficking in Human Beings.

Mr Durkan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I realise that unusual circumstances were created this morning because of the absence of Mr Wilson at the time when his motion was due to be taken. However, in circumstances in which an amendment appears, suspicion will be around, unless some further explanation is given, that that creates a precedent whereby a Member can deliberately collapse their own motion, having recognised the serious flaws and contradictions in their position that a debate would expose. In circumstances in which motions and amendments can only be withdrawn by leave of the House, a dangerous precedent is being created. That should not simply pass as being one of those things.

On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. A difficult situation could have arisen in which Mrs Kelly would not have been here to address her motion, perhaps because of another meeting. Where would that have left Assembly business? That matter needs further and serious reflection.

Mr Speaker: If, for whatever reason, the second motion had fallen, I would have dealt with that appropriately, as I have dealt with the first motion. I am happy to come back to the Member on his first point of order.

Mr S Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I know that the leader of the SDLP leads a difficult party, so perhaps he has become paranoid. He has displayed that this morning. Can I make it quite clear that there was — *[Interruption.]*

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

Mr S Wilson: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for the paranoid leader of the SDLP to make allegations that are not true? I was held up by traffic. I am here; I am happy to debate the motion, I have no intention of having it collapsed, and it will be presented again.

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. We spoke to the Chief Whip of the Democratic Unionist Party, Lord Morrow, and he confirmed that Mr Wilson was held up in traffic.

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Is it the same point of order or a new one?

Mr McElduff: It is the same point of order. Perhaps it would be better practice for two Members to table a motion of this character, so that at least one would be present to move it. The motion related to funding for youth services, which is a crucial issue, and we needed to debate it this morning.

Mr Speaker: Order. On several occasions, the Business Committee has encouraged Members to put at least two names to a motion. Unfortunately, that did not happen with this motion.

Mr S Wilson: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Given that 11.00 am was given as the indicative time for the motion to be moved — and I was in the House at 10.45 am — it should have been moved at that time. Members were in their places, and we could have remained within the indicative time that was laid down by the Business Committee.

Mr Speaker: I have raised this issue before: only indicative timings are provided. It is Members' responsibility to be here in the morning. They should not adhere to the indicative timings; we all know that we sometimes get through business quicker than anticipated.

Mr McElduff: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Members who have come from rural constituencies —

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not prepared to take any further points of order on the issue; we have dealt with it well.

Mrs D Kelly: The inspirational civil rights leader Martin Luther King declared "I have a dream", as he articulated the hopes of African-Americans in the early 1960s — hopes of equality, tolerance and opportunity.

Those were also the words on the lips of the people who boarded the emigrant ships — or who now board the Boeings and Airbuses that have replaced the ships — to seek their fortune in some foreign land of opportunity.

Ireland is increasingly becoming the land that emigrants choose to seek their fortune. However, like many Irish people before them who emigrated to England, they are sometimes welcome only for the jobs that they take on — jobs that are too dirty and low paid for our own people. They are welcome only as workers. The Germans discovered that when they encouraged many poor Italian and Turkish immigrants to work in the booming industries of the Ruhr in the 1960s and 1970s. As Max Frisch said:

"We recruited workers, but got people."

If we think about the people who have come to our part of the world, we can bring to mind the Portuguese man who works the night shift for low wages, shivering in a processing plant in mid Ulster, the Lithuanian family who pay an exorbitant rent for slum accommodation in Dungannon, the Nigerian couple who were burned out of their home in Donegall Pass, and the Chinese girl who was murdered while working as a prostitute in north Belfast.

A report that the Irish Congress of Trade Unions commissioned last year not surprisingly confirmed much of what people knew or suspected: a growing number of migrant workers in Northern Ireland are being exploited and experience widespread racism and sectarianism. What land of opportunity, what fortune to be sought? Martin Luther King's dream has turned into a nightmare for some. Yet, the actions of Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement in the States have led to what is happening today, which is that African-Americans may decide who will be the next President of the USA. Indeed, the SDLP was born out of the civil rights movement.

That example proves that we do not know what the future holds, because the pace of change moves so quickly. Enoch Powell, who was another famous politician of the 1960s, predicted — unpopularity at the time — in his "rivers of blood" speech of April 1968 that much of what was happening in Britain related to the arrival of unforeseen numbers of immigrants.

Although Powell was motivated by a racist perspective on who should and who should not constitute the British people, he predicted that immigration — if not properly managed and catered for with regard to employment, conditions, health and education, for instance — would lead to racial conflict between communities and, ultimately, to bloodshed.

Members are aware of the reasons behind the growing popularity of the British National Party (BNP) among poor white people in Britain. No one was

prepared for the situations in many English towns and cities today. Where are the school places, hospital beds, adequate social housing, language services and community and social workers to cope with the unforeseen population influx and growth? What problems are being stored up for the future?

Is Northern Ireland to suffer the same fate? Will we close our eyes to the low wages, poor conditions, racism and sexual exploitation that are visited upon our immigrant population? How long will it be until we also reap the whirlwind? We must prepare for the future and begin to make proper planned provision for the growing trend of inward migration, and build that into our projected plans and budgets for all Departments for the coming years. That must be achieved and implemented through horizontal measures based upon legislation — especially our equality and human rights legislation.

We, as a responsible Assembly, must recognise and appreciate the difficulties and challenges that have been — and which will continue to be — presented to us in welcoming so many people from diverse cultures and backgrounds into our midst. The Assembly will set the tone for our future relationships with those who come to share this island with us.

We must not only plan for the future but ensure that the present is not a basis for storing up problems for the future through the actions of unscrupulous and cruel employers, landlords, pimps, gangmasters and traffickers in inhumanity. The Assembly must send out the message that such exploitation will not be tolerated and that where it is found and uncovered, the perpetrators will be brought to book and made to face the full rigour of the law.

In order that the authorities have sufficient power and support to address such maltreatment, exploitation and trafficking, we must seek to press the Government at Westminster to face up to the challenge and adopt the United Nations Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrants and Members of their Families, which the motion calls for. The convention exists to protect migrant workers, and it sets the moral standard to which its signatory countries should adhere. Ratification of the convention will mean that lawmakers adopt the terms of the convention and undertake to incorporate them into our national laws.

The convention on migrants' rights is one of the core international human rights treaties. It is the first international instrument to provide specific recognition of the fundamental human rights of all migrant workers and their families. It aims at unifying the international legal standards of protection for migrant workers and protects the rights of all migrants. The convention does not create any new rights for migrant workers; it simply ensures that migrant workers and their families

enjoy the same human rights, equality of treatment, and working and life conditions as we do as nationals.

The rights that will be accorded to migrant workers and their families in Northern Ireland are: the right to life, liberty and the right to private family life; the right not to be subjected to cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment; the right not to be required to perform forced labour; the right to freedom of religion and thought and the right to hold opinions freely; the right to medical care; and the right to education for their children.

Northern Ireland has a Human Rights Commission and legislation on equality that is overseen by the Equality Commission. We of all people have no reason not to support the terms of the convention. Surely we do not wish to be exposed as hypocrites for demanding the most progressive equality legislation under the Good Friday Agreement to ensure equal treatment across our two communities, only to deny it to other communities who have since the time of the agreement established themselves on the island.

We are unique in western Europe in that we are emerging from 30 years of conflict in which people were subject not only to inequalities but to ongoing breaches of basic human rights, including the most basic of human rights — the right to life. From such an experience, we should have lessons for others and the opportunity to be an example to others. No European country has adopted the convention. It is easy to find and fabricate all manner of reasons for procrastination in doing what is, by any standards, the right thing. What is our excuse?

We know better than others the true cost of inequality and disharmony between communities. Therefore, we must call on Parliament to adopt and ratify the convention without delay. The Assembly should support the convention in principle and send a clear message to Westminster from this unique part of these islands. Our message should be that the Assembly wishes to be on record as supporting the convention because Members believe that it is our moral duty to do so.

11.15 am

In the conclusion to its report, 'Migrant Workers and their Families in Northern Ireland', the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) suggests that the Assembly has autonomy on employment rights and has a unique opportunity to create a model of best practice. In addition, ICTU suggests that there should be a formal investigation into the activities of recruitment agencies that recruit migrant workers to Northern Ireland. Therefore, the relevant Minister should take on board the issues raised in that report and, indeed, set about creating a model of best practice. That would be the most concrete demonstration of the Assembly's support for migrant workers' rights as set out in the

UN convention and would show our earnestness when pressing the Westminster Parliament to ratify it.

I recall that a report, 'Migrant Workers in Northern Ireland', was produced in 2004 by Bell, Jarman and Lefebvre from the Institute for Conflict Research in the University of Ulster, Jordanstown. That report was commissioned by OFMDFM's equality directorate. What happened as a result of that report? Would it be appropriate for the report to be updated in order to ensure that our knowledge on those issues is comprehensive, up to date, and can inform policy in the relevant areas?

I will conclude by addressing the closely associated issue of human trafficking. The European Commission stated that:

"Trafficking in human beings as defined by EU law is not only a crime aiming at the sexual or labour exploitation of persons, mainly at the sexual exploitation of women and children. It is also a fundamental violation of human rights."

The Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings stated that:

"Trafficking in human beings is a major problem in Europe today. Annually, thousands of people, largely women and children, fall victim to trafficking for sexual exploitation or other purposes."

Given that my time is running out, I will finish by saying that, although the SDLP supports the motion, it will accept the Alliance Party's amendment because it adds to the motion. Regrettably, however, the SDLP does not accept the Ulster Unionist Party's amendment tabled by Mr McFarland because it dilutes the aims of the motion.

Ms Lo: I beg to move amendment No 1: Insert after "Assembly":

"recognises that immigration is good for Northern Ireland and positive for the vast majority of immigrants;"

and insert in line 2 after "trafficking,":

"calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to introduce a proactive programme of protecting the workplace rights of migrant workers in Northern Ireland;"

I commend the Member for tabling the motion to debate two issues that are of growing concern to the public. I would have preferred to discuss the exploitation of migrant workers and human trafficking as two separate motions, because they are different issues, each deserving the attention it would generate in a full debate. However, given the constraints of the motion, I will begin with the issue of migrant workers.

It is estimated that, since 2003, 40,000 to 50,000 migrant workers have come to take up jobs that could not be filled locally. Various research findings — including the Concordia paper, 'Migrant Workers in Northern Ireland' — indicate that the overall impact of migration into Northern Ireland has, in addition to the benefits derived by having a more inter-cultural society, been positive to both the local and regional economies.

Migrant workers have not only met our labour shortages in healthcare and local industries such as construction, agriculture, food processing and hospitality, but have prevented hospital wards from being closed and meat plants from being relocated elsewhere, which would have resulted in job losses for local people. Migrants do not come here to diminish our prosperity, but to enhance it. The Institute for Public Policy Research confirmed that, far from being a drain on the public purse, immigrants contribute more than their fair share fiscally.

Having more people means more tax revenue and service users. In addition, migrant workers regenerate local economies by paying for food, housing and services. For example, we can reliably state that several schools would have closed had it not been for the children of migrant workers.

The argument that demographic change has led to pressures on public services is fundamentally a matter of inadequate planning by public authorities. That is what the Alliance Party meant by highlighting sustainable public services in its response to the Programme for Government.

A large proportion of migrant workers have had good experiences in finding employment and housing and in gaining access to services. Unfortunately, many Members have had to deal with instances of abuse of employment and housing rights, difficulties in accessing public services, and racism — both direct and institutional. A raft of literature produced by trade unions, organisations such as Action Now to Integrate Minority Access to Equality (Animate) and others documents the issue of migrant labour exploitation.

I support the call for the ratification of the UN International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families. It is shameful that the UK and Irish Governments have not yet signed up to it. In fact, most of the countries that have ratified it are countries of origin of migrant workers. Apart from the United Nations convention, a range of international instruments to which the UK is a contracting party apply to migrant workers, as well as existing domestic law on employment and equality. It is clear that existing legislation has not been rigorously enforced.

Although immigration is an excepted matter, the Assembly should express its concern about the many new immigration policies that focus on the economic benefit that can be obtained from migrants rather than protecting their entitlement to human rights and dignity. There is much that we can do. The Executive must urgently approve the draft migrant workers' strategy and action plan produced by the Northern Ireland racial equality forum's thematic subgroup on migrant workers, which is led by the Department for Employ-

ment and Learning. The key strands of the draft strategy presented to the forum in 2006 include the development of information; effective inspection and enforcement of employment rights; research and data gathering; and promotion of best practice. Furthermore, the Executive must gather pace on producing the second departmental action plan of the racial equality strategy, which is almost a year overdue. Both action plans can address the problems experienced by migrant workers on a daily basis and improve their quality of life.

It is such an irony that although we have just celebrated the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade, the global problem of human trafficking — modern-day slavery — continues. It is estimated that some 4,000 individuals are trafficked into the UK each year for the purpose of enforced prostitution. The victims are predominantly women and children from poor countries, or countries experiencing unrest. After bringing them into the country illegally, the traffickers use violence, threats and coercion to force their victims to work against their will. In a submission to the UK Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights, which examined human trafficking, Women's Aid stated that through its research, it had discovered between 50 and 100 women and minors who might have been trafficked into Northern Ireland.

I am very pleased that the PSNI now has a special team working on human trafficking as part of a UK-wide programme. The team recently charged two men in connection with trafficking. The police are aware of 60 to 70 brothels in the Province, up to 10 or 12 of which are operating in south Belfast. Police sources have also determined that Northern Ireland is a transit route from Dublin to other parts of the UK and vice versa. It is believed that paramilitary groups with links to overseas gangs, such as the so-called snakeheads, may also be involved in human trafficking here.

I support the call for the UK to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings as early as possible, now that it has signed up to it.

It is important that the British Government set a target date for ratification and publish an action plan. The protection of victims should be incorporated into the legislative framework, and trafficked persons should be treated as victims in need of protection, not as illegal immigrants who will face immediate deportation.

In its report on human trafficking, the UK Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights made a comprehensive list of recommendations, including: prevention in source countries; measures to reduce demand in the sex trade within the UK; proper investigation, prosecution and punishment of traffickers; and protection of victims. It is also important to raise

awareness of the problem and to provide training for immigration and law-enforcement officers. Statutory agencies should work with the voluntary sector to provide support and shelter for victims. I call on the Assembly to support amendment No 1.

Mr McFarland: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert:

"urges the Executive to take all necessary measures to address both the exploitation of migrant labour and human trafficking; and welcomes the commitment by the United Kingdom Government to ratify the 2005 Council of Europe Convention on Action against the Trafficking in Human Beings."

I thank Mrs Kelly for securing today's debate. Exploitation of migrant labour and the growth of human trafficking are two of the most serious problems facing our increasingly globalised world. Northern Ireland is, of course, not immune to those issues. However, the motion is flawed, as it unhelpfully conflates the 1990 United Nations migrants' rights convention with taking action against human trafficking.

Migrant labour is a reality in our globalised economy. Indeed, one person in 35 is an international migrant. The United Kingdom — and Northern Ireland, which is within it — has benefited from such migration, and it is likely that it will continue to do so in the future. However, while the majority of migrant labour is legitimate and beneficial to all parties, exploitation cannot be ignored. Exploitation destroys the dignity and rights of those who suffer from it, but the dignity and morality of our society is also jeopardised.

Unfortunately, the Ulster Unionist Party cannot support the motion, as the UK Government has stated that the 1990 United Nations convention is not compatible with UK immigration law. The main difficulty is that, under the convention, the UK Government would not be able to control the conditions under which migrant workers can stay in the country. To quote the official response of the UK Government to the House of Commons International Development Select Committee's report on migration and development:

"The UN Convention would therefore allow migrant workers to circumvent current immigration controls and remain in the UK even when they are not fulfilling the conditions on which they were granted entry into the UK (pursuing the specified employment)."

The ramifications of the UN convention would put extra stress on already strained public services. The flaws in the convention are highlighted by a UNESCO study showing that only 37 countries have ratified the convention — the fewest of any of the instruments viewed by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. More significantly, not one of the major migrant-receiving states, including the Republic of Ireland, is among the parties to the convention. It appears senseless for us to call on the UK Government to do something that would put further stresses on

public services and place us out of line with the international community.

However, the Ulster Unionist Party urges the Minister to do all in his power to ensure that the exploitation of migrant labour is stamped out in Northern Ireland. We have been encouraged by the Minister's commitment, in the recent debate on agency workers, to crack down on rogue employers and to increase powers of inspection and enforcement.

Human trafficking is such a serious problem that we must now consider it to be a new form of human slavery that is too frequently focused on the sexual exploitation and abuse of women and children. Trafficking from eastern Europe, Asia and Africa into western Europe is becoming an increasingly alarming problem. UNICEF has estimated that 1·2 million children are trafficked each year. Criminal gangs are making millions of pounds by peddling misery and destruction.

11.30 am

People are often lulled into being trafficked by promises of a better life, only to end up with a lifetime of desolation. That is an indictment of both the trafficking gangs and society. Human trafficking will be tackled successfully only when the demand from the West is in decline. Although it is not considered to be a major problem in Northern Ireland, that could be largely due to ignorance. I welcome the fact that the PSNI will take part in Operation Pentameter 2, which seeks to assess the level of human trafficking in Northern Ireland.

Human trafficking is a prime example of why all sections of society should co-operate fully with the PSNI and of how the failure to do so can lead to the continued suffering of others. Therefore the Ulster Unionist Party welcomes the UK Government's recent commitment to ratifying the 2005 Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. That substantial convention will help to prevent human trafficking and to protect the rights of its victims.

I urge the Minister and the Executive to work with their counterparts in London and with the Northern Ireland Office to do everything that they can to implement effectively the measures contained in the UK legislation when it comes into force.

Mr Spratt: I too thank Mrs Kelly for securing today's debate, and I support Mr McFarland's amendment. Human trafficking may not strike many people as a particularly serious issue in Northern Ireland, but it is a major problem. If we do not take remedial action now, it could become a huge problem that we will struggle to address.

It is 200 years since the great British parliamentarian William Wilberforce finally secured a majority in

Parliament to make slave-trading illegal in the British Empire. However, that was not the end of his political struggle, as it took a further 27 years to achieve a ban on the ownership of slaves. In the intervening period, Wilberforce brought to the attention of the wider public the broader issues of slavery: the terrible conditions in which slaves were transported; the abuses that they had to suffer; and the mental and physical anguish that they endured.

Today, the Assembly is debating human trafficking, which is, in essence, the twenty-first century equivalent of slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Members have a responsibility to make the public aware of the problems faced by those trapped by such terrible crimes and to do everything that we can to ensure that, as Wilberforce brought an end to slavery, an end is brought to human trafficking.

My South Belfast constituency has one of the worst records in Northern Ireland for human trafficking and prostitution. It is a shameful statistic that the bulk of brothels that operate using immigrants are based there. New apartment developments provide a perfect location, short-term leases are available and there are shortfalls in the rental agreements. The organised gangs who run the brothels create scores of victims, who are predominantly vulnerable women and children. The Assembly must send out a strong message to the organisers of the vice trade in Northern Ireland that there will be a starting point of zero tolerance of their activities.

In the years ahead, Belfast could become a target for massive levels of human trafficking, particularly for the purposes of prostitution. With that in mind, steps must be taken to prevent its further development.

The economy is becoming increasingly dependent on migrant workers, who make up an invaluable section of the labour market. They play a massive part in developing the Northern Ireland economy in sectors such as agriculture, catering and construction. As such, they deserve to be afforded the rights that will protect them from exploitation. I am sure that all Members have been contacted by migrant workers from their constituencies who were in great distress due to their exploitation in the workplace.

Many migrants who have work permits receive well below the wage that is stated in their contracts. They fear that if they voice their concerns, their work permits will be rescinded; that fear prevents many from coming forward. It is vital that we protect those workers.

It is a poor reflection on the Government at Westminster that the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings has still not been ratified one year after they signed it. That massive step forward has yet to be taken. I urge the Government to press ahead with a timetable for

ratification, and, indeed, to consider ways to address this issue further.

Measures such as a UK border police force should be examined. Stronger punishments for those caught engaging in human trafficking should be enforced. We must get to grips with this problem and protect those who are vulnerable to exploitation.

I support the motion as amended by Mr McFarland, and I urge the Minister to do all that he can with the Government at Westminster to ensure that the convention is ratified as soon as possible.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat. I congratulate Dolores Kelly on tabling the motion, and I welcome the opportunity to speak about this matter. Protecting the rights of migrant workers and objecting to human trafficking are important and should be dealt with by the Assembly.

Sinn Féin believes that the amendments are unnecessary; the motion itself contains what is required. However, we recognise the Alliance Party's amendment as it is recognised that migrant workers are an important aspect of the economy here and that they add to the social fabric by increasing cultural diversity. The Ulster Unionist Party's amendment is an opt-out that tries to get away from protecting the rights of migrant workers.

Migrant workers have been good for the economy. It could be argued that many businesses in areas such as Dungannon and Cookstown would not have located there had it not been for migrant workers. Other businesses may have relocated when they were expanding because they would not have had the necessary workforce. Therefore, migrant workers are important to the local economy, the structure of society and the developments of those areas, provided that development is monitored correctly.

Dungannon and Cookstown have benefited from attracting many migrant workers. Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council took early action to ensure that those workers were protected, particularly with reference to the agencies that were employing them. It was important to ensure that workers were being properly looked after, particularly with regard to housing. There were instances of too many workers sharing houses, the doubling up of houses, and the multi-use of houses without any protection for the workers. It is important that legislation is in place to ensure that councils and this Assembly can take immediate action when they become aware of such problems.

Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council faced resistance — some of the agencies did not want any protections for workers and did not want the council controlling how many people should be able to stay in one house. There were situations in which two groups of workers shared the same house — those

working night shifts and those working day shifts. That was total exploitation of those workers, as they were not provided with proper facilities.

Planning is important in order to deal with this matter. Until now, no plans have been in place to deal with new situations, such as the number of apartments required, the rise in population, and waste-management structures and their delivery. Such issues need to be addressed to provide for the extra workers who arrive, and to ensure that different ideas and cultures are embraced.

It is important that the Assembly sends out the message that migrant workers are welcome, that they have been beneficial to the economy and to society, and that we oppose all forms of exploitation.

In some instances, agencies could be accused of human trafficking because of their failure to look after people whom they brought here to work and contribute to the economy. It is important to monitor the situation continuously and to bring our legislation into line with European and international legislation on human rights. Sinn Féin calls on the British and Irish Governments to sign up to such legislation in order to ensure maximum protection for migrant workers. Too often, the British Government, on security grounds, have derogated from European and international human rights legislation, which exists to protect the rights of migrant workers.

We are part of the European Union and recognise the European Convention on Human Rights, so we must adopt all aspects of human rights legislation to ensure that workers in future generations are protected, that this is a friendly and welcoming place for migrant workers and that we build a multicultural society. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Newton: I will take a slightly different approach to other Members. I want to speak about exploitation, at home and abroad, and the responsibilities of businesses and individuals, before paying tribute to police forces throughout the United Kingdom. I support the amendment tabled by Mr McFarland.

I am hugely concerned about the growth of human trafficking, particularly that involving young children and women, which, like the exploitation of migrant labour in general, is an evil trade. I am a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and I encourage those who want to manufacture abroad — a growing trend in Northern Ireland — to consider the circumstances under which their profits are made. That is not to say that profit is a dirty word, but profit that is made at the cost of human misery should be rejected.

I support the Organised Crime Task Force and other UK police forces in their work to address the worldwide crime empires that control the counterfeiting of branded merchandise. That nefarious activity — often

likened to Del Boy-type behaviour — is a multi-billion-pound, sinister trade. The heavy trade losses that regional businesses continue to suffer because of the illegal activities of counterfeiters are not the only price of such activity: child slavery, people smuggling, gang warfare and terrorism are integral parts of that unlawful activity. That is a large price to pay to facilitate bargain hunters in Northern Ireland. Everyone likes a bargain, but if shoppers do business with those who sell phoney goods such as garments, CDs, sports goods and handbags, they contribute to the exploitation of children and migrants.

Mr Shannon: Does the Member agree that the Home Office figure of 1,420 for the number of people trafficked into the UK for prostitution last year is unacceptable? Does he also agree that the 2005 Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings is a step in the right direction but that it will work only if the public help the PSNI to address the issue?

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for that intervention and wholeheartedly concur with those statements.

Innocent shoppers who turn a blind eye contribute to the global crime wave that is often directed from sweatshops in the Far East.

11.45 am

Not only do local businesses suffer the loss of trade, but purchasing fake goods contributes to the suffering of the children and adults who live in poverty or who are exploited by unscrupulous gangs. Those gangs will go to any lengths for limitless profits. All the evils of the counterfeiting industry are well documented and evidence of extreme cruelty is commonplace. In support of local retailers and manufacturers, more emphasis must be placed on stamping out the fake-goods industry. Profits from illegal trade fund at-home criminals, and paramilitary groups also gain from that nefarious business.

The justifiable outcry when it became known that the retailing group Gap — and I pay tribute to the company and the action that it took — had goods made by children in slave-like conditions should be even more vocal against the counterfeit trade that takes place off the back of a lorry or on the shifty market stalls that operate in our Province and throughout the UK. For a shopper's bargain in Belfast, many children will pay a heavy price in Far Eastern sweatshops.

My time is almost gone, Mr Speaker. Sorry, I had forgotten that I had an extra 60 seconds.

My colleague has already referred to figures. The Government estimate that there are 500,000 illegal immigrants throughout the United Kingdom, and other estimates put that figure as high as 870,000. Once migrant workers, both legal and illegal, have arrived

on our shores, many of them are recruited by criminal gangs and end up in dreadful conditions. We are all aware of the snakehead gangs that operated in Morecambe Bay and of the dreadful incident and the loss of life that happened there.

The exploitation of migrant workers and illegal human trafficking is a serious issue in today's society. As more countries join the EU and our borders become increasingly more open to migrant workers, greater attention must be paid to that dreadful problem.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I apologise to Dolores Kelly for not being in the Chamber at the beginning of the debate. I had other matters to attend to and did not realise that the business had moved on.

Tá mé ag labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin. I support the motion and everything that Francie Molloy said about the amendment. Therefore, I do not intend to rehearse that.

The issue of migrant workers and the exploitation that they endure is nothing new, particularly in this society. Women and men have been leaving their homelands in search of work ever since payment in return for labour was introduced. Nowhere is that more true than in Ireland. For generations, oppression, starvation and poverty forced our people to distant lands in order to survive. That Irish diaspora faced the onslaught of prejudice, racism, exploitation and discrimination that many migrant workers continue to face the world over. Indeed, to this day, the Irish community in Britain still faces an enduring legacy of hardship because of that discrimination.

A British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body report last year revealed that the suicide rate in Britain is highest among the Irish community, life expectancy is lowest and the community also faces high levels of mental-health problems and drug and alcohol abuse. Nevertheless, despite the hardships that they faced, the global Irish diaspora is perhaps the best example of how migrants can assimilate into the host community and make a positive contribution to their new homes.

Irish migrants became nation builders, statesmen and stateswomen, military heroes, renowned artists and celebrated inventors. The foundation stones of many of the world's great nations were laid through the labour of Irish migrants, and their contribution is still celebrated across the globe today. If any country should be welcoming migrants with open arms, therefore, it is Ireland. We know better than most the hardships that force people to leave their native land, and we know the contributions that they can make to their new home.

Is this really the land of 100,000 welcomes? How can it be, when a Ukrainian woman loses her legs after almost freezing to death on a Coleraine street? What a scandal for the North, and what a reputation to be afflicted with. How can we be considered welcoming, when migrant workers are being attacked in their homes in Derry's Waterside by sectarian thugs, and when human traffickers smuggle vulnerable women and children into this country and force them into lives of prostitution?

How can we be considered welcoming, when unscrupulous employers exploit migrant workers and refuse to give them the same entitlements as indigenous employees? Migrant workers should be afforded the same rights and entitlements as anyone else. Everything possible must be done to oppose the evil of human trafficking, and every Member has a duty to ensure that everything is done. Therefore, I support the motion. I hope that the international legislation that it lists will be ratified and that that will help end the misery that is being caused by the exploitation of migrants and the trafficking of human beings.

However, I am saddened that it is necessary to bring motions to this Assembly, or to the European Parliament, in order that migrants to this land are treated with human dignity. I appeal to everyone to remember our painful history when we are thinking of migrant labourers. We should reflect on our forefathers' experiences and on the suffering and exploitation they endured in faraway lands. We should remember their suffering, and our actions should ensure that no one who comes to this country should have to endure a similar experience. I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Simpson: I support Mr Alan McFarland's amendment. As a representative of the Upper Bann constituency, not only in this House, but as MP, I am well aware of the need for migrant workers in Northern Ireland. The proposer of the motion, Mrs Kelly, like others, will be aware that the Upper Bann constituency has the largest number of employees in the manufacturing industry — 9,500 people — more than East Belfast, which has around 7,300 or 7,500 employees. I am sure that the Member on the next Bench will know the figure.

Sir Reg Empey: You are talking about legal ones.

Mr Simpson: Yes, legal ones. Therefore, we are well aware of the need for migrant workers in the constituency to keep industry moving, whether in manufacturing, hospitals, or other sectors.

The general public get confused sometimes. On the one hand, they read in the press that Northern Ireland needs more people to come to work in the manufacturing sector — which is a good thing because it means that business is going well. I also agree that migrant workers have rights — and I declare an

interest as an employer in the manufacturing sector. I have employed people from that background, and they are very good workers.

On the other hand, members of the public who walk down the streets in my, or any other, constituency see migrant people begging, and they get very confused about what those people are contributing to society. We must be careful about that as well. I agree that they must have rights and —

Ms Lo: The people who are begging on the streets are not, generally, migrant workers, but asylum seekers or illegal immigrants.

Mr Simpson: That may be the case in the Member's constituency; however, it is not so in mine. I could take the Member to places and people in my constituency which would clarify the position. I take her point, however; in some cases, that may be so.

We need to expose employers who treat migrant workers abysmally. They should be brought to book for using and abusing people who come to this country to contribute and help. As Members know, there is a shortage of trades here, especially in the medical profession.

I turn to the issue of people-smuggling. In January 2006, I put down a question for written answer in the House of Commons. I asked the then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland:

“what estimate the police has made of the number of (a) people smuggled illegally into Northern Ireland and (b) females brought into Northern Ireland to work as prostitutes in each of the last five years.”

In response, Mr Tony McNulty MP, Minister of State for the Home Office, stated that:

“The Police Service of Northern Ireland has conducted a number of inquiries into suggestions of people-trafficking to Northern Ireland for the purposes of prostitution. There is presently no evidence to suggest that this is taking place in Northern Ireland. The Police Service of Northern Ireland is acutely aware of the problems experienced in other jurisdictions and they continue to monitor the situation”.

What a big difference 18 months has made. The situation has changed significantly. Mr McFarland mentioned Pentameter 2, a national, multi-agency campaign to tackle the trafficking of human beings for sexual exploitation and forced labour. Launching it, Paul Goggins said:

“Human trafficking is a modern form of slavery where individuals and criminal networks seek to profit from the brutality, misery and suffering they cause to others.”

I support amendment No 2. We will do everything we can in Westminster to push forward the legislation.

Mr Ross: I, too, support amendment No 2.

I also welcome the original motion. Mrs Kelly has raised an important issue, which has been touched on in several debates over the last couple of weeks. The Assembly held a debate on agency workers, during

which the case of a 23-year-old Polish man in my East Antrim constituency was raised by Mr Sammy Wilson — who was on time for the debate that day. The young man worked for an employment agency — People Resource — which has offices in Poland and England, and it was taking £1,000 each week from the young man for rental of a house in Larne which local estate agents have said is worth only £400 a month. That is a key issue. I voiced my concerns during that debate, and warned against unscrupulous agencies which flout the laws intended to protect agency workers.

Mr Simpson, the MP for Upper Bann, made reference to families in his constituency who, on arrival in Northern Ireland, were greeted by mafia-type figures who demanded money from them for protection. That is a sad reminder of Northern Ireland's past. Paramilitary groups used to have a grip on communities here; now, eastern European gangs are trying to exercise the same control over migrant families which come to work in Northern Ireland. My colleague in Upper Bann has been made aware of the situation and will take it up with police in the area.

With the increase in the numbers of migrant workers in recent years, the opportunity for exploitation has arisen. As a proportion of the UK workforce, the number of migrant workers has increased by nearly one third since 1995. We do not want a situation where they are overworked and underpaid.

I turn to the issue of human trafficking, which has been described by several Members as slavery. It is an increasing problem, not only in Northern Ireland, but throughout the United Kingdom.

12.00 noon

Yesterday, the Assembly endorsed the report by the Ad Hoc Committee on the draft Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 — of which Mrs Kelly is a member. The report examines the draft legislation on sexual offences, which aims to strengthen the law on commercial sexual exploitation, including offences related to prostitution. Sex trafficking is an obscene activity. Many young women and children are brought to Northern Ireland and elsewhere, more often than not against their will, and are sold for sex.

The Joint Committee on Human Rights' report on human trafficking, published in October 2006, highlighted the extent of the problem. It quoted Home Office research that states that around 4,000 women in the UK have been trafficked for sexual exploitation. It is important that women in those circumstances are given all the help available to get out of that situation and to escape a life of exploitation. The Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation gave evidence to the Joint Committee at Westminster and expressed its concerns that smuggling expertise exists in Northern Ireland because paramilitary groups have operated here

for so long. That expertise makes Northern Ireland ripe for human trafficking, and that is, obviously, a concern.

Not only have there have been well-highlighted cases in south Belfast, to which my colleague referred, there have been cases in Londonderry, where several brothels have been uncovered. PSNI figures suggest that more than 70 brothels could be operating in Northern Ireland, many of which have imported eastern European girls who have been forced to sell themselves for sex. People who operate those places have been able to exploit the law in many ways. It is important that the steps that the House has taken to strengthen sexual-offences legislation will tackle the problem. Unfortunately, for many years, the focus has been on prosecuting the women who have been forced to sell themselves, rather than the men who pay for prostitution. It is important that the law reflects that and targets the people who use prostitutes.

Although scenes of women being bundled into vans and smuggled into the country happen more often in the mainland UK than in Northern Ireland, there is no doubt that measures must be taken to prevent that happening in future. I hope that the Executive will take those measures and do all that they can to tackle the problem. I am happy to support the amendment that has been tabled in the name of Mr McFarland.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I thank Mrs Kelly for bringing the motion to the House and Members for their participation in the debate. The fact that the Assembly has discussed these issues twice in a relatively short time illustrates Members' concerns.

I condemn any exploitation of migrant workers, who are one of the most vulnerable groups in society, and the vile trade of human trafficking. The issues that arise with regard to migrant workers are wide-ranging; some of those are devolved to the Executive, while others, such as ratification of conventions, remain in the competence of the United Kingdom Government.

For many reasons, it is difficult to obtain information on human trafficking; the main one being the clandestine nature of the crime. Home Office research on organised crime suggests that at any one time in 2003, for example, there were approximately 4,000 victims of trafficking for prostitution in the UK. The UK Government became a signatory of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings in March 2007. The Home Secretary announced on 15 January 2008 that the UK Government intend to ratify the convention by the end of the year.

At the Home Office's request, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is engaged in a cross-departmental exercise to gauge the scope of existing compliance with the convention and to identify the areas that Departments must address, including through

legislation, to achieve full compliance. Actions to prevent human trafficking have the potential to cut across the responsibilities of several devolved Departments. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister are committed to playing their part in ensuring that the convention can be ratified as soon as possible. I fully support all measures to deal with human trafficking and to provide assistance for its victims.

The United Nations Convention on Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families dates back to 1990. I have been informed that the UK Government's position on that convention is that the Human Rights Act 1998 provides sufficiently for the rights of all migrants and sets in national law the key human rights that were established in the six core international human rights treaties.

In the view of the United Kingdom Government, ratifying that convention would undermine the UK's immigration policy and would allow migrants fuller, immediate access to public funds. That would constitute an excessive pull factor. It is important to distinguish between the two issues that we have been discussing this morning — human trafficking and the protection of the rights of migrant workers. I stress that I am committed to tackling any exploitation of migrant workers. They play an important part in shaping our communities and in contributing to a more robust Northern Ireland economy by helping to overcome labour shortages. It is in all our interests to ensure that they are not exploited and to tackle exploitation when it occurs. Member after Member brought that to our attention this morning.

Substantial inward migration of workers is a relatively new phenomenon. Since the accession of the A8 countries in May 2004, there has been a marked increase in inward migration, specifically of workers to Northern Ireland. That activity resulted from EU citizens exercising their entitlement to free movement and work, allowing them broadly the same rights as local citizens.

As I said, the issues that relate to migrant workers are, by their nature, wide-ranging and do not fall under the remit of a single Department. Matters that relate to, for example, immigration, work permits and the national minimum wage are not devolved, while others, such as employment rights, health and safety and education issues, are the responsibility of Northern Ireland Departments. My Department is the lead Department for migrant-worker issues, and it chairs the migrant workers thematic subgroup, which was set up by the Racial Equality Forum. My Department has attempted to be as inclusive as possible in chairing that subgroup, which comprises almost 50 members. They include representatives from most Northern Ireland Departments, relevant UK Departments and statutory and non-governmental organisations that seek to represent

the interests of migrant workers. In that subgroup, the non-state sector has been given a clear voice. The forum tasked the subgroup with producing a strategy and action plan, which it subsequently endorsed.

The draft migrant workers strategy for Northern Ireland and its associated draft action plan aim to ensure that the employment-related needs of migrant workers — and those who employ and advise them — are met effectively through the provision of appropriate information and advice. They also aim to ensure that the relevant state and non-state systems are effective, complementary and fit for purpose. Both documents are designed to be flexible in order that they may take account of evolving situations, and both are subject to annual review.

The thematic subgroup has identified four key strands of required action, and it has established complementary working groups to address the identified needs in each strand. The four strands are employment inspection and enforcement; information; developing best practice; and research and data gathering. I will presently bring to the Committee for Employment and Learning — and subsequently to the Executive — the draft strategy and action plan that details the progress that is to be made.

The enforcement and inspection working group brings together bodies that are responsible for enforcing specific areas of employment law. A range of Departments and their agencies are carrying out considerable employment-related inspection and enforcement activity in Northern Ireland. However, it is recognised that more co-ordination and better co-operation are necessary to focus that work properly. Bilateral meetings relating to breaches of employment rights have taken place with various regulatory bodies. It is important that Members realise the extent of the discussions. The regulatory bodies that have been involved include the Border and Immigration Agency, HM Revenue and Customs, Citizens Advice, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the Gangmasters Licensing Authority, the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland, and the National Employment Rights Authority in the Republic of Ireland.

All those organisations have shown great willingness to co-operate and share information, within the constraints of existing legislation.

It remains a priority for my Department to ensure that there is a modern and effective employment-rights infrastructure that protects all those working in Northern Ireland legally, not least those who may be more vulnerable, such as migrant workers. Migrant workers in Northern Ireland have the same employment rights as all other workers, including the right to be paid the national minimum wage. Those rights are enforced through the tribunal service. All legal migrant workers are entitled to avail themselves of the services of the

Industrial Tribunals and Fair Employment Tribunal Northern Ireland, and translation services will be provided when required.

Many, but not all, migrant workers use the services of, or are employed by, employment agencies. In the next few months, I will be bringing a package of legislative measures before the Assembly to increase protection for vulnerable agency workers, including providing them with the right to withdraw from services provided by an agency — such as transport or accommodation, which has been referred to by Mr Ross — without any detriment to their position. Agencies will be obliged to give workers a written statement of their rights to withdraw from such services. In the meantime, anyone who wishes to make a complaint about an employment agency should contact my Department.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development sponsors the Agricultural Wages Board and funds gangmaster enforcement in Northern Ireland. Those responsibilities offer protection to workers — including migrant workers — in agriculture, including horticulture and forestry, shellfish gathering, and the processing and packing of produce deriving from those sectors.

Members have already had a debate in the House on the national minimum wage. In Northern Ireland, the national minimum wage is enforced by HM Revenue and Customs through a dedicated team based in Belfast. I am informed that criminal prosecutions have taken, and are taking, place. Those prosecutions send a clear message to employers that HM Revenue and Customs will actively pursue those it suspects of flouting national minimum wage law.

In Northern Ireland, HM Revenue and Customs recovered £186,560 of arrears for 868 workers in 2006-07. In total, £2.5 million of arrears has been recovered for workers in Northern Ireland since the legislation was introduced in 1999. HM Revenue and Customs is committed to simple, effective enforcement of the national minimum wage that supports workers and businesses by deterring non-compliant employers from underpaying their employees — a point that Mr Simpson referred to — and removing the unfair competitive advantage that such underpayment can bring.

The Employment Bill [HL], which was introduced in Parliament in December 2007, will introduce a new enforcement framework, a new penalty for all employers who are found to be paying less than the national minimum wage, and a fairer method of calculating arrears. The Bill will also make it a triable offence in the Crown Court and the Magistrate's Court, under the National Minimum Wage Act 1998, and will strengthen the powers of HM Revenue and Customs to investigate criminal offences. It is clear that major steps are being taken across the board to deal with these matters.

Citizens Advice runs the Northern Ireland national minimum wage helpline, which can handle calls in more than 100 languages. There is a network of translators throughout the citizens advice bureaux network to facilitate such translations.

Health and safety is another area of concern; the Health and Safety Executive is increasingly encountering migrant workers in sectors such as construction, food processing and farming. There is no evidence that migrant workers are more accident-prone. Nevertheless, the Health and Safety Executive is working very hard to ensure that all its assistance and help is understandable and that employees are made aware of their rights in such matters.

There are issues regarding communication and the provision of information. My Department has a strategy of providing courses in English for speakers of other languages as part of mainstream further-education provision. That work is ongoing, and the money being invested is rising dramatically. In the past four years, the sum has risen from £300,000 to approximately £1.5 million.

12.15 pm

I turn now to issues that Members raised during the debate. The House is unanimous that workers — indigenous and migrant — should not be exploited, and the Department for Employment and Learning, under employment rights, must ensure that all workers enjoy those rights. However, Members are confusing two issues, a point that Anna Lo raised in her amendment. Migrant labour is a national issue, and human trafficking is an international one.

However, we must be careful. I understand Mrs Kelly's points and her quoting Martin Luther King. Many Members expressed their views on the type of society that they would wish for Northern Ireland, and I share those views. However, it is telling that virtually no receiving states have signed the 1990 United Nations Migrant Rights Convention. The Republic of Ireland has not signed the convention, and it, like the United Kingdom, opened its doors to the A8 accession states in 2004. All those Governments across the European Union are not racist; they are democratic Governments that have not signed the convention because they see the danger of creating additional problems. Members reacted strongly when there was a shortage of money for social housing in Northern Ireland, and that was a big issue in the Budget. If further uncontrolled and unplanned immigration started to bear down on local services — including housing — I wonder whether Members would be able to speak in the Chamber with the same level of enthusiasm as was expressed today. We must be careful.

I undertake that my Department will do everything in its power to ensure that employment rights are

enforced. I will introduce measures in the near future to tighten up regulations.

Mr K Robinson: I am grateful to Dolores Kelly for tabling this important motion, but, unfortunately, the motion is flawed because of the linking together of exploitation of migrant labour and human trafficking. Both issues are abhorrent, but they cannot be dealt with in one motion. Immigration law is a contentious issue, which the Ulster Unionist Party does not deny. However, if the UK Government were to accept the 1990 United Nations Migrant Rights Convention, it would place a serious strain on public services and facilities, because migrant workers would be able to circumvent current immigration controls and remain in the UK, potentially on benefits, without fulfilling the conditions under which they were granted entry.

The UK Government are, therefore, not in a position to accept this convention, and it would be irresponsible for the Assembly to propose a contrary position. However, we urge the Minister to continue to do all that he can to stop the exploitation of migrant workers and to protect those who are so vulnerable in our society. Members have outlined a variety of approaches to the problem.

I supported the expansion of Europe and frequently travelled to Poland to encourage residents from Newtownabbey's twin town of Rybnik to become involved in the positive features of the European Union. Therefore, I am particularly saddened to witness the adverse and negative aspects, to which Members have referred, experienced by those who are seeking only to improve their quality of life and that of their families.

The Ulster Unionist Party thinks that human trafficking is one of the most pressing problems in western Europe. Recent shocking figures published by the Home Office show that over 4,000 females are victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation; it is impossible to get exact numbers, as Mr Ross said.

Members referred to sweatshops, where children are forced into labour, often for little or no recompense. Criminal gangs are causing misery and distress for thousands of vulnerable women and children in the UK and overseas. We also saw — and it has been referred to — the tragic outcome when the Chinese cockle-pickers in Morecambe Bay were overwhelmed by the tide. That was surely an object lesson in the misery that the exploitation of workers can cause.

The Ulster Unionist Party, therefore, welcomes the UK Government's commitment to ratify the Council of Europe's Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. It is crucial that we send a united message to those who perpetrate such crimes and those who benefit from trafficking, especially with regard to prostitution and child labour. It is not acceptable and will no longer be tolerated by society, and it is good to hear cross-party support for that.

I was, however, somewhat disappointed that the motion did not take on board the issues highlighted in our amendment. There was an opportunity to show a united front against both the exploitation of migrant workers and human trafficking. I, therefore, hope that all Assembly Members will support our amendment.

This issue goes right to the heart of the reason for this Assembly. We are trying to improve life, not only for members of our own indigenous society, but for those who have chosen to come here, whether for economic, educational or social reasons. Many Members will have travelled in eastern Europe and seen the gap between those who, realising that without communism there is no safety net, have struck out and tried to better their situation, and those who remain in those countries, still trapped in abject poverty. Perhaps they can understand the demands of folk from the emerging EU countries to try to get into western Europe, the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

One of the saddest things that I witnessed in the early days of the communist demise was in East Germany, shortly after the Berlin Wall came down. High-flying Mercedes and BMWs could be seen in the town square in Dresden, but people were running around with hardly enough to eat and with difficulty in finding employment once the safety net had been removed. The warnings were almost visible.

Look at Czechoslovakia. Prague, a jewel in the European crown, has been turned over completely to tourism of the lowest kind. That city and its people looked forward to the benefits of Europe, but we did not deliver them. As I said earlier, the same situation exists in Poland. Are we going to see that process repeated here in Northern Ireland, where folk come for the very best of reasons, then find that they are exploited — sometimes by their own countrymen?

The Member opposite referred to the Irish diaspora —

Mr Speaker: Time is almost up.

Mr K Robinson: Remember who exploited the Irish when they went abroad and during the famine? It was their own people.

Mrs Long: I thank Dolores Kelly for bringing two very important issues to the Assembly. They are separate issues, but they have a common thread. In both the exploitation of migrant labour and the growth of human trafficking, we are dealing with the abuse of human rights and dignity.

I also thank her for accepting the Alliance Party's amendment, which seeks only to stress the positive aspects of migration and the role of this Assembly in tackling the abuse of people. Several Members, including Martina Anderson, highlighted the positive impact of migration and the benefits sought for our own community as people have migrated to other places — whether to

America, Australia or any other country — settled and made a well-recognised, valuable contribution. It would be a shame if we felt that there were no benefits to be sought here from inward migration.

Mrs Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Molloy and Ms Anderson all identified a key fact: it is the lack of proper planning and enforcement of decent standards of treatment that leads to overstressed services, community tension, and the inhumane treatment of those who come to our shores seeking work. Migration itself does not cause problems, but not planning properly for it does, and that must be addressed.

Both Ms Lo and Alastair Ross recognised that many women and children are trafficked into our society for sexual exploitation. The focus must be on criminalising the traffickers and the abusers from the local community, not the victims of the abuse who have been trafficked. Although I recognise Mr Spratt's point on the importance of criminalising those people, it is difficult for women who have been trafficked to feel confident in approaching the authorities if they know that immediate deportation is all that will happen. As a society, we must recognise that when women are trafficked to Northern Ireland and are abused by Northern Ireland people, we have created victims for whom we have a moral obligation.

We must take seriously our roles and responsibilities for dealing with those victims and with the consequences of their being abused.

Alan McFarland said, rightly, that issues of dignity and morality are involved, both for the individual and for society. However, he expressed concerns about the 1990 United Nations Migrant Rights Convention and people being able to stay in Northern Ireland when no longer working. One cannot have it both ways. We do not bring workers to Northern Ireland; we bring people. We bring families. We bring people who have emotions, relationships, and connections to a local community. They may work here for a period, marry into the local community and build a new life for themselves. It is not as simple as saying that when the job goes, the person goes with it. That would be a huge abuse of human dignity.

We need to look at long-term planning. I accept entirely what the Minister said: the UK and the Republic of Ireland have been good at opening their doors. However, the message that they are sending out is that they want not simply to close the doors when migration is no longer necessary, but to force back out through the doors people whom they previously welcomed. When times get tough, we have to be responsible in how we treat those whom we have invited into our society. If they contribute to the boom, surely they should be looked after in the hard times. We need to be realistic about that.

We also need to look at how that affects those, for example, whose employment rights are being abused. If they feel that raising objections with their employer will simply get them sacked and put them in breach of their conditions of entry, where is their motivation to blow the whistle on their exploiters? They have to know that if they lose their jobs for speaking out and standing up to abuse, they will not be repatriated without recompense from the society into which they have been trafficked.

Robin Newton, rightly, said that we must look not only at the exploitation of people in our community, but at how we exploit those in their home countries. The Assembly has to be conscious of that. I hope that the Assembly will support our amendment and that it will recognise that when we benefit from inviting people to come and work in Northern Ireland, we take on a responsibility. We should be planning for that and committing ourselves to it, not shirking it.

Mr Dallat: Some of the best films end where they began. In order to clear up confusion, I will repeat what my colleague Dolores Kelly said about migrants' rights:

"The convention on migrants' rights is one of the core international human rights treaties. It is the first international instrument to provide specific recognition of the fundamental human rights of all migrant workers and their families. It aims at unifying the international legal standards of protection for migrant workers and protects the rights of all migrants. The convention does not create any new rights for migrant workers; it simply ensures that migrant workers and their families enjoy the same human rights, equality of treatment, and working and life conditions as we do as nationals."

How could anyone possibly disagree with that? I do not think that it is possible, yet it is purely because some migrant workers did not have those rights that they have ended up in desperate conditions. One young girl in my town, who was injured in an industrial accident last July, is being supported by another Polish family with no rights or money. We do not have to look too far into the past to know what could have happened if there had been no support.

I am pleased that the Minister is here, and I understand that he may have been speaking for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. I would have been much happier had they been here. We would, perhaps, have accepted a junior Minister, and I acknowledge that Ian Junior was here for 10 minutes.

Dolores Kelly referred to Martin Luther King. For those of us who are following the primary elections in America and remember the days of John F Kennedy, the first time a white person reached out to a black person was deeply emotional. It is etched on the minds of older people to this day.

Dolores Kelly mentioned the dangers of extremism, referring to the British National Party, which tried hard

to put down roots here and, indeed, attacked members of the migrant community in my constituency.

12.30 pm

We must send out a clear message about the problem of exploitation and abuse. We must also be clear about the importance of the rights of individuals and families, and about ending human trafficking. Anna Lo, who has established herself as a champion of the human rights of immigrants, spoke eloquently of the problem. I accept that she is an authority on the need for Members to support the motion as amended by the Alliance Party's amendment.

It is shameful that Britain and Ireland have not signed the United Nations convention, which they should have done. Trafficking is violence of the worst kind against human beings — *[Laughter.]* I assure Mr Weir that trafficking is a serious matter — I am pleased that the PSNI has a team that is working to establish the extent of the problem.

Alan McFarland explained why the Ulster Unionist Party could not support the Alliance Party's amendment. The SDLP regrets that, but it welcomes his support for the Council of Europe Convention on Action against the Trafficking in Human Beings. Jimmy Spratt referred to the slave trade. Indeed, there is evidence that the slave trade featured prominently at one stage in Belfast. We would certainly not wish to see that repeated. I agree with a zero-tolerance approach to the vice trade.

Francie Molloy also spoke from a position of strength, given the many migrant workers who are based in his constituency. He talked, in particular, about welfare, housing and houses in multiple occupation, and the need for legislation. Robin Newton made a forceful point about the need for people to be mindful that, when they move their labour abroad, they do not, in fact, stop contributing to the problem. He also had a go at bargain hunters, who I hope are listening. I also hope that when we next go in search of a bargain, we remember that it may be the product of human suffering.

Martina Anderson focused on Irish people. We must accept that, sometimes, Irish people who chose to live abroad were not good to their own people. That is also true of some of the migrant workers who have established positions of power. We must not forget that. The old adage, put a beggar on horseback and he will trot to hell, was quoted to me when I spoke to older people from the Irish community who were living in America. Therefore, we must be mindful of that history.

David Simpson represents a constituency that has 9,500 migrant workers, which he claimed is the greatest number in any constituency. I was disappointed to hear him focusing on begging. That is not associated purely with migrant workers. It would be better to find out why people are begging, rather than stigmatise and

label them. More positively, he mentioned the need to end the smuggling of young girls for prostitution.

Alastair Ross spoke about agency workers, protection rackets and exploitation. He called for strengthening the law on prostitution. I was pleased that he also mentioned the role of Women's Aid, an organisation that is an authority on the abuse of migrant women and women here at home.

Sir Reg Empey, in his official position as the Minister for Employment and Learning, covered a lot of positive issues, but I am sorry that he feels unable to support the motion as amended.

It has been a good debate, and the Assembly has acknowledged the need to ensure that migrant workers and agency workers are protected. It is a pity that we will divide on the issue, but I hope that, at some time in the future, the House will be united and speak with one voice and see everyone in Northern Ireland as entirely equal in all respects. There should be no need to shy away from a piece of law simply to deprive someone of resources that they may need.

I return to the point that Martina Anderson made: the New World often forgets that the Irish built it. Irish people built the tunnels in Britain and the skyscrapers in America. However, even today, they cannot get the right to come and go as they should. The Irish people have enough history behind them to know not to do the same thing to the people who are building this economy. We must stop using the term "migrant workers"; we must start calling those people the "new Irish". They have done everything possible to blend into our community, so we must ask ourselves what we are doing. I did my little bit when I went to Poland over Christmas, and I did not see any deterioration in the city of Krakow. I saw a vibrant, youthful city that was not spoiled by the sort of cheap tourism that was referred to earlier. We are all part of a large European Union: let us live in it as brothers; let us treat one another as equals.

Mr 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 Questions on the amendments and the motion will be put then.

The sitting was suspended at 12.37 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —
2.00 pm

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 40; Noes 46.

AYES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan,
Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley,
Mr Brady, Mr Burns, Mr W Clarke, Mr Dallat,
Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Dr Farry, Mr Gallagher,
Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo,
Mrs Long, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Ms J McCann,
Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell,
Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone,
Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin,
Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Mr Neeson, Ms Ni Chuilín,
Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey, Ms Ruane.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Lo and Mrs Long.

NOES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne,
Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain,
Mr Cree, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott,
Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Mr Gardiner,
Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr McCallister,
Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea,
Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland,
Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan,
Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr,
Rev Dr Ian Paisley, 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 McCallister and Miss
McIlveen.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put, That amendment No 2 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 46; Noes 42.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne,
Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain,
Mr Cree, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott,
Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton,
Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland,
Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea,
Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey,
Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow,
Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr,
Rev Dr Ian Paisley, 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 Ayes: Mr McCallister and Miss
McIlveen.

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 W Clarke,
Mr Dallat, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Dr Farry,
Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly,
Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey,
Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney,
Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone,
Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin,
Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Mr Neeson, Ms Ni Chuilín,
Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey, Ms Ruane,
Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr D Bradley and Mrs D Kelly.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly urges the Executive to take all necessary
measures to address both the exploitation of migrant labour and
human trafficking; and welcomes the commitment by the United
Kingdom Government to ratify the 2005 Council of Europe
Convention on Action against the Trafficking in Human Beings.

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

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Post-primary Education in County Fermanagh

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the Member who tabled the Adjournment debate will have 15 minutes in which to speak, and that all other Members will have nine minutes in which to speak.

Lord Morrow: Education in County Fermanagh is a very vexed subject, and it is important that it be debated in this House.

As an Assembly Member for the constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, I would like the House to acknowledge that the education of our children is vital. I suspect that many, if not all, Members will acknowledge that fact. After all, when we talk about our children, we talk about the future generation who will inherit our new Northern Ireland. It is our duty to ensure that they are adequately prepared for that task. If proper preparation is not made for that journey and the responsibility that it entails, it will ultimately reflect on those who make the decisions today.

There must be a framework for education that is fit for purpose and facilitates an effective transition from primary, through post-primary, to third-level education and prospective employment. I place on record my thanks to the Business Committee for agreeing to this debate, because it could not be more timely.

Tony Blair declared that his foundation cornerstones were “education, education, education”, which became his mantra when he was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Alas, County Fermanagh is not on the receiving end of such a mantra. Instead, it is handed obfuscation, obfuscation and more obfuscation.

Under direct rule, much in Northern Ireland was allowed to drift. Sadly, under devolution, it seems that education is also drifting, particularly education in County Fermanagh. The restoration of devolution promised the people of Northern Ireland a better future. I have not given up hope of that, but some Members must take cognisance of their responsibilities.

I am glad that the Minister is in her place today, and I take some comfort from that. However, before the debate goes much further, I say to the Minister, and to anyone else who wants to listen, that every parent, politician and teacher wants only the best for our children. We want them to develop their academic and vocational

life, and their social and communication skills. That, undoubtedly is, or should be, everyone’s aim.

Matters may become contentious at this point. From reading the Hansard report of the Education Committee’s meeting on Thursday 31 January — and if I have correctly interpreted media reports — relations between the Minister and the majority of the Committee are, to say the least, disharmonious. In fact, relations seem to be disintegrating daily. The only casualty of that will be the education of our children.

While it was being reported in some quarters that the Minister was neglecting her Committee and the opinions and challenges that it brings to her, she was neatly sidestepping her duties in the Fermanagh area, particularly in relation to a pre-consultation document. That almost leads me to say that Fermanagh has been forgotten, but, in fact, it has been completely ignored. Concerns raised some time ago have been left to stagnate, resulting in a crisis, or near crisis. I realise that “crisis” is a particularly strong word to use, but it is the only word that adequately describes the state of play of education in County Fermanagh.

I asked the Minister for her comments on a Western Education and Library Board document that was produced in County Fermanagh. It is entitled, ‘Post-Primary Education in Co Fermanagh’, and is described as a pre-consultation document on the future of controlled/voluntary education in County Fermanagh. With a brush of her hand, the Minister nonchalantly said that it was nothing to do with her and that she was not interested. That is powerful — the Minister of Education is not interested in a document on education.

I thought that education was her remit and that she would be involved in all aspects of education and take her role seriously — but that is not the case. According to the Minister, it is not her document, has nothing to do with her Department, and she could not care a less about it. That is regrettable.

This piece of paper or booklet — whatever terminology one wants to use — has proved controversial. Indeed, it is so controversial that it has angered one school to the point of publicly shredding it in order to send a stern message to its authors — the Western Education and Library Board.

2.30 pm

It is becoming something of an unwanted document as it appears that no one wants to take ownership of it, even though the foreword was signed by the chairman and the chief executive of the Western Education and Library Board. However, at several discussion evenings the chief executive emphatically denied responsibility for the document.

If it does not belong to the Western Education and Library Board, and, as the Minister of Education has

disowned it and does not want to hear about it, who is responsible for taking ownership and acting upon it?

The document had to be drafted, printed and paid for. After several attempts, and after requesting information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, we ascertained where it originated. Costs were authorised and by 2007 stood at the princely sum of £6,703. That includes £4,790 for the printing of 9,300 copies of the document, £1,176 for working meetings and seminars at various venues, £527 in travel costs for those attending the meetings and £210 for the delivery of the document. That is a great deal of money, and it is time that responsibility was assumed for it.

Oddly enough, it appears that the Western Education and Library Board is in fact the author. Therefore, I assume that it will take responsibility, although that has not come out loud and clear in any meetings that have taken place.

The Western Education and Library Board held public meetings to hard-sell the document, and the chief executive claimed he would answer questions and take criticisms. However, sadly, just like the Minister of Education today, that proved difficult.

One of the most significant matters raised at the meetings concerned the shambolic situation at Devenish College. Boards of governors at several schools — and I am thinking specifically of the Duke of Westminster High School, now the Kesh campus — were given an undertaking that a new state-of-the-art facility would be built.

The governors reluctantly took the decision to close the school on the strength of the board's assurance guaranteeing a new school. They accepted that until the new school was built, children would be taught in what was described as good-quality, temporary accommodation. However, children are still in that temporary accommodation five years later. That cannot be a long-term solution. How long is temporary? How long can this go on for?

Such conditions are unacceptable, in spite of the high levels of teaching and professionalism. Were it not for the professionalism of staff and those around them, the situation would be much worse. The staff have been put in an impossible position.

The chief executive of the Western Education and Library Board recently said that although he is sympathetic, the Minister of Education had not released the funds to build the new Devenish College, even though funds were allocated and cleared some years ago by the direct rule Minister of Education, Maria Eagle.

The present Minister of Education should tell us why that has been delayed. Will she tell the House, at the foot of this debate, why she refuses to release the funds to build that much-needed school?

I have no doubt that Members will wait for an answer with baited breath. However, rather than prejudge the answer, we will listen intently to what the Minister has to say. Does she appreciate the scale of the crisis in Fermanagh? We want her to address that crisis directly, instead of putting it off, as has happened in the past.

Will the Minister explain why the chief executive of the Western Education and Library Board does not appear to be taking public opinion on board? Is he acting on her direction or his own? What is going on? Parents in Fermanagh are confused and concerned about what is happening to the future of their children's education. Who is really in charge? If the Minister answers that question, and no other, she will have done us all a service.

The general feeling among parents in Fermanagh is that the Western Education and Library Board document should be shelved. One parent has drawn attention to the blatant plagiarism in the options set out in the document, which were copied verbatim from a consultation exercise by the Catholic-maintained sector. That sector had seven years to get to grips with the issues involved, whereas the controlled and voluntary sectors had just seven months, which is entirely inappropriate.

Parents in Fermanagh are not unwilling to engage — they want to be, and must be allowed to be, involved in the education of their children. They are not afraid of change. However, change must be introduced in a constructive, cohesive and proper manner. The process behind the document is flawed, not least because willingness to take ownership of its inception is causing much confusion. I look forward to hearing what other Members say on this important issue and I thank the House for listening to me.

Mr Deputy Speaker: All other Members who speak will have seven minutes, not nine as was previously advised.

Mr Elliott: I congratulate and thank Lord Morrow for securing an Adjournment debate on a very important topic for the people of Fermanagh. I am pleased that there has been reference to education in general in County Fermanagh rather than just post-primary education, because one of my main concerns is the primary school estate in County Fermanagh.

Over the years, there has been an erosion of the primary-school estate in Fermanagh; some small rural schools have been closed, and others have been, almost purposely, run down with a view to closure.

Primary schools, particularly those in small rural areas, are vital to the communities they serve. Some Members will not recognise place names such as Drumskinny, Teemore and Stragowna, in which there were small schools at the heart of the community which provided a service, as well as an education, for local young people. All of those schools have closed,

which leaves a big void in those areas. A number of years ago, the primary schools in Stragowna and Teemore had the option to amalgamate. Unfortunately, agreement could not be reached, and now both schools are closed, which has left a huge void in the area on the west side of Lough Erne that will probably never be filled again by a controlled-primary school.

I am pleased that the Minister is here to listen to the concerns. I want an assurance from the Minister that maintenance of controlled primary schools will be secured in County Fermanagh. A further erosion of those primary schools would mean that pupils as young as four years of age would have to travel up to 22 miles to their nearest primary school.

An option given in 'Post-Primary Education in Co Fermanagh' is a proposal to close five primary schools in one area to facilitate a school for four- to 14-year-old pupils in the Lisnaskea area. I am not aware of any other area in County Fermanagh, or in Northern Ireland, that has a four- to 14-year-old school system — although the Minister may tell me differently. How would that system work in an area that would be singled out in the county? How would a four- to 14-year-old school system work in one part of the county when a similar system did not operate in the rest of the county?

Those five primary schools were not even consulted or told that their closure was an option until a couple of weeks before the pre-consultation document was due for release. It is a total disgrace that that absolutely ridiculous situation was allowed to happen.

Lord Morrow also referred to the situation of Devenish College. Minister Foster, who was an MLA at the time, and I fought a hard campaign to secure the Duke of Westminster site in Kesh until the new Devenish College was built, and we were given promises and clear assurances on the matter. The board of governors of the then Duke of Westminster High School were fed a pup; they were given inaccurate information. The board has it in writing that Devenish College would have a newbuild in 2008. It is now 2008, and there is no sign of progress on that school.

In the past few months, I requested a meeting with the Minister to discuss progress on Devenish College to try to develop it, and, on two occasions, she has refused. I want work to start on that school without any further delay. I commend the work of the teachers and staff. Pupils and parents say that the teachers and the school's academic progress are excellent. They are more than happy with the school's ability. However, the school facilities are antiquated, and there is a desperate need for new facilities. I ask for that to be progressed as soon as possible.

The main four post-primary schools detailed in the pre-consultation document are all fighting for their individual issues, and I see merit in all their points.

However, instead of the Western Education and Library Board or the Department of Education trying to steam-roller the process through, there is now an onus on the four schools to work together. They had started that process, but the pre-consultation document was published before they could continue it. However, the onus is now on those schools to continue that process and to find a way forward. That process must be conducted outside the Western Education and Library Board, otherwise they may not find the process easy.

The pre-consultation document was premature and was published before the Assembly and the Minister come to a final decision on post-primary education after the announcement to abolish the 11-plus. It has been said that the document should be taken off the table and scrapped, but perhaps it has gone too far. It may be an option to allow the document to take its course, and let the people have their say, and it may be got rid of in that way.

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

2.45 pm

Mr Gallagher: I, too, thank Lord Morrow for raising this issue, which concerns the future of post-primary education. However, the future of primary education in County Fermanagh is implicit in that, because of the arrangements for feeder schools, if nothing else. The issue is more prominent on the controlled side than on the maintained side, but that is the case only for now. Among the next steps on the way forward, there will be a wider debate on the future of all post-primary schools in County Fermanagh.

I agree entirely with Tom Elliott in relation to the site of the controlled school at Kesh. At least now we can take the matter forward with an Assembly to provide transparency and accountability. I hope that all Members will endeavour to ensure that, no matter what authorities are involved, or whatever side of the divide they come from, the Assembly will see to it that they are held to any commitments that they might make.

The former Devenish College campus at Kesh, which has been closed for a couple of years, is the closest controlled post-primary school to where I live. I go past it every day as I travel to the Assembly. For anyone who does not know that school, its recent history provides a sad commentary on the way in which post-primary education is being handled.

As Members will know, Fermanagh is a predominantly rural area, and it has a much higher proportion of small schools than any other area in Northern Ireland. It is very encouraging to see that Members from other constituencies are attending this debate. This battle is important, because what happens in Fermanagh will filter down to rural communities and affect the future of rural schools everywhere.

An increasing threat hangs over the future of many of Fermanagh's primary and post-primary schools. Due to curriculum changes, falling enrolments, the rationalisation of schools and other factors that, lately, have been accelerating rapidly, small schools are in serious danger of closure. Schools in Fermanagh are particularly vulnerable. Many people, across the entire community in Fermanagh, think that the Department and others involved in education simply no longer see a place for small schools.

Current economic thinking goes way beyond education, but it is creeping into that area as well. It is considered to be cheaper to bus thousands of children to schools in large towns — in Fermanagh, that means Enniskillen — to educate them. That seems to be the way forward. When fuel prices are rocketing, there is traffic chaos and congestion in Enniskillen and many other towns, and there is growing concern about carbon emissions, surely the argument that small schools are wasteful is flawed.

What about the burden of a 3-hour bus journey for primary-school children? Some 4- or 5-year-old children have to leave home at 7.00 am, or some unearthly hour — as do some post-primary-school children — and they do not return until 5.00 pm or 6.00 pm. What about the costs of that? What about the implications for parents in rural areas, many of whom must travel for hours to work in another direction after leaving their children to school?

The needs of rural communities, especially those in Fermanagh, are not getting a fair hearing.

The present policy on closures will inevitably leave communities in the county more isolated. People will begin to move away, and the rural areas will be denuded even further.

The review of public administration, which recommends one health board, one education board and fewer councils, exemplifies the growing trend towards centralisation. That trend can also be seen in Invest Northern Ireland, which, according to its latest policy, wants to centralise all its operations to Belfast and Derry.

It is time that the issue is taken seriously. Schools can provide support and stability in rural areas. I taught in a post-primary school in Fermanagh, and I know that all the schools there have excellent educational records. That is borne out in the reports of the Education and Training Inspectorate. The records of all those schools are available to anyone who wants to see them. The schools have achieved high standards, maintained excellence, tackled underachievement, raised the self-esteem of pupils, increased pride in local communities, and have given them a strong sense of identity. Despite the rapidly changing environment in which those schools operate, they have an excellent record in preparing

pupils for life and work and in building on their personal and social development. They now face an uncertain future, and that is not good enough.

Members may be critical of this debate, but it gives parents an opportunity to get involved and to make known their views. It is important that they do so. I welcome the Minister's presence in the Chamber.

I do not advocate that all schools remain open. We live in the real world; however, the Department needs to recognise the difficulties of rural communities and make an explicit commitment to children.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Your time is up, Mr Gallagher.

Dr Farry: I congratulate Lord Morrow on securing the debate. Members may wonder why an Alliance Member for North Down wants to contribute to an Adjournment debate on post-primary education in County Fermanagh. I have two reasons for speaking: first, the topic is of importance across Northern Ireland, though perhaps for reasons that are slightly different to those so far mentioned; and secondly, I claim substantial roots in Fermanagh, given that both my parents were born, bred and educated in rural and urban schools in the county. Indeed, many members of my family still reside there.

I view the topic from a slightly different perspective to that of Members who have spoken so far. I, too, am critical of the document, though for reasons other than those that have been advanced already.

We must recognise that there is a crisis in the education system in Northern Ireland, particularly in County Fermanagh. There are 50,000 empty school places, and that may rise to 80,000 by 2012. Many schools have low enrolment rates. That has implications for the public purse and for the education of children. Where there are many small schools, a disproportionate amount of available funds is inevitably drawn into looking after buildings, heating and other overheads. That means that those funds cannot be spread as evenly as would have been possible if schools were larger. That has financial implications for the ability to invest in the education and welfare of those children who attend small schools.

In County Fermanagh, a huge opportunity has been missed. There is uncertainty in the education system, both with respect to post-primary education and the transfer system and to a lack of policy on sustainable schools. Through the education and library boards, the controlled sector is making decisions in a vacuum, while, in a separate sector, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) makes decisions in a similar fashion.

The implications of that are obvious. We must have proper area planning and collaboration between sectors

and schools to provide a modern, efficient, up-to-date schools estate that will serve the interests of children everywhere.

I fear that that is not what exists at present. There are two parallel processes, each of which does its own thing, and unless those processes are brought together, there will not be a sufficiently robust outcome. If Members consider the report that was commissioned under Sir George Bain —

Mr Elliott: Is the Member happy for there to be collaboration between different sectors? His party advocates that there should be an integrated sector only.

Dr Farry: Mr Elliott will be aware that the Alliance Party's preferred option is integrated education, because it believes that that sector offers the most efficient and effective way of educating young people. However, my party recognises that the sectors in Northern Ireland will persist for many years, and we must deal with that reality. Integrated education will probably be a viable option for only a small proportion of children during years to come. Therefore there must be much greater emphasis on area planning and on collaboration between sectors and schools.

Mr Storey: With regard to the point that was made by the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Mr Elliott, can Dr Farry clarify how he views the controlled sector? Is it integrated or is it on the fringes — the same as the other sectors, each of which has its own ethos? How would he describe the controlled sector?

Dr Farry: I am glad that the Member raised that point. The controlled sector has open enrolment: its schools are open to all sections of the community. However, its ethos does not recognise the diversity that exists in Northern Ireland. Inevitably, therefore, people from different backgrounds may find that the controlled sector does not provide the kind of education that they wish their children to have. I draw a contrast with the integrated education system, which tries to cater for that diversity.

However, controlled schools may be an option for many people. Indeed, several voluntary grammar schools in Northern Ireland have a balanced educational intake. In the same way, schools in the Catholic maintained sector draw students from right across the community, such as St Malachy's Primary School, St Comgall's Primary School and St Columbanus' College in my constituency. Fundamentally, however, they retain a Catholic ethos. That is understood. The Catholic Church wants that to persist.

However, I have taken on board the Member's remarks. The Alliance Party is wary of comments that have been attributed to the Education Minister with regard to community background's potentially being a factor in determining admissions criteria for post-primary education. The Alliance Party believes that

that would encourage a situation in which controlled schools will be de facto for Protestants and Catholic-maintained schools will be de facto only for Catholics or that people from either religious background will be given preference in the respective sector. That would be a retrospective step away from where progress should be made.

It is important to recognise that Fermanagh is perhaps the most rural part of Northern Ireland and that it is under huge pressures. I fully take on board Mr Gallagher's comment that a situation in which children must travel on buses for long periods, and the effect that that will have on the environment, must be avoided, as should the over-centralisation of provision into Enniskillen. Surely the solution is that if sectors work with one another, there is a greater chance of preserving some form of provision in local communities, whether it is at primary or secondary level. Towns such as Irvinestown and Lisnaskea are prime examples of places that can sustain secondary provision. If the Assembly is imaginative, it can work towards those solutions.

A hierarchy of provision is needed. The options that were identified by Professor Bain, such as integrated schools, shared campuses and better collaboration between sectors, must be considered. Until there is clarity from the Minister on post-primary education and a sustainable schools policy, decisions on those matters will be taken in a vacuum. That will be a huge missed opportunity. I appeal to the Minister for clarity on those issues so that crucial decisions can be made in the proper framework.

Mrs Foster: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate, which was secured by my good friend and colleague Lord Morrow. I want to make it clear that I am speaking as an Assembly Member and not as a Minister. I also want to declare an interest insofar as I have three children, who, I hope, will all progress through post-primary education in Fermanagh; that is, if the schools in the area can be sustained.

As my friend Lord Morrow said, there have been conflicting claims about the genesis of the report. However, whatever the murkiness of its origins, one thing is certain: the entire community in County Fermanagh is opposed to the contents of the pre-consultation document.

That is no surprise to me when one considers the five options that have been proposed in that document.

3.00 pm

The first option is to maintain the status quo, which is a pejorative term. It is the only option that is open to people, because the other four options are so wrong and bad for the people of County Fermanagh. Tom Elliott talked about option B, which envisages the closure of all primary schools in south-east Fermanagh and the transfer of all those pupils to a campus at Lisnaskea

High School. That school would then include children from four to 14 years of age. It is something that was unheard of by the community, and by the principals of those primary schools until a week before the document was published. That option is totally and utterly rejected by the community.

The closing of Lisnaskea High School is envisaged in options C, D and E, with the placing of all post-primary education in Enniskillen town. Colleagues have commented on the infrastructure problems that would be associated with such a move. There would also be transport problems. The Western Education and Library Board has the highest transport costs of any board in Northern Ireland, and those costs are likely to be tripled if any of those options are adopted. It also means that children in County Fermanagh will have no choice about where they go to school. The document informs us that the children will go to school in Enniskillen if option C, D or E is chosen. Where is the equality in that for my children, who live in a rural area, if they have to go to Enniskillen for post-primary education?

The proposals are so limited and closed that many people, including myself, believe that the board has a preferred outcome for the pre-consultation. That is what most people in County Fermanagh think. It is a closed and blinkered pre-consultation, based on a premise that the equation is: small school equals bad school. I certainly do not accept that. As far as I am concerned, the premise is flawed. In England, the view is that the working-out of that premise has gone wrong. People there are moving in the opposite direction, and we need to have cognisance of that.

I refer to Stephen Farry's remarks when I say that the document takes no account of sharing across sectors or looking at area planning. There were three meetings to consider the pre-consultation document. Therefore, he should know that the post-primary integrated sector, the new South West College and the maintained sector were not consulted. I know that the maintained sector is concerned about all of those matters. Its representatives came to see me to discuss the fact that we seem to be moving along two parallel lines. There is no recognition of a shared future in the document. That is something that all Members should be concerned about and have cognisance of.

The document does not take into account twenty-first century facilities such as IT, which would enable pupils to remain in Lisnaskea and share IT facilities with other campuses. The document presents a closed and blinkered view. It is littered with references to closures, which is disappointing. We should think of the future and look for opportunities in County Fermanagh, and we should consider the benefits of the small schools there. The document is constructed on a negative view of demography that suggests that the population in County Fermanagh is getting smaller. In fact, I do not

know why they do not simply close all of the schools in County Fermanagh and bus all of the pupils up to Belfast. *[Interruption.]* Do not say that that is a good idea.

Mr Storey: What about the carbon footprint?

Mrs Foster: Absolutely; the carbon footprint is important.

It is important to remember that small schools are not just about statistics, education and results. They are also about a way of life for a lot of children, a matter to which Tommy Gallagher referred. It is about their countryside identity and about wanting to be at home after school instead of spending hours on buses. It is disgraceful that the Western Education and Library Board has not taken cognisance of what happened in Kesh and the disastrous results of pushing children out of the local school — where they had enjoyed good relations and were well looked after — into a situation in which they are being bullied. That is no reflection on the school because that all happened outside of the grounds. Children from the Kesh area have had behavioural problems since they were pushed into the big school in Enniskillen. They feel that they are inferior because they are not from the town.

It may sound strange to some Members that Enniskillen should be seen as an urban metropolis, but if you live in the far reaches of County Fermanagh it is quite a change to come to Enniskillen for your schooling. It is disappointing that the board has not learned from the Kesh experience.

It is no surprise that Fermanagh District Council, the Fermanagh branch of the Ulster Farmers' Union, the Chamber of Commerce in Lisnaskea and County Fermanagh Grand Orange Lodge have been among those who have rejected the process in County Fermanagh. Pressure groups, such as FREE and Impact, have been formed. Most significantly, after the Committee for Education heard evidence from the board and the groups involved, it asked for the document to be pulled and started again. I am glad that some members of that Committee are here. There is no difficulty in having a discussion about post-primary education in County Fermanagh, but this document makes the issue blinkered and means that post-primary education will not work for the good of children in County Fermanagh.

The Minister will be coming to the House in the near future with her ideas for area planning. Surely, given all that I have said, the pre-consultation document conflicts with any area planning documents that she might bring forward. I urge the Minister to ask the board to withdraw the process. I ask her to take the lead with the document, rather than doing nothing about it.

Mr Storey: I thank Lord Morrow for securing this debate. Some might ask what interest I have in education in County Fermanagh. I am a member of the Education Committee, but, lest it be used against me, I stress that

I am not speaking on behalf of that Committee. I am speaking as a Member of the Assembly with an interest in education.

Mr Weir: Does the Member agree that it is disappointing that, although the Alliance Party managed to provide a spokesperson in this debate from the far-flung constituency of North Down, which is the farthest possible point from Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and one Member called Michelle has appeared for the debate, another Member of the same name — Michelle Gildernew, the MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone — not only has not contributed to, but has not even shown up for, a debate on an issue that vitally affects her constituency?

Mr Storey: That is a reflection on that Member, and it is for that Member to explain that to her constituents.

I welcome the fact that the Minister of Education is in the House. I assure her that I am not here as a bully. Assertions were made the other day that some of us were bullies, but I am not the school bully. Equally, I assure the Minister that we will not be bullied.

The issue of education in County Fermanagh is relevant to us all, because it gives an indication of how the education system has become so divided. As other Members have said, rather than having a coherent strategy and policy, everyone is doing their own thing. It seems that the Minister is allowing that to happen. Therefore, I welcome the fact that the debate has been secured.

Education in Northern Ireland faces a crisis, but people in County Fermanagh are additionally burdened on top of a confusing and distracted system. I am appalled to hear how funds that were secured by a direct rule Minister have still not been released for Devenish College, which is in desperate need of a new building. Prefabs are sturdy and great, but they are no substitute for a new building, and they are not a long-term solution. Parents should not have been guaranteed a new school, because that allowed the board of governors to make the reluctant decision to close schools when a new facility was not built. That remains the case five years later. The Minister has taken her eye off the ball on that issue. When will the funds be released?

She has often reminded us that she is the Minister of Education. In the Minister's statement to the House on 4 December 2007, she reminded us that she is the Minister for all children. She also informed us that equality is her watchword, but what equality is there for children in County Fermanagh in how the process is being conducted and how she is overseeing it?

I do not want the Minister to shift the blame, as she did in the classroom assistants' dispute, when she said that it was not she who took the decision but the boards. I do not want the Minister to come to the House today and abdicate her responsibilities. She was keen enough

to get the position; therefore, she should be keen enough to accept the responsibility. She would have been keen enough had there been a call for the establishment of another sector in County Fermanagh, which the Minister has declared a preference for — namely, the Irish-medium sector.

The Minister's view seems to be that my comments are an attack on the Irish-medium sector; they are not. The Irish-medium sector has a right to educate just as I, as a parent, have a right to have my children educated in the medium of my choice. However, with choice comes responsibility. To date, the Minister has released funding for the Irish-medium sector. She has released further funding for the teaching of Irish and Spanish in schools, yet a problem persists in County Fermanagh that requires funding.

With regard to area-based planning, which is in the proposed scope of the review of public administration education legislation, the Department has set out the timetable under which the first and second Bills will be brought forward. If the Minister wants to be all-inclusive and prove that she is for equality and does not want the maintained sector to get one over on the controlled sector or the Irish-medium sector to be ahead of any other sector, those issues should be dealt with in the first draft of the first Bill. That is also the case if she tells us that area-based planning is a vital building block. The Minister will make a statement on those issues some time this month.

However, the consultation document and the outline of the second Bill tell us that area-based planning will not be addressed until the second Bill has been introduced. Therefore, all the other arrangements must be put in place before we get to the nub of the issue, which is area-based planning. Will the Minister give —

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

Mr Storey: Will the Minister assure the House that area-based planning will be addressed in the first Bill?

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend the Western Education and Library Board and the six schools involved in the working group for exploring options that might best meet the educational needs of children in the Fermanagh area. Education is facing significant challenges. In order to meet those challenges, school authorities must examine provision to find out how they could provide good-quality educational experiences for the future.

Tá rollaí i scoileanna san earnáil faoi chothabháil, san earnáil rialaithe agus san earnáil dheonach ag titim i gCondae Fhear Manach; ag an am chéanna caithfidh siad freastal ar riachtanais an churaclaim. Caithfidh roinnt de na scoileanna a gcuid saoráidí a nuachóiriú freisin, agus tugann an réamhchomhairliúchán seans dúinn na ceisteanna seo a phlé.

Schools in the maintained, controlled, Irish-medium, integrated and other sectors in Fermanagh are experiencing falling rolls, but at the same time they need to meet curricular requirements.

Some schools also need to modernise their facilities, and there is an opportunity to examine those issues together as proposed by the pre-consultation exercise.

3.15 pm

The pre-consultation document suggests a number of possible options for addressing the challenges faced by the schools. It sets out important and worthy guiding principles that have been agreed by the working group: a high-quality pupil-centred educational experience for all; equality of access and parity of esteem for all educational routes; high quality leadership and management; collaborative working; and the principles underpinning diverse and shared futures. I am sure that Members and the community support the guiding principles.

I will not comment on the options contained in the pre-consultation document. It is a consultation with local communities and schools on the future shape of controlled and voluntary post-primary education in Fermanagh. As the document states, the options identified are not exhaustive, and other options might be put forward during the exercise. I will be interested to hear what transpires.

The Western Education and Library Board does not have a predetermined outcome regarding the pre-consultation process, and the purpose of the document is to give the community the opportunity to shape the future of post-primary provision. The board intends to collate all responses following the end of the consultation on 26 February. The working group of schools and the board will consider the responses before advising on the next stages. In considering the options, the Western board has considered the curriculum changes, the entitlement framework and the Bain Report conclusions on sustainable schools.

I come from a rural community; I know how important it is that children have access to the widest and broadest curriculum possible. Children in rural schools must get the same as children in urban areas. I will ensure that they do.

George Bain did not say that schools below the recommended thresholds must be rationalised. He said that they should be reviewed to see that they continue to provide a high quality of education for all pupils. Decisions on future provision are not made simply on the basis of enrolments, but through the consideration of a range of factors at local level. The consultation provides an opportunity to discuss those issues.

Lord Morrow mentioned Devenish College. The Department has granted approval for a newbuild for that school, and that is stated in the consultation document. Devenish College is also part of the working group

that produced the consultation, and it is identified in the options. We must be clear on the conclusions of the exercise and the way forward in helping to identify the future accommodation needs for the area.

I welcome the debate as part of helping to inform and move forward the modernising of our education system. In my statement to the Assembly on 4 December, I explained that we must develop a more flexible and agile post-primary school system that will take account of the full reform agenda that is already affecting the education system in the North of Ireland.

I also made it clear that I was not advocating a one-size-fits-all system. I am seeking to devise an education system in which all children — and I mean all children — in all sectors will enjoy access to an equal range of high-quality choices at the critical junctures in their educational development, the most significant of which is 14. I make no apology for being the Minister for all children. The way in which young people will access their post-14 pathway will be determined by the planning of education in their local areas.

Following a series of meetings that I held with key education stakeholders before Christmas, my Department is engaged in a further round of meetings with the stakeholders that are aimed at achieving consensus on new post-primary arrangements. I look forward to the Committee for Education reaching consensus and bringing it to me. I have provided the Executive and the Committee for Education with information on developments. I intend to be in a position soon to put to ministerial colleagues an outline of my proposals for transfer after 2010, at which point I will give a further briefing to the Committee for Education and make a statement on progress in the Assembly.

In that context, it is helpful that we are having this debate. There must be more public debate about the transfer arrangements, and I welcome the Commission for Catholic Education's conference in Armagh today. The commission and other key groups in the education sector recognise that our children deserve the best that we can give them, and we can only do that by building a consensus in which children are at the centre of our policy deliberations.

The commission has also identified the challenges brought by change, and I can reassure everyone that there will be a cohesive approach to the many policy initiatives that are being advanced. The changes will be well managed and not for the sake of change.

I welcome the Commission for Catholic Education's focus on social justice for all children and young people.

I appreciate the concerns expressed by some Members about consultation on the post-primary transfer options in County Fermanagh. That, of course, is a matter for the Western Education and Library Board. However, Members should remember that its publication is a pre-consultation document, the assessment of options

is at an early stage, and there will be ample opportunity for the input of local people. The working group's approach is to examine how best to meet the post-primary needs in County Fermanagh.

Area-based planning will be at the heart of my post-primary proposals. Planning and collaboration can ensure that an area's ability to offer a range of pathways is related, and responsive, to individual needs. Some local areas and sectors are already engaged in area-based planning, which is often prompted by demographic change and a desire to provide a wider range of choices. For example, if children in an area are served largely by four schools, two of which select at the age of 11, what are the options? If applicants, parents and schools can agree the best post-14 education route, why could one or two of those four schools not offer mainly academic education for children over the age of 14, alongside two other institutions offering mainly technical and professional post-14 provision? Why could either or both of those mainly academic institutions not be for 14- to 19-year-old pupils? Alternatively, why could such institutions not cater for 11- to 19-year-olds and offer a clear academic pathway for people in the area aged 14 and over? Why should Government make such decisions on their behalf?

The oversubscription of particular institutions by either 11- or 14-year-old children is often raised in the Assembly. However, consider that point on a broader canvas. The North's over-provision is such that nearly all local areas have too many school places.

The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools is also undertaking an examination of the options for the maintained sector in County Fermanagh. Although the remits of the CCMS and the Western Education and Library Board extend only to their respective sectors, both bodies — as well as the integrated sector and Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta, the Irish-medium sector — have indicated a willingness to explore the potential for collaboration and sharing facilities after they have a clearer picture of the local community's views on the options for the future. For the benefit of all children's education in Condae Fhear Manach, I encourage opportunities for greater collaboration and sharing between schools.

Soon, I intend to announce my proposals to explore restructuring requirements in order to deliver my overall vision for post-primary schools. The work in County Fermanagh is in line with that and will feed into wider considerations. I have no doubt that the school authorities will carefully examine all the views expressed by local people.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, your time is up.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat.

Adjourned at 3.24 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 11 February 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Royal Assent

Pensions Bill

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the House that the Pensions Bill has received Royal Assent. The Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 became law on 11 February 2008.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Suspension of Standing Orders

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

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 11 February 2008.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 11 February 2008.

Mr Speaker: As the motion has been agreed, today's sitting may go beyond 7.00 pm, if required.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Spring Supplementary Estimates 2007-08 and Vote on Account 2008-09

Mr Speaker: As these two motions relate to the Supply resolutions, I propose to conduct only one debate, as follows. I shall call the Minister of Finance and Personnel to move the first motion. Debate will then take place on both motions. When all who wish to speak have done so, I shall put the Question on the first motion. I shall then ask the Minister to move the second motion, before putting the Question without further debate.

The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to four hours and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have up to 60 minutes to propose and up to 60 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have 10 minutes. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

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

That this Assembly approves that a total sum, not exceeding £11,851,642,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2008 and that total resources, not exceeding £14,429,839,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2008 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Columns 2(c) and 3(c) of Table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2007-08 that was laid before the Assembly on 31 January 2008.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £5,335,212,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund on account for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2009 and that resources, not exceeding £6,493,908,000, be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2009 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Columns 4 and 6 of Table 1 in the Vote on Account 2008-09 document that was laid before the Assembly on 31 January 2008.
— [*The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson).*]

Mr P Robinson: The motion has been very ably read by the Clerk.

Two weeks ago, on 29 January 2008, the Assembly debated and approved the forward spending plans for the financial years 2008-09 to 2010-11. Today, our main focus is on the final spending proposals for the current financial year, and I am providing Departments and other public bodies with the legislative authority to finalise spend in 2007-08. These motions, although vital, are necessarily technical in nature, and I trust that Members will appreciate the need to set out the position in some detail.

Assembly Members will know that the Budget, which sets spending plans for future years, does not in itself convey cash or resources to Departments or, indeed, give Departments the legal authority to spend cash or use resources. That is done through the Assembly's approval of the Supply resolutions, the Estimates and the associated Budget Bill. I, therefore, move two important Supply resolutions in order to seek the Assembly's approval for the final spending plans for 2007-08 and to provide interim resources and funding for the first few months of 2008-09 in the form of a Vote on Account. To do so, I seek the levels of Supply that are detailed in the resolutions. I do that pursuant to section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which provides for the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make recommendations to the Assembly, leading to cash appropriations from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund.

The first resolution seeks the approval of the Assembly on the issue of a total cash sum not exceeding £11,851,642,000 from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund and the use of total resources not exceeding £14,429,839,000 for 2007-08, as detailed in the spring Supplementary Estimates volume, which was laid before the Assembly on 31 January 2008. The amounts of cash and resources for 2007-08 covered by the first resolution supersede the provision in the Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2007, passed by the Assembly in June 2007.

The second resolution seeks the Assembly's approval on the issue of a cash sum of £5,335,212,000 and resources of £6,493,908,000 on account for the 2008-09 financial year, in advance of the consideration and approval of the 2008-09 Main Estimates and Budget Bill by the Assembly in June 2008.

The resolutions, if approved by the Assembly, will be the precursor to the Budget Bill (Northern Ireland) 2008, which I plan to introduce to the Assembly later today. Subject to Assembly approval and Royal Assent enabling the Bill to become an Act, that will provide the formal legal authority for Departments to incur expenditure for this financial year and the start of 2008-09. In considering this issue, I want to highlight the significance of the Supply resolutions for which approval is being sought today.

Those resolutions, supported by the Estimates, are the cornerstone on which the Assembly not only sets limits on expenditure and use of resources but holds Departments to account for managing and controlling that spending and use of resources within the limits authorised for that particular year.

Details of departmental spending plans are set out in the spring Supplementary Estimates, which are before the Assembly. Members should be familiar with the structure of the document as it reflects the structure of the Main Estimates, which the Assembly considered and approved in June 2007.

Mr Speaker, you will be relieved to hear that I do not propose to go through the document in detail. However, at the end of the debate, I will endeavour to answer questions. Members will appreciate that I may not be able to respond to specific departmental queries in detail. I will ask the relevant Minister to issue a response in such cases.

As this is the first time that this Assembly has dealt with the spring Supplementary Estimates, it may be helpful to take a few minutes to mention some important aspects of the Estimates that differ from the Budget and in-year monitoring rounds. The Supply resolution is the means by which the 2007-08 spring Supplementary Estimates are examined and approved by the Assembly. Members will recall that the Assembly inherited an opening position from direct rule Ministers, which Departments had already used for planning and for the allocation of budgets to health trusts, education and library boards and other public bodies. To maintain financial stability, as was explained to the Assembly in June 2007, the Executive agreed to adopt that opening position.

Through the in-year monitoring rounds — in June, October and December — the Executive were able to bring before the Assembly some adjustments to the position to meet emerging demands. Public expenditure in Northern Ireland is subject to two controls; departmental expenditure limits and annually managed expenditure (AME). The in-year revisions focused on the departmental expenditure limits. Unlike departmental expenditure limits, AME is not subject to firm multi-year limits: it is generally demand-led and includes major areas of expenditure such as social security benefits and public-sector pension payments.

Departmental expenditure limit totals are largely fixed in Treasury spending reviews for a three-year period, whereas AME is revised with the Treasury annually. Forecasts on the amount of AME needed are updated twice-yearly. As we receive an adjustment of estimated requirements for AME from the Treasury, and must return resources that are not required to the Treasury, those items are not included in the scope of the monitoring rounds.

Therefore, although the Executive have not had the ability to directly influence the spring Supplementary Estimates that are before the Assembly today, those Estimates contain revised figures not only for the departmental expenditure limits, which are the main focus of the Assembly, but for AME.

During the in-year monitoring rounds, agreed transfers of resources between Northern Ireland Departments, between Northern Ireland Departments and the Northern Ireland Office, or between Northern Ireland Departments and Whitehall Departments may take place. Due to their routine nature, those technical adjustments are not highlighted to the Assembly during monitoring statements.

The final area worth noting is the difference between the boundaries of Budgets and Estimates. Budgets are at the wider public-sector level, including full resource consumption of non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs), while Estimates are at a departmental level. An Estimate is a summary of a Department's spending proposals, including cash grants to NDPBs, while Budgets include the totality of public-sector expenditure, including NDPBs, health trusts, education and library boards, etc.

I appreciate that all those issues may make it very difficult for Members to readily identify in the spring Supplementary Estimates the reduced requirements surrendered or the additional allocations made during monitoring rounds. However, I assure Members that although Estimates and Budgets have different boundaries, they are both based on the same data source of public expenditure and are reconcilable, and I refer Members to the resource and capital reconciliation tables that are contained in the supplementary tables for each Estimate.

12.15 pm

At this juncture, I will outline briefly the logistical need for the Budget Bill, which is associated with the spring Supplementary Estimates, to be given accelerated passage. The December monitoring round is the final opportunity to seek approval for expenditure changes and to maximise the efficient use of resources before the end of the financial year. The Budget Bill must receive Royal Assent by March, and there must be time for the Assembly to approve the spring Supplementary Estimates by the same month. That would be impossible without accelerated passage. In that regard, I appreciate the Committee for Finance and Personnel's assistance and acknowledge its confirmation that it has been consulted appropriately on the spending plans, which are reflected in the motions, as a basis for using accelerated passage for the related Budget Bill. I am aware of the Committee's keen interest in the issues in question, and I value both its contribution to the

budgetary process and the accountability role that it plays at each stage.

I turn now to first, the in-year monitoring exercises that have occurred under devolution, and secondly, to the new, emerging pressures that we have been able to meet. During the past nine months, Departments surrendered a total of £176 million reduced requirements. As well as reducing the aggressive overcommitment that was inherited from direct rule, we were able to meet £105 million of bids from Departments for their emerging pressures. End-year flexibility (EYF) of £42 million was returned to Departments, and almost £90 million of technical adjustments were processed.

With respect to capital investment, Departments declared reduced requirements of £197 million, and £145 million of bids were met, with Departments carrying forward £78 million of EYF. In addition, many Departments identified slippage in planned capital projects. However, that slippage was managed by my Department, and it will be carried forward for the Executive's use in the future.

That slippage is reflected in the reduction in the net-cash requirement for 2007-08 in the spring Supplementary Estimates. Some of the main allocations during 2007-08 were £4.1 million to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) for animal health; £1.5 million to the Department of the Environment (DOE) in response to the severe flooding in June; £53 million for the Department for Regional Development (DRD) for water and sewerage services, while £45.5 was allocated for various road schemes; the Department of Education (DE) received £2.8 to underpin home-to-school transport and £12 million for classroom assistants; the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) received £15 million to fund the ongoing Civil Service reform programme; the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) received £14 million to address the costs that are associated for the review of public administration, while £3 million was granted for the provision of pharmaceutical drugs; and over £70 million was allocated to the Department for Social Development (DSD) for a range of social housing initiatives, including the co-ownership scheme, the warm homes scheme, and the social housing development programme.

By proactive management, some Departments have also restricted expenditure on lower-priority services in order to release resources to meet higher-priority pressures in their areas of responsibility. Notably, DHSSPS reallocated funding to the suicide prevention strategy and to the provision of a range of community services, including help to address the problems of assessing respite care, particularly for the carers of children.

As Minister of Finance and Personnel, I am always seeking an improvement in the quality of Departments' financial management and a reduction in their underspends. My officials are working actively with Departments to that end. As I said in the Assembly last month, the level of reduced requirements rose dramatically in the December monitoring round. I continue to stress to Departments the need to surrender any slippages or potential underspends early in the new year in order that the Executive can reallocate them at the earliest opportunity and put them to best use.

I am ever mindful that we are dealing with taxpayers' money and that we have a responsibility, as custodians of the public purse, to ensure that that money is managed efficiently and effectively.

Some degree of underspending will be inevitable, but even when it is entirely unavoidable, it is important that we recognise that situation as early in the year as possible and surrender such amounts, so that the Executive have every opportunity to address early pressures.

Although we do not lose the money, tighter controls on access to end-year flexibility mean that funds unspent at the end of this year will need to be the subject of negotiations with the Treasury to agree the future profiling of such underspends. In short, although we do not lose the money, we do lose control of it.

I cannot overemphasise the importance of that matter, and my Executive colleagues and I should robustly review our in-year financial position early in the financial year and identify any potential underspends. Failure to do so, leading to ineffective management of the total Budget and high underspends at the end of the financial year, will incur adverse criticism and demonstrate a failure to deliver the maximum level of public services possible. When taxpayers and ratepayers are being expected to give Government their hard-earned money, it is reasonable for them to expect that their money is not being wasted.

We have just completed a long Budget consultation period, with many bids for additional resources. Getting financial management right in the public sector can make a huge contribution to meeting emerging pressures; getting it wrong is simply squandering money. To assist in that area, my officials are working actively with Departments to improve financial management and accountability. There has been an overall review of the financial training provided across the Northern Ireland Civil Service. I am pleased to say that that is already producing tangible benefits, with a suite of new training courses being developed and a dialogue opening up with non-finance specialists to ensure that decisions are taken with due regard to the financial consequences. More detailed training is being developed for those who set and manage budgets, day to day. Finance training for departmental staff

responsible for other parts of the public sector, beyond pure finance, is due to be rolled out over the coming months, along with newly invigorated courses on fraud prevention and governance.

I am conscious too of the role that the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) has to play in supporting us all in improving standards of financial management and good governance. Recommendations arising from the PAC will be actively pursued, and in many respects my Department, in conjunction with audit colleagues, is central in driving forward that agenda. Departmental boards and audit committees will also provide an important and independent accountability tier that, ultimately, supports us all as Ministers.

At this point, I want to make some comments about the role of Assembly Members in holding Departments and the Executive to account in authorising and regularising expenditure. This is a vital day for the Assembly. However, in reality, as Members will be aware, there is a limited opportunity to hold Departments to account through this process. If devolution is to maximise its benefits for the people of Northern Ireland, Assembly Members, and not just members of the Executive, must have a meaningful role in decision-making and in holding Departments to account.

The value of devolution lies in the capacity of local Members, who are close to the problems that affect their constituents, being able to hold Government to account. Devolution is not just about a local Executive, it is about a local Assembly. I do not see the role of Assembly Members and Assembly Committees as that of opposition, but as that of challenge and assistance. Done properly, that means better policy and better outcomes for the people of Northern Ireland, which is in all our interests.

As other Ministers will be aware, the Department of Finance and Personnel has considerable power and influence across all Departments. Without its approval, no expenditure can be incurred. Indeed, following the changes to the devolution arrangements provided for in the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006, expenditure without DFP approval would be not only irregular but unlawful. In that regard, I take my responsibilities seriously; however, it is also the responsibility of Assembly Committees to hold their Departments to account. During the Budget period, most of the Committees, perhaps understandably, lobbied for greater resources for their Departments. It is vital that those Committees now ensure that the Departments deliver on their commitments.

Again, I say that this does not mean opposition for its own sake; however, it does mean asking probing questions and ensuring that Departments deliver on what they promise. Departments should not fear questions and challenges from their Assembly

Committees; rather, they should welcome the additional perspective and scrutiny. Our system of democracy is made stronger by a Committee system that can ensure that value for money is delivered for the public.

If Departments do not deliver on the targets set for them in the Programme for Government, we should not have to wait for three years to find out. Apart from the monitoring that is conducted by the Executive, the Committees should have identified where greater attention is required. Such an approach gives Assembly Members a meaningful and important role, and is in the long-term interests of the Executive. I urge Assembly Committees to challenge Departments constructively to deliver and to hold Ministers to account for what has been promised — and I say that as much to the Committee for Finance and Personnel as to any other Committee.

Looking ahead to 2008-09, the second resolution seeks the Assembly's approval of a cash resource — a Vote on Account — to continue existing services in the early months of the next financial year, until the Main Estimates and corresponding Budget Bill are approved by the Assembly. That amount is approximately 45% of the 2007-08 provision for cash and resource.

As we look forward to the next financial years and the implementation of our Programme for Government, underpinned by the recent Budget and investment strategy endorsed by the Assembly, we have the opportunity to ensure that, in future years, the local economy will be strengthened, our infrastructure will be upgraded, and public service delivery will be improved.

The people of Northern Ireland expect delivery of the targets and outcomes published in the Programme for Government. The public service agreements, shortly to be published, will set out in detail how Departments will work together to achieve those targets and outcomes. The delivery agreements will set out roles and responsibilities, lines of accountability, performance-measurement methods and risk-management strategies. Alongside that, the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) will play its role in identifying scope for improved delivery of efficiencies and performance.

In commending these resolutions to the Assembly, I urge delivery of better-quality public services in future years, with greater efficiency and effective management of public resources. Today is the end of one phase of the Budget, and the beginning of another. Getting the money is one thing, ensuring the proper spend is another.

The most fundamental scrutiny role for the Assembly is to ensure that money is spent in accordance with its wishes. If Assembly Members were to believe that scrutinising the expenditure of over £10 billion a year was confined to a vote on one day a year, we

would never be in a position to hold Departments or the Executive to account. Instead, today must be seen as the start of a process by which Committees ask difficult questions, challenge fundamental assumptions, hold Ministers to account, and ensure that every pound of public money is spent appropriately.

As Minister of Finance and Personnel, I ask not only for more support for the resolutions from Assembly Members, but for a commitment to hold Departments to account for the next three years.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his opening remarks and his explanation of the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account.

At its meeting on 30 January 2008, the Committee for Finance and Personnel took evidence from officials of the Department on both the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2007-08 and the Vote on Account for 2008-09. I thank the officials for helping the Committee to navigate its way through what are, by necessity, detailed and complicated documents. Indeed, some Committee members used other words to describe the process outside today's discussion.

The Budget approved by the Assembly in January set out spending plans for 2008-11, and the spring Supplementary Estimates, the Vote on Account and the associated Budget Bill gave Departments authority to spend and set out control limits, through which the Assembly can hold Departments to account.

12.30 pm

The Committee discussed and approved accelerated passage for the Budget Bill that is to be introduced later today, and I have written to the Speaker to confirm that.

The spring Supplementary Estimates for 2007-08 seek the Assembly's approval for additional resources — and/or cash — that is needed over and above that detailed in the Main Estimates for the year and which were approved by the Assembly in June 2007.

During evidence gathered from Department of Finance and Personnel officials, the Committee was updated on a range of adjustments affecting spending profiles as the year progressed. As a result of the monitoring rounds there will be in-year changes, both in and between Departments; and Departments may also change their levels of spend to reflect refinements in the original Estimates. Changes may also occur because of technical reclassifications, rescheduling of contracts, or for a number of valid reasons. It will be obvious to Members that it would be impossible to project with absolute certainty the outcomes across the full range of Government spending programmes, and that is why processes such as in-year monitoring exist.

However, we can demand the highest standards from bidding processes during Budget negotiations and best practice in financial management. The Minister dealt with that in his presentation this morning.

The spring Supplementary Estimates also include other changes that are not subject to the normal monitoring round discussions, including changes in demand-led services, such as social security benefits, that are annually managed expenditure and outside departmental expenditure limits. The Minister addressed that too in his opening remarks. All those changes are picked up in the spring Supplementary Estimates, which bring everything into line in order that Departments can draw up their end-year accounts.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel took an active scrutiny role throughout the 2007-08 budgetary changes that emanated from the quarterly monitoring rounds. The Department of Finance and Personnel briefed the Committee on its own position prior to each round and provided in-depth written responses to queries raised. I thank the Minister and the relevant officials for that, because there has been a good working arrangement and relationship.

Following the Minister's statement to the Assembly on the outcomes of each monitoring round, the departmental officials responsible for central finance subsequently briefed the Committee on the more strategic issues relating to public expenditure; and that has been a very useful learning process for all of us.

There is evidence that Departments are identifying unused resources at an earlier stage in the financial year and are releasing them to the centre for reallocation. That is welcome, but more can be done, especially as Treasury appears to be restricting future access to unspent resources.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel will continue to prioritise the scrutiny of DFP's bids and easements for each monitoring round and urges other statutory Committees to do the same for their respective Departments. The Committee echoes the Minister's comments on that point very strongly and is currently working with DFP officials to develop a standardised format for monitoring-round information to facilitate the Committee's scrutiny of departmental submissions.

The Minister outlined three possible reasons for the return of funds by Departments in his statement on the outcome of the December monitoring round: greater-than-planned efficiencies; initial overstating of resource bids; and failure to deliver the planned level of public services. Therefore, Statutory Committees should be examining resources returned by the respective Departments, questioning why they have been released and determining whether they have been returned at the earliest possible opportunity.

The Department of Finance and Personnel also has a strategic challenge function, especially in examining whether Departments are overstating resource bids when bidding for particular programmes. The Minister made it clear on a number of occasions that that is a function that he will deploy to achieve the goals set out in the agreed Programme for Government.

On an earlier occasion the Minister indicated that his officials will be examining previous patterns of capital slippage more closely, and the Committee looks forward to the outcome of that.

I will turn briefly, *go raibh maith agat*, to the motion on the Vote on Account for 2008-09, which provides the figures needed to enable public services to continue during the early part of a financial year until the Main Estimates and associated Budget Bill are debated before the summer. The Assembly has already approved Budget plans for 2008-2011, and the Vote on Account for 2008-09 is the first outworking of that.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel produced an extensive report on the Executive's budget for 2008, and awaits a formal response from the Department of Finance and Personnel to the recommendations contained in that report.

I am sure that the House will be pleased to hear that I do not intend to reopen the Budget debate today. I support both motions on behalf of my Committee.

Mr Storey: I wish to speak as a Member of the Assembly and not as a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, of which I am the Deputy Chairperson. The reasons for that will be made obvious in a few moments.

I thank the Minister for giving us the detail behind these lengthy and wordy motions, and especially in light of the volumes that are set out in the Supplementary Estimates for 2007-08. I want to focus particularly on the issue of departmental expenditure limits, and the control and scrutiny powers that the Assembly and its Committees have in relation to their respective Departments. I raise that issue because of the disgraceful comments that were made by the Minister of Education when she appeared before the Committee for Education in the Senate Chamber last Thursday. On that occasion, she made it abundantly clear that she would not be subjected to scrutiny.

The Members opposite may live in denial or dismiss that episode as something that is in the past — as Mr O'Dowd tried to do the other evening — and tell us that we must move on. We have heard all that before from Sinn Féin, who would like to revise the past. However, these are the facts: a Minister of the Executive, who is subject to a ministerial code and who has responsibilities to discharge, made it abundantly clear that she would not be subject to scrutiny.

Bearing in mind that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has today illustrated that, post-St Andrews, there is a legal requirement upon Ministers and the Executive to discharge their duties in an appropriate fashion, I suggest that the Minister of Education is failing, and is seeking to make a solo run. She wants to do that because she is well aware that she cannot achieve consensus in the Executive. All sorts of financial issues emanate from that situation, and I want to keep my remarks in a financial context.

The Minister of Education has a responsibility to discharge a departmental budget. How has she discharged that budget to date? I know that there is a plan to build a bridge at Carlingford, which may assist the Minister to get from her home in the Irish Republic to Northern Ireland quicker, but it will not help her to address the issues.

The money that she was given to disburse to the education and library boards was intended to be spent at a local level. One would assume that those education and library boards would be able to make proposals that were in keeping with good financial management, and that they could make recommendations that were within the terms and remit of their responsibility. However, during the summer, in my constituency, the Minister of Education decided to ignore the decisions and the advice of the North Eastern Education and Library Board about the viability of two schools — for financial reasons. That decision has been reviewed, but the Minister has ignored reality. The financial consequences of her decision have cost more than £500,000.

I will illustrate the stupidity of the decision that the Minister has made. A principal has been appointed as of 31 March as opposed to 1 April. Of course, we all know the reason why the principal could not have been appointed on 1 April — it is April Fool's Day. The foolish decision to move the date from the next financial year back into this financial year has cost the North Eastern Education and Library Board over £8,000.

The delegated responsibility of this particular Minister must be scrutinised, challenged and questioned. We are all guilty of coming to the Chamber and using words such as “accountability” and “scrutiny” and of saying that we must be all-encompassing in how we move forward and that everything must be squeaky clean. However, when this particular Minister is brought into the light, and when we challenge her financial controls when she makes a decision, it becomes abundantly clear that she has failed to operate in a way that gains consensus and support. Therefore, I ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel to take look at how the Department of Education operates.

Of course, the classroom assistants' pay dispute is another example that must be mentioned. Remember,

the Minister of Education was able to tell us that, financially, the matter is not her responsibility and that it is the responsibility of somebody else. Thus, she shifts the blame and ensures that whatever costs are incurred are incurred by somebody else.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I know that the DUP missed an education debate last week because its Members slept in, but is this debate about the spring Supplementary Estimates or about education? Not for the first time, I am slightly confused by Mr Storey's remarks.

Mr Speaker: I assure the Member that I have listened closely to Mr Storey's remarks, and he has been very careful to keep them related to finance. Sometimes Members — from all sides of the House — are inclined to stray from the motion, but, on this occasion, Mr Storey has been very careful not to do so.

Mr Storey: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Of course, I must mention the fact that the Education Minister arrived late to the Assembly and to the Education Committee meeting.

I want to mention the finance that the Education Minister requires for her visionary proposals — albeit that we are still in the dark as to what those proposals are. The Minister said that she would require no further finance as she would be able to fund her proposals from current allocations. This House and its Committees must scrutinise the proposals to ensure that that will be the case. I have no doubt that when we work out the costings for her proposals — whatever they may be — there will be severe financial implications. We must be made aware of any such implications at an early stage. The Dickson plan was mentioned; it took four years to plan and three years to implement. Thus the Minister's proposals will surely have huge financial implications. I am sure that the Minister of Finance and Personnel would like to know how those implications will affect future Budget management and how he can oversee future Budget planning when the Education Minister does not know how much her proposals will cost.

Therefore, I support the Minister of Finance and Personnel's motion, but I ask him to examine the issues that I have raised, particularly departmental expenditure limits and financial controls. The Minister of Finance and Personnel's track record with his Committee has been such that he has ensured that all relevant information has been made available to the Committee in an open and transparent way and without any particular ideology attached. Given that, I ask him to ensure that, in all financial matters — whether they involve the Department of Education or any other Department — Ministers are held to account and Committees are not sidelined.

I support the motion.

12.45 pm

Mr O'Loan: The spring Supplementary Estimates — voluminous and detailed as they are — are essentially the outworking of processes that have already been brought to the Assembly and agreed. Therefore, I will make no further comment on those.

Regarding the Vote on Account, the SDLP made its stance on the Budget clear during the debate on Tuesday 22 January 2008. *[Interruption.]*

Thank you, Mr Storey.

We made it clear that what we were saying was based on our principles and values as a social democratic party. We are committed to an inclusive society; where there is disadvantage and exclusion, our instinct is to identify and tackle it. We also want a society that binds together well, that displays real harmony and in which problems are tackled together. Furthermore, we want balanced regional development.

We expressed real concerns about the Budget, as did members of all parties. By this stage, everyone will recognise that. I welcome the Minister's remarks today about the role of Assembly Members in providing a challenge to proposals that come before us.

There will be a further opportunity tomorrow to say more during the debate on the Second Stage of the Budget Bill. The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, Mitchel McLaughlin, has rightly said that we have already had opportunities to comment in general on budgetary matters.

The issue of secondary-education reform has not diminished in its importance since the debate on the Budget. Indeed, it has come considerably more to the fore. I am pleased that the Committee for Education has now expressed clearly its concerns — as the SDLP did at that time — about the lack of clarity in the proposals for secondary education. Such concerns are now widely shared among all political parties, including the Minister's.

We have all listened to the speech from the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, Mr Mervyn Storey, which contained trenchant criticisms and concerns — very much the same concerns that the SDLP has expressed. If there is no clarity about the proposals, there can be no clarity about the budgetary implications, and certainly no provision for potentially massive changes. Those changes will occur within the three-year Budget period and they require budgetary provision, which is not there.

The SDLP will be constructive in how it presents opposition to proposals with which it has concerns. We will not attempt to hold up the implementation of the necessary resources that are required to keep the wheels of Government in motion. Procurement has to continue and salaries have to be paid. For that reason, we

support the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account.

Dr Farry: Through the spring Supplementary Estimates, we are essentially implementing the Executive's tinkering with the last direct rule Budget, and the first implementation of the Budget for the incoming year — the first of the devolved Budgets.

The Alliance Party has already made clear our concerns about the flawed devolved Budget. However, we recognise that the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account are about good financial housekeeping and ensuring the continuity of services, both as regards the current financial year and the start of next year.

Although we have major concerns, at this stage we are not minded to force votes and to have the repetitive unnecessary process of Divisions. However, we will no doubt come to that when the main Budget Bill is debated during June 2008.

We have an opportunity today to reflect on a number of the structural flaws of the inherited situation that has been progressed by the Executive, and also, more importantly, the future path that has been chosen by the four-party mandatory coalition Executive.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Dr Farry: I imagine that that may well be the last "hear, hear" I get from the DUP Benches during the next few minutes.

I echo the comments made by the Minister about the importance of accurate financial projections. I recognise the efforts that have been made regarding addressing underspends by Departments. There were concerns that underspends were originally quite high compared to other devolved Parliaments in the United Kingdom. They have since reduced, but clearly there is a lot more room for improvement.

To a layman, the sums that are involved can be staggering and, in simplistic terms, would make a major difference to several of the services that are falling behind because of a lack of resources.

The Assembly is starting from a position that is unsustainable for Northern Ireland. My party and I are ambitious for Northern Ireland and want radical change. However, we fear that the decisions that have been taken so far sell us short. As a society, we have an unhealthy dependency on the public sector: depending on the measuring method that is used, we are between 65% and 70% dependent on the public sector. We rely on a large fiscal subvention from HM Treasury, which meets almost 50% of our public expenditure requirements.

Even with such a huge public sector, we struggle to deliver the same standard of public services as that

enjoyed elsewhere in these islands. The amount of money that we invest in transport means that, for example, transportation infrastructure is well behind that of all our competitors. That is compounded by our overemphasis on roads at the expense of investment in public transport. That situation will get worse over the next 10 years. We are not addressing properly environmental protection or projecting the creation of an environmental protection agency.

There are major inefficiencies in our schools estate, and I appreciate that there has been a lot of discussion on education in the debate so far. However, looking at the underspend of various Departments — particularly in areas of capital — it is hard not to notice that education is falling behind and that many projects that were promised have been shelved. I understand that those projects must be kept within the parameters of a policy on sustainable schools. Where is that policy? Those projects are waiting for decisions to be made. Some schools are already looking ahead to the next round of capital investment in the schools estate, and they wonder what type of vacuum that they are dealing with. Therefore, some clarity is required.

We are also behind all other parts of these islands in our per capita funding of the arts sector. Although more money has been made available for that in the new Budget, it comes nowhere near to closing the gap.

Our health budget is about £200 million behind that of the rest of the UK. In preparation for today's debate, I looked at the equivalent discussions that took place in 2000, and it is interesting that the points that I am making today on the gap between our health investments and those in the rest of the UK were being made then. Eight years on, we are still talking about that subject, and the issue has not been properly addressed.

Mental health is a critical area; on average, 12% of the health budget in the rest of the UK is directed to mental health, but in Northern Ireland, it is stuck at about 8%. That presents a challenge for us to readdress our priorities to accommodate what is a growing sector and priority area for many.

Due to the distortions that are caused by trying to manage a divided society, public expenditure in Northern Ireland is already heavily skewed. The unnecessary duplication of services means that the possibility of creating quality public services for the whole community is hampered. Sadly, the Executive are not prepared to address the challenge of creating a shared future despite the clear human, social, economic and financial imperatives to do so.

Therefore, Northern Ireland is starting from a very difficult base, which last year's UK comprehensive spending review (CSR) has worsened. However, we have made that situation worse still through our populist approach to taxation at the expense of

investment in public services and the rebalancing of the economy. I do not want the tax burden to be any more arduous than is necessary, but serious questions must be asked about an approach to local taxation that is based on populism instead of on hard evidence. That approach comes at the expense of investment in, and modernisation of, our local services.

The Alliance Party wants to end Northern Ireland's dependence on financial subvention from London. The rapid turnaround in the Republic of Ireland from being one of the poorest countries in the European Union 20 years ago to being one of the richest today is an example of what can happen if we are ambitious. Unless we wrestle with the costs of segregation, which act as a straitjacket, we will remain trapped fiscally. For the foreseeable future, Northern Ireland will, sadly, continue to rely on financial assistance from London. Therefore, it is critical to use that money wisely. How will HM Treasury react to the populist approach to taxation that has been adopted? How can this or future Executives argue credibly for favourable funding when the resources are used to fund a populist approach to taxation instead of being invested in sustainable public services, as happens in the rest of the UK?

Two weeks ago, I made the point that organisations as diverse as the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland (ERINI), the CBI and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) had challenged the approach being taken to household taxation. In his answer, the Minister shifted the goalposts and argued that those organisations supported him on business taxation, which in itself is debatable, but the fundamental point was ducked. For different reasons, those organisations argue that additional resources are better invested either in rebalancing the economy or in addressing social problems, or in a balance of both.

On business taxation, the key issue should be the rate of corporation tax. The Alliance Party has been enthusiastic about tax-varying powers. The party is also clear that, in the event that those powers are achieved — even though that is unlikely given the outcome of Varney I — under the terms of the Azores ruling, revenue lost would have to be made up from elsewhere within the Northern Ireland block grant, either from reductions in service delivery or from other taxes in the system. I am not sure that that point has been considered or how such a situation could be managed were a different rate of corporation tax to be achieved in the next three years.

Ultimately, corporation tax is only a means to an end, and that end is making Northern Ireland sustainable — a sustainable economy and society with high growth and low dependency.

There is a fundamental challenge to rebalance our economy and address the regional disparities that exist in the UK. The Alliance Party welcomes the emphasis that has been placed on the economy by the Executive, but has some scepticism about the delivery. Generally speaking, there are lofty aspirations, but no clear road map as to how to get there. Many measures being pursued by the Executive are more about maintaining the status quo and holding back the tide of globalisation than genuinely trying to integrate Northern Ireland into the global economy. I am disappointed that the Executive seem to be giving up the fight on corporation tax. The Assembly has not yet had a statement on the outcome of Varney I, never mind any comprehensive rebuttal of its flawed analysis — something that many businessmen and economists are already doing.

The Executive has shifted the goalposts on convergence targets. No longer are they talking about trying to rebalance Northern Ireland against the UK average for productivity; rather, they are trying to rebalance it against the UK average, minus the south-east of England and London. Although I recognise the desire to remove the distortions that come from including the south-east of England, it now appears that we are fighting over the scraps from the table rather than challenging the overall regional balance of the UK economy as a whole — something that we must return to.

In conclusion, the Assembly must do more than simply take a large chunk of public expenditure from Whitehall and determine how to reprioritise it; it must seek radical and ambitious change in this society. A major political challenge is looming. There are expectations of what devolution should be doing to rebalance and reform Northern Ireland, and the means to do so will be a matter for debate.

Today, my party is happy to support the spring Supplementary Estimates as they stand — recognising that that they are inherited — and support starting off the next financial year in a wise and prudent manner.

Mr Hamilton: I support the two motions. The Minister of Finance and Personnel said that the subject matter was the cornerstone of departmental expenditure limits: the use of resources and holding Departments to account. Given that point, this is a timely opportunity to discuss the important issue of financial management.

One of my first contributions in the Chamber was during the debate on the Main Estimates last year, when I called for sound and strong financial stewardship of the public's money. At that time, I had cause for concern. First, there was the attitude — which still pervades in some Members in the Chamber although, thankfully, they are not in power — that we could simply call for absolutely everything under the

sun and need not worry where the money came from. However, the Alliance Party has now told us where it would get the money from, which is by taxing everybody and everything that moves — and if it does not move, taxing it twice.

I will need to catch myself on: I agreed with one thing that Dr Farry said.

Mrs I Robinson: Oh dear.

Mr Hamilton: I know; someone will have to take my temperature as there is something wrong. I have had a cold recently, and clearly it has gone to my head.

1.00 pm

The Alliance Party talked about the size of the public sector and how overinflated it is in a Northern Ireland context. I agree. However, that party supports, for example, the creation of an environmental protection agency, which would have carte blanche to take action. No consideration has been given to what such a body might cost, its size, or the impact that it would have on the public sector.

The Alliance Party called again for massive additional investment to be made in a variety of public services, yet it made no mention of any efficiencies that would match that investment. We cannot simply churn that sort of money into the public sector and not expect it to grow. That, therefore, runs contrary to any of the Alliance Party's comments about the size of the public sector.

We are becoming tired of that sort of repetitive speech. However, I am not at all tired of hearing about the Alliance Party's taxation plans. In fact, I encourage its members to talk more about how they would tax individuals, households and businesses more. I get the sense that, if they kept talking in that way, we would not have to hear too many more of their speeches, because their Benches would be empty after the next election. I therefore encourage that party to talk about its taxation plans at every opportunity.

The other cause for concern that has been raised is the poor financial management record that, in conjunction with a culture of underspend and overcommitment, the Executive have inherited from direct rule Administrations. Several Members have spoken already about that culture of underspend. It is important, because during 2004-05 and 2006-07, there was an underspend of nearly £400 million of current expenditure and nearly £500 million of capital underspend. Underspend on that scale renders insignificant any arguments or squabbles between the Department of Finance and Personnel and the other Departments over Budget allocations. If Departments cannot spend the allocations that their Ministers have cried for, the allocation process is seriously called into question.

The figures that I quoted compare very unfavourably with those from Westminster, Wales and Scotland.

Sometimes there are valid reasons for underspend, particularly capital underspend, if, for example, a project encounters a delay in obtaining planning permission or there is an unforeseen technical problem. However, there is an onus on Departments to identify underspend quickly so that it can be reallocated and spent on projects that are needed here and now. The Committee for Finance and Personnel, of which I am a member, has called for ever-lower targets for underspend in order to reduce it to an acceptable level. Some underspend is inevitable, but we should aspire to achieve the goal of 1%, which would bring us into line with our devolved counterparts in the rest of the UK.

Overcommitment is allied to underspend. In the past, it was called “planned overcommitment”, although it rose at such a rate that it seemed more out of control than planned. Departments seemed to have a hit-it-and-hope attitude to underspend. We were all shocked when, during the June monitoring round, the Minister of Finance and Personnel told the House that he had inherited £153 million of overcommitment from the direct rule Administration. That is a staggering figure. Although some underspend is inevitable and is required to accommodate overcommitment of that scale, under direct rule, the figures had risen year on year at such a rate that they were becoming dangerously excessive, and a culture of underspend and overcommitment was becoming endemic.

As the Finance Minister said recently, improved financial management by Departments shows that it is justifiable to reduce that amount of overcommitment at a manageable and cautious pace. A tentative downward trajectory is required. I welcome very much the Budget’s targets to reduce gradually overcommitment from its present level to around £60 million in 2010-11.

Sensible budget setting is essential; as much as anything, underspend results from poor planning. When Ministers make bids for Budget allocations, they must ensure that they can be realised in the years for which they have been requested. However, as I said, there is encouraging evidence of an improving financial picture. The December monitoring round released £107 million of current expenditure and £132 million of capital — far higher reduced requirements than in previous years — and the reduced requirements this year are, to date, 12% higher than in the whole of the previous year.

I welcome the assurances of the Finance Minister that he and his Executive colleagues are working to improve the level and quality of financial management in Departments. I do not doubt that devolution is responsible for the change. Local Ministers have more consideration for the funds at their disposal, have more focus, identify reduced requirements earlier and free up funds for allocation elsewhere, because they care

about what goes on, unlike the fly-in, fly-out direct rule Ministers whom we had to endure for many years.

As the Finance Minister said, it is essential to embed higher standards of financial management within the public sector. That is particularly pertinent now because of the tight CSR period that applies right across the board and the end-year flexibility situation. The Minister said that there is no certainty with regard to the level of access to underspend from the current year onwards. In some respects, that generates a worrying degree of uncertainty and risk.

In its draft Budget report, the Committee for Finance and Personnel stated that:

“there is now an even greater onus on departments to manage public finances in a way which achieves the highest possible level of spend within authorised limits and maximises the impact from available resources.”

That is a maxim by which all Ministers and all Departments should live. It is absolutely essential that we have good financial management. If we achieve that, it will be a marked improvement on direct rule. Perhaps, on first impressions, it does not have as big an impact on people’s lives as a new hospital, or an improved schools or roads network; but in the long term, it is more important than anything else in the delivery of real change.

That is right and proper in any set of circumstances. After all, the money we manage is the people’s money. We inhabit a tighter financial framework than in recent times, and rigorous financial management is a must.

I support both motions.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I, too, support both motions.

The Budget allocations have been a source of debate inside and outside the Chamber. Many issues and concerns around those allocations are still outstanding. However, no programmes or services will be delivered by any Department unless Members support the motions in order to process the allocations and resources to ensure the continuity and delivery of much-needed services.

There are a number of major obstacles to the progressive development and delivery by the Executive of the new social, economic and political reality. Central to that is the fact that taxation and public expenditure policy are still set in London. As republicans, we believe that the only context that will truly deliver sustainable economic and social progress is that of an island economy. However, we are faced with the challenges of achieving the best possible outcomes within the economic, social and political realities of the here and now.

Sinn Féin will continue to press for a full range of fiscal powers to be made available to the Executive and Assembly. Those powers are required to facilitate

the delivery of high-quality public services, the development of the economy, the building of prosperity and the redressing of the inequalities and disadvantage that afflict substantial portions of society. In the short term, and towards the same ends, we seek to ensure the best use and allocation of resources.

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Department of Finance and Personnel should put in place immediately a transparent mechanism for future equality scrutiny of all public spending plans, in strict and full compliance with section 75 and schedule 9 of the "North of Ireland" Act 1998. That may include the use of external expertise, given the findings of the report on public-sector capacity and the fact that section 75 has not been properly implemented to date.

Sinn Féin still has some concerns about the overall resources available for the various stated priorities, including the anti-poverty strategy and the lack of clarity regarding how that money will be utilised across the various Departments in order to meet the stated aims. We hope to see further investment in the Health Service targeted at front-line services, including community and primary care services.

Dr Farry: The Member has listed a number of criticisms of the Programme for Government and the Budget, with which many of my colleagues and I agree. Why, therefore, is Sinn Féin supporting both documents, and why did it sign up to them in the Executive?

It seems rather bizarre that Sinn Féin Ministers have signed up to the documents, given that the Member, and other Back-Bench Members from her party, have criticised them and identified their flaws.

Ms J McCann: As I said at the outset, Sinn Féin still has a number of concerns but, overall, we support the Programme for Government, Budget and investment strategy. I have listed some of our concerns, and we will continue to try to address those.

Sinn Féin will continue to campaign for funding to meet the needs of social housing, the arts and community-based services, including youth services. We will lobby Departments to ensure that the priorities in the Programme for Government are reflected in the delivery of services. The upcoming investment conference provides an opportunity to deliver on the important issues of fairness, inclusion and equality by actively and effectively challenging the existing patterns of social and economic disadvantage and using increased prosperity to tackle ongoing poverty.

The outcomes of challenging and tackling that poverty and disadvantage and supporting balanced regional development must be central to any future foreign direct investment. We should not compete with the South of Ireland for investment; rather, we should work closely in partnership to attract investment in an

all-island context. No one inside or outside the Chamber should be concerned by that, as it can only complement and strengthen the economy as a whole.

Much mention has been made of the scrutiny that Departments are subject to, and of their accountability. Departments are not only accountable to Ministers and MLAs; they are also accountable to local people, whose money they spend. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Weir: Given the number of occasions on which we have debated budgetary issues, I have a creeping sense of déjà vu. The same arguments come up time and time again. I hope not to disappoint by reiterating the same arguments from this side of the House.

Whatever criticism may be made, that of lack of consultation on the budgetary process cannot hold any degree of substance. Anyone who flicks through that thin volume, 'Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2007-08', will see the high level of detail that is provided. One wonders whether my colleague Mr Sammy Wilson, who seems to be a new convert to the environmental cause, will be going apoplectic at the sheer number of pages that are in the document. Nevertheless, the level of detail that is provided allows the fullest possible debate.

The spring Supplementary Estimates 2007-08 and the Estimates for next year show record levels of investment, which will act as a key driver to our economy. Perhaps I should not make any more references to drivers, because I suspect that at least one party will be touchy on that subject.

The Supplementary Estimates will be judged not principally on the figures that are provided, but, as was said during the Budget debate, on the level of delivery. People will look at how money can best be diverted from administration into front-line services. I echo one of the key points that has been mentioned by a number of my colleagues: the drift into underspend and overcommitment under direct rule. They are the two ends of the spectrum; a budgetary process that operates in a bizarre see-saw fashion is not acceptable. I welcome the commitment that the Minister has made to start tackling the issue. When the public see large amounts of underspend and overcommitment, it undermines the credibility of the budgetary process.

Delivery, particularly of capital projects, must also be timely. Here I concur, at least for once, with my colleague from North Down Mr Farry that there has been a major problem with capital projects on the education front.

1.15 pm

Promises made by direct rule Ministers for capital projects in North Down and other constituencies were simply not delivered; and that key issue must be tackled. However, given the constraints and the

inherited position of underspend in the resources available, I welcome the fact that money has been spent wisely. Some £53 million has been allocated to NI Water and £45 million has been allocated to the Roads Service. Some £70 million has been committed to the Department for Social Development for the warm homes scheme, social housing, etc.

I am also pleased that money has been allocated to help review and reform public expenditure by the Health Service and the Department of Finance and Personnel, because that can act as a driver for invest-to-save in the future. It is important to ensure that front-line delivery is as good as possible.

However, I said that there was a strong feeling of *déjà vu* about the situation, because, yet again, there was criticism from the SDLP and the Alliance Party, although more restrained than on previous occasions. To be fair to both parties, they seemed to be backing the Supplementary Estimates. However, the SDLP seems to be constantly doing the *hokey-cokey* — not quite sure whether it is either in or out of the four-party coalition. The Alliance Party appears to agree to a particular budgetary position but takes a different position when it comes to discussions in the Chamber. However, at least the SDLP is willing to support today's position, so we should be thankful for small mercies.

Northern Ireland is spending more money on health than any other part of the United Kingdom. However, although investment has increased, it has not been directed properly to front-line services. Indeed, the increase in the amount of money being spent on administration has massively outstripped any that has gone into front-line services. We need a better Health Service; not simply one that has more money pumped into it.

Again, the Alliance Party seems to be taking a schizophrenic attitude towards the Budget. Dr Farry told us that the objective should be to rebalance the economy — presumably by strengthening the private sector. Indeed, there was a concern that too much money is being put into the public sector. However, Dr Farry's solution to rebalancing the economy is to increase the size of the public sector. The Alliance Party is seeking to increase taxation, and it is berating the Executive for fixing the regional and business rates.

One wonders how the economy would be rebalanced by increasing taxation and spending more money. It is essentially the old Soviet command economy. The solution being offered by comrade Farry strikes of tractor farms in the Urals. Indeed, the Alliance Party is adopting the same policies adopted years ago by Mr Brezhnev. One wonders whether such a far-left agenda will cause choking on the Alliance wine-and-cheese circuit or indeed at the parties of its allies — the Green Party — on the nutmeg-and-Perrier circuit.

It is the case that public services must be protected if the economy is to be rebalanced and if favourable economic circumstances are to be created to help to grow the private sector. This Budget has a record level of support for public services, but the circumstances must be created to help the private sector to grow.

Dr Farry: How does the Member respond to criticism from the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland of the Executive's approach to the regional rate where they argued that the revenue lost would be better invested in supporting the four drivers that have been identified by the Department of Finance and Personnel and the rest of the Executive?

Mr Weir: The regional rate has gone up by 60% over five years. If we are going to create the conditions whereby private enterprise can flourish, we need to have an economy that does not overly tax people.

Mr Hamilton: Is the Member aware that the domestic regional rate will have to be trebled if the high levels of investment in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety alone that the Alliance Party is suggesting are to be achieved? Given that a 60% increase in the domestic regional rate was imposed during the last five years of direct rule, does the Member agree that the public purse cannot endure any more rates increases?

Mr Weir: The level of taxation that the Alliance Party has proposed will mean that, because so little money will be left, people will be given pocket money each week instead of wages. The correct economic circumstances must be created. Historically, economic circumstances that have been created to benefit private investment have also served to grow the economy. The South is an example of that, given that it increased massively its level of private investment.

There is much to commend in the Budget. When one gets away from the Alliance Party's socialist-like doctrines, one will see that the Budget will deliver to the front line of public services. The Budget focuses on efficiency and investment and concentrates on delivery for front-line services. Unlike other Members whose support for the proposals appears to be reluctant, I enthusiastically support the motion.

Mr Beggs: A technical process, which is associated with the final departmental Estimates for 2007-08, is involved in achieving the spring Supplementary Estimates. I do not know how many members of the public will read the estimates, but it would benefit people to examine them in detail. In particular, I urge Committee members to look at the sections that deal with their relevant Departments, because lessons are to be learned for the long term and some areas deserve additional scrutiny.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has surrendered £81 million in cash out of a total resource budget of £296 million — that is almost one quarter of its budget. Significant increases are planned for subsequent years for that Department and for the Department for Employment and Learning. Any additional money that is given to a Department must be managed carefully; I see it as a warning sign when Departments do not spend the money that they have been allocated.

Under the Department of Finance and Personnel's reform agenda, approximately £150 million was allocated in resource funding, but that has increased by almost one sixth to £178 million. Why is the reform costing so much more than the allocated budget? The Committee for Finance and Personnel, of which I am a member, will have to look closely at that.

There are significant variations in the allocations to the Civil Service pension schemes. The summary of Estimates shows a present net provision of £273 million and a proposed change of an additional £160 million. That gives a new net provision of £433 million. However, in cash terms, there is presently a requirement for £245 million, but there is a proposed reduction of £200 million. That gives a new requirement of an additional £45 million. There are, therefore, significant movements, and it would be helpful if the Minister were to give further information on what is happening with that. In any budgetary process, it is better if Departments can plan accurately where money will be spent so that significant funds will not have to be altered in that fashion.

The Department for Regional Development's resources have also changed significantly in the Budget period. They have altered by almost one seventh, from £1.65 billion to £1.88 billion. Members are aware of significant changes relating to issues that are connected to water, but it is also worth mentioning roads. Following the December monitoring rounds, there is a traditional tarmacking spree in Northern Ireland. Large amounts of money are spent on tarmacking, filling in potholes or resurfacing roads. Are we getting the best value from the contractors when money is spent in that fashion? Perhaps those in the Committee are best placed to take action on that.

The report also contains some proposals that will cost relatively little, but which, nevertheless, expose highly significant U-turns. On page 293 of 'Spring Supplementary Estimates 2007-08', it is revealed that the North/South Ministerial Council will receive an additional £212,000 to cover "increased costs for plenary meetings" and:

"professional fees associated with the new accommodation project".

It is not a significantly large sum, but that is the first time that I have heard of new accommodation project expenditure. For many years, the Democratic Unionist Party vigorously opposed North/South expenditure, yet now its members plan to invest significant sums upgrading North/South Ministerial Council premises. I leave it to them to explain that.

What is being proposed, and what scrutiny have those proposals undergone? The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is best placed to pursue those matters. A colleague who sits on that Committee told me that he is not aware of those proposals. The various Committees must investigate such issues in order to ensure that we get the best value for money and that that money is wisely spent.

Concerning the Vote on Account, as I said earlier, several Departments have been awarded significant above-Budget increases — in particular, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Over the next three years, there will be reduced end-year flexibility, so it will become increasingly important for each Department to carefully manage its expenditure in order to ensure that money is wisely spent within the designated time. We do not want money to be returned to the Treasury; we want it to be well spent in Northern Ireland. Devolution, under the guidance of local Ministers and scrutiny Committees, is the best mechanism for ensuring that. English or Scottish direct rule Ministers would not suffer any major political fallout by returning funds to the Treasury, whereas local politicians will obviously suffer if they fail to manage our money well. Devolution offers the prospect of better-managed funds.

The Member from the Alliance Party appeared keen to increase business rates and introduce a local income tax. I oppose such ideas. We have a fragile business community, and we wish to encourage entrepreneurial activity and get more people back into work. There are already too many people who do not contribute to the economy, and any such proposals would create disincentives to achieving those goals. We must encourage more people to be entrepreneurial and to return to work in order to contribute to the economy.

I am content to support both the Vote on Account 2008-09 and the spring Supplementary Estimates 2007-08.

Mr Attwood: The Minister said that the role of Committees — and, presumably, Members — should be to challenge what is going on in Government Departments in order to achieve better outcomes. I agree with that, and the tone of my speech will reflect that; however, I do not agree with his assertion that the role of Committees should not be one of opposition. That would put a straightjacket on Committees. Given

the debate about the 11-plus, even the DUP would not want to be in such a straightjacket when dealing with possible education reforms. I wonder whether the DUP members of the Education Committee were surprised when the Minister of Finance indicated that they should not adopt an opposition role concerning the 11-plus.

1.30 pm

That said, I want to address two or three themes. The Minister said, quite rightly in my view, that we should not wait three years to find out what might potentially be errors in the overall Budget. I want to raise two issues around this Budget, in a very genuine way.

The first concerns research, development and innovation. In the Irish Government's 'National Development Plan 2007-2013', the Taoiseach stated that:

"We will ensure that our enterprise sector stays at the leading edge globally, by continuing to attract key inward investment, by further stimulating the indigenous sector, by renewed emphasis on"

— and this is the critical part —

"worker training and skills and ... by expansion of our science, technology and innovation capacity".

I have said in the House before that although people inside the Irish Government affirm the reduction in corporation tax as a catalyst for economic development, they also assert that skills, research, technology and innovation sustain inward and indigenous investment. I continue to be concerned that although there has been some adjustment to the Budget, with respect to R&D and innovation, it is not adequate.

During the six years of the national development plan in the South, £25.8 billion will be invested in training, skills, schools and higher education. Yet the draft Budget that came before the House some months ago had no Budget line for dedicated innovation and research. Quite properly, the Minister responded to that situation by agreeing that an innovation fund would be created. However, as I understand it, that fund is worth £90 million in total, of which £38 million is to be contributed by the Irish Government. That means that our contribution to innovation at this phase of our history is going to be a little over £50 million. Contrast that figure with the six-year investment in the South. Are we going to be able to position ourselves in the global economy around the critical issue of R&D and innovation when our contribution to the innovation fund is £50 million?

When the figures in the innovation fund are analysed, further questions arise. Part of the fund is actually filling in gaps left by changes in science research investment funds. Are we in a position to leapfrog in the way that we must in order to have the successful and sustainable economy that I, the Minister and everybody else wishes to see?

The second issue that I want to mention is training. This may be premature, because the final figures are not in, but it is only fair that I flag it up to the Assembly and the Minister. Unless we have the necessary skills base to grow our economy and ensure that the 6,500 jobs promised in the Programme for Government come and can be serviced, we are going to be in trouble. Figures given to the Committee for Employment and Learning on 18 January — and they may have been adjusted in the past 12 days — suggest that the number of level 2 and level 3 apprentices in the North has fallen by nearly 20% compared with last year, from over 7,500 to a little under 5,500 — a drop of 2,000.

If one bores down into those figures, one discovers that, as of 18 January, 5,492 people were in training, 116 of whom were at level 3 — skilled apprenticeships — and 2,435 were at level 2; the figures may have been adjusted more favourably since then. I do not wish to prejudge, but where level 3 skills are concerned, the situation may become critical, resulting in a black hole for our skills base. That black hole will not serve our economy well for indigenous and inward investment economic opportunities.

However, the situation may be even more critical if comparisons are made with figures in the South. There are targets in the South, over the next six years, to have 48% of young people training at skills levels 6 to 10 — higher and further education — and 45% at skills levels 4 and 5. Only 7% come in under performance targets at skills levels 2 and 3. If the North is to compete in the global market and leapfrog over all those years of lost hope and lost opportunity, how will our skills base service indigenous and inward investment opportunities?

I want to be positive and constructive. If the Minister is correct that we should not have to wait three years to discover the real situation, I am putting it on all Members' radar screens that, in this phase, we may not be in as good a place as we would have hoped.

In the Minister's response to the Budget debate on 29 January, he said of the ending of the 11-plus:

"I accept that the proposal in question is of great significance and is, potentially, hugely expensive ... If new pressures arise, clearly there will be decisions for the Executive to take." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 27, p151, col 2].

Two weeks after the Minister made that statement, is he any the wiser about the potentially "hugely expensive" consequences of the decision on the 11-plus? Are we still facing a black hole?

Mr McQuillan: History is being made today, and it is an honour to be able to take part in the debate and support the motions. Those motions enable Departments to get on with doing their job of running, for example, health, social security, roads and the education programmes that have been approved by the Assembly. If the Assembly does not agree to the motion, there is,

in the most extreme circumstances, the possibility of Departments' grinding to a halt because of a lack of funding. Today's motions will ensure that funding continues uninterrupted, and I am sure that all Members can realise the need for the Assembly to support the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Although the mechanisms required may appear boring to some Members, it must be remembered that that is the means by which Departments receive the funding that they require for their programmes. Therefore, the debate is important, and I sincerely hope that all Members will support the motions. Lest any of us forget, governance is not only about the exciting debates but day-to-day basic housekeeping tasks, such as today's motions.

Some Members have moaned and groaned about the Budget provisions. I hope that today they will realise the importance of the motion and support it; although, undoubtedly, they will have another moan in the process. It is a privilege for us to be part of the process of developing schemes for new water and sewerage infrastructure; supporting rural transport; investing in new trains and buses; funding the Food Standards Agency; and continually upgrading the road network. We are talking about all that work today; not just about the motion from the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

The Programme for Government depends on wise and prudent spending on its priorities through the Budget. First, the money must be given to the Departments to spend. Let us do that today with a unanimous voice, and let us continue to work for the people of Northern Ireland now and in the future.

I seek assurance from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that the £12 million that has been set aside for the Minister of Education for the classroom assistants' dispute will be spent on that issue.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for today's announcement. The first issue that I want to mention has been discussed by the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development at length over the past few months and relates to the proposed development of the former Forkhill army base.

Although some proposals for the site have great merit — I and other members of the Committee support them — I am concerned that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is proposing to take the lead. The proposals contain plans for social housing, childcare facilities and enterprise units, none of which requires the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to take the lead. They are very worthy causes, and I suggest that the Department for Social Development and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment take the lead.

I have asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how he proposes to deal with the matter, and I look

forward to the proposal being led by another Department. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development can provide an input to the proposals but the finances talked about would be better spent in another area of the Department rather than be used by it in a leading role. That is especially the case given that this week we learnt that the Department is going to axe a very important course at Loughrey College. The communications course accounts for one third of students at the college, and I am concerned that the Department is planning to take something very successful out of circulation while it spends money on something else that is not in its remit.

I am also concerned about the amount of money that is being transferred to the Department for Regional Development for road maintenance. Over the past few years, I have noticed that road maintenance gets quite a bit of surplus money at the end of each year. The constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone falls badly behind as regards the road maintenance budget. County Fermanagh has around 9% of the road network but receives only 6% of the road maintenance budget. I would like to see more diversion of end-year funding into road maintenance and especially into a constituency in which there is poor public transport and no rail system.

If money is being directed into the railway system in other parts of the Province, my constituency should get its fair share of the road maintenance budget. Indeed, any additional money should be diverted to that budget.

1.45 pm

Mr Gallagher: I, too, thank the Minister for bringing the Supplementary Estimates to the Assembly, thus providing an opportunity for further debate.

The Minister mentioned Civil Service reform programmes, and I want to ask about the childcare voucher scheme in particular. As Members know, that scheme, which helps to offset the cost of childcare, is used by almost all major employers. Many employees opt into the scheme in lieu of some of their wages. Given that childcare costs can range between £800 and £900 a month, there is growing annoyance and dissatisfaction among many civil servants that they are not yet entitled to participate in the salary-sacrifice scheme. On a previous occasion, the Minister gave a commitment that the scheme would be introduced for civil servants in 2008. Can the Minister assure the House that the necessary funds are included in the Supplementary Estimates to introduce a new payroll scheme for the Civil Service? Will the salary-sacrifice scheme be introduced in conjunction with that? In confirming that, will he give a date as to when the scheme is likely to be introduced?

As Members know, one reason that we in the SDLP opposed the Budget was because of our serious concerns

about the implications that it would have for educational reforms. Those implications will affect both primary and post-primary schools. Towards the end of this year, for the last time, children will sit the 11-plus. We can see, therefore, that educational reform will move ahead quickly. I restate the SDLP's concerns and remind Members about parents' and children's uncertainties. Those uncertainties will have an impact on schools; in particular, many post-primary schools will have to make adjustments to accommodate the broad curriculum that they will have to deliver. Many will require more facilities, and some will require additional or even new premises, the cost of which will have to be taken into consideration. Some may need a completely new building. Therefore, there are grave concerns about whether funding will be available to support all those educational reforms.

As the SDLP spokesperson on the environment, I will mention again the report 'Foundations for the Future', which was published nearly 12 months ago. That recommended the establishment of an independent environmental protection agency. I am sure that you recall, Mr Speaker, that after a debate on the matter, the majority of Members voted for the establishment of such a body. There is dissatisfaction at the performance of the Environment and Heritage Service that goes further than just to elected representatives. Indeed, the Waste Management Advisory Board has documented that criticism in a report, as has a Westminster Select Committee. In October, another scathing report on the matter was published as part of the criminal justice review. Having examined all those points and taken into consideration the public's growing concern about ensuring that the environment is adequately protected in the future, it is clear that once the Assembly makes its decision on the matter, the money needs to be available to act quickly to establish the independent environmental protection agency.

The SDLP welcomed, in the Minister's Budget statement, the opportunities for economic investment that would, it was hoped, impact on all areas. However, we now have some concerns. Last week, Invest Northern Ireland announced its new strategy, which made it very clear that, in future, its efforts to attract foreign inward investment will focus on Belfast and Derry. That is a worrying statement, which sends out a message that Invest Northern Ireland, in spite of the comments about it and the criticism of it on the Floor of this House, is still not taking seriously the need to address those areas that, historically, have been economically disadvantaged.

Side by side with that is investment in tourism, which, again, the Minister highlighted in his Budget statement. There is a concern that the five signature projects established by the Tourist Board will attract the greatest share of the tourism budget. Two counties in Northern Ireland do not have signature projects — Fermanagh and

Tyrone. As a representative for the constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, I want to draw attention to the concern that the money available for the tourism sector will be swallowed up by the areas with signature projects and that the other areas will be further disadvantaged.

Dr Deeny: I thank the Minister for his statement. I want to make some comments and voice some concerns about health matters, which is my area of interest.

Of course, there can never be enough money for the Health Service. However, I am well aware, having seen inefficiencies in the Health Service down the years — administrative duplication and sometimes triplication, for example — that a balance must be struck between input and efficiency savings. Having said that, I am disappointed that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety settled for an uplift of only £17 million in the final Budget, which is less than half of 1% of his entire budget.

My concern is whether there will be sufficient funds to address the points raised in the report by Professor Appleby and deliver the health services that the public need and deserve. Will there be adequate funding to deliver the mental-health services needed and implement the important recommendations of the Bamford Review? Mental health is an important issue for the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and, as a GP, I know that a properly funded service benefits everyone.

As Members know, Northern Ireland has the highest rate of economic inactivity in the UK, and 40% of people who are economically inactive have mental-health problems. I feel that it is, therefore, important to say, both as a doctor and as a member of the Health Committee, that every area must have sufficient finance, and not just for treatment. Healthcare providers have wised up to the fact that modern healthcare is not just about waiting until the illness occurs; it is about preventing ill health. That is vital.

Furthermore, there is — rightly — a shift towards the community. Communities can play their part in preventing ill health and mental ill health. To ensure that that happens, it is necessary to direct funding into the community. Community care in tackling mental-health issues is, again, vital. Having worked as a doctor for well over 20 years, I have no doubt that good emotional and mental health leads to good physical health. With that comes a more economically active and productive population, and that benefits all of us, as well as the Northern Ireland economy.

I was delighted to hear the Minister say that every MLA must hold Departments to account in whatever way possible. That is important, and it is our duty as elected representatives. What has been said time and time again must be borne through, and we must see to

it that money is spent wisely, and nowhere more so than in the area of health.

On the subject of front-line services, I refer to my own area. Just two hours ago, I heard of another baby in County Tyrone — I do not yet know whether it is a boy or a girl — born on the floor, and delivered by the father. That makes roughly one a month, which is a shocking situation in a developed country. That is where front-line services are; there is a deficiency, and that must be addressed.

For years, I have said that, although good managers and administrators are necessary in the Health Service, we do not need an over-abundance of them. Efficiency savings can be made there.

With regard to healthcare and spending money wisely, people are sometimes short-sighted. For example, drugs called statins reduce cholesterol and prevent heart attacks and strokes. There is the view that they are too expensive and that they should not be prescribed. That is short-sighted. Take, as an example, a patient who is not treated and ends up having a stroke. If the patient survives but is left disabled or paralysed, there will be the cost of occupational therapy, physiotherapy, long stays in hospital wards, then, potentially, years of long-term community care. We must think sensibly and futuristically as regards healthcare. Money spent sensibly on prevention will mean a decrease in waiting lists and in the occupancy of hospital beds.

There must be high investment in health, together with major efficiency savings. We may then have a Health Service to compare with those in the rest of the developed world. With that, I guarantee that we will have a happier, healthier population that is more economically active and productive.

The Minister can take my word for it that the Health Committee will hold the Department to account, particularly on financial matters.

Mr B Wilson: The Executive's five-point strategy includes the objective of protecting and enhancing our environment and natural resources. The Budget statement proposed to improve the quality of Northern Ireland's natural and built environment and heritage, and to reduce our carbon footprint.

2.00 pm

Sustainability was the key theme. Building a sustainable future is a crucial requirement if the Executive's economic, social and environmental policies are to be realised. To achieve those worthy objectives, additional resources are necessary. However, nothing in the supply figures suggests that those resources will be provided. There has been a long-standing underfunding of environmental issues in Northern Ireland, and it looks as though the Supplementary Estimates will allow that to continue.

Northern Ireland workers make significantly less use of public transport than their UK counterparts. In 2004-06, 6% of the population in Northern Ireland used public transport, compared to 12% in the UK. However, the proportion of the DRD budget that will be invested in public transport is due to fall over the next 10 years. If we hope to increase the use of public transport, we must provide additional funding.

The commitment to introduce a rapid transit system is welcome. However, consideration has been given to that project for at least a decade, and work on it will not start until 2011. That proposal was contained in the regional transportation strategy for Northern Ireland for 2002-12, and it formed part of the 2002 Programme for Government. Again, funding for it should have been provided. The supply figures should have mentioned that funding in order that the project, which will greatly reduce pollution in the city, might be expedited.

The Green Party is disappointed at the imbalance that exists between capital expenditure on roads and on public transport. By 2010-11, when that imbalance has been somewhat dissipated, we will still be spending 160% more on roads than on the rest of the transportation infrastructure put together.

The Executive's aim is to reduce the carbon footprint by at least 25% by 2025, but there is no suggestion either of how that can be achieved or of the provision of additional funding. I welcome that objective, but I am concerned that no interim target has been set and that there is no evidence that there has been any change in policy to meet the 2025 target. Such long-term targets are ineffective and will achieve nothing unless they are accompanied both by changes in policy and by adequate funding. To achieve the target, we must get commuters out of cars and on to public transport. However, an examination of the DRD capital investment programme for the next 10 years shows a 4:1 ratio in favour of roads. That differential is increasing. If we are ever to decrease our carbon emissions, we must do more to encourage the use of public transport.

I am also concerned that the budget for the Environment and Heritage Service is being reduced over the next three years, despite our having been assured that that body will be able to carry out the role of the proposed environmental protection agency.

Figures show that Northern Ireland also has the lowest share of electricity that is produced from renewable energy sources — 1.9 % compared to the EU average of 13.7 %. However, there is no obvious additional funding to meet the objective of increasing the use of renewable energy sources.

The Executive state that climate change and rising fossil-fuel prices have focused attention on finding renewable energy sources. Again, the supply figures give no evidence of that.

The most disappointing aspect of the figures is that nothing was included for the renewal of the Reconnect grants. The decision to abolish them and the change in building regulations sound the death knell for many small businesses in Northern Ireland. Over the past two years, DETI has encouraged firms to develop skills in the installation of renewable energy systems. Its staff were encouraged to take courses, which were funded by the Department, at the Renewable Energy Installer Academy. More than 800 installers completed those courses. That meant that an industry that was based in new technology was evolving and students were developing skills that were increasingly in demand, North and South.

However, that developing industry depended on a demand for microgeneration systems. The end of the Reconnect grants and the Minister of Finance and Personnel's decision to amend building regulations have destroyed that demand. The installers rightly feel betrayed. They argued that they had been let down by the Government and that they wasted time and money in acquiring those skills, only to find no demand for them. Some of the installers even said that they would be forced out of business if the Reconnect grants, or similar support, were not made available immediately.

The decision runs counter to the Executive's claim that they intend to encourage growth in our indigenous private sector. Northern Ireland is losing small businesses that could develop into much larger ones. That is a betrayal of everyone that is involved in the renewable energy scheme, and I appeal to the Minister of Finance and Personnel to find a way to support the installers. We cannot afford to lose a large number of small businesses that are at the cutting edge of technology.

The Executive claim to be concerned about climate change, but the policies that they intend to implement will have a detrimental effect on the environment. The Executive claim to be green, and to support sustainability, but there is nothing in the Budget to substantiate those claims. In fact, all the evidence is to the contrary. The abolition of Reconnect grants to small renewable energy systems and the reduction in the percentage of the Department for Regional Development's budget for public transport, together with the Minister of Finance and Personnel's recent decision to change building regulations so that the inclusion of renewables in new buildings is no longer mandatory have totally negated the Executive's claim to support sustainability.

Mr Speaker: Question Time begins at 2.30 pm, so I propose, by leave, to suspend the sitting until that time. We will take a private notice question at 4.00 pm, after which the Minister of Finance and Personnel will make his winding-up speech on the Supply resolutions.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 2.06 pm.

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

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Repair of School Buildings: East Derry/Londonderry

1. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Education to outline the Department's budgetary provision for the repair of school buildings in the East Derry/Londonderry constituency in (i) 2008; and (ii) 2009. (AQO 1802/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Tá mé tiomanta d'fhoirgnimh scoile a fheabhsú. Tá i bhfad níos mó i gceist ná deis a chur ar na foirgnimh atá ann cheana féin. Beidh ról tábhachtach ag an infheistíocht chapitil, ar tháinig méadú uirithi le blianta deireannacha, ag feabhsú na timpeallachta foghlama.

I am committed to improving the condition of school buildings. That involves much more than repairs to existing buildings. Capital investment, which has increased in recent years, will play a significant part in the creation of an improved learning environment. My aim is for a sustainable schools estate that is planned on an area basis to meet local needs. It will comprise modern schools that are managed — individually and through collaboration — on a sound financial footing and that provide high-quality education for all children.

In recent years, capital investment has been starting to have an impact, and that will continue in the years to come. Over the next three years, allocations to my Department from the budget for schools capital are: £205 million in 2008-09; £244 million in 2009-2010; and £195 million in 2010-11. That funding will help to ensure that we continue to progress a significant programme of projects for renewal, upgrading and refurbishment.

In addition to capital funding, my Department includes an additional maintenance budget in funding that is allocated to education and library boards each year. That funding is allocated specifically to help boards to address high-priority maintenance needs in schools. In the next three years, planned additional maintenance allocations for all boards are: £18 million in 2008-09; £19 million in 2009-2010; and £19 million in 2010-11.

The amount of funding that has been allocated to maintenance by the Western Education and Library

Board and the North Eastern Education and Library Board, which are responsible for education services in East Derry, is decided each year as a portion of the block grant. The boards will not be in a position to establish their planned maintenance funding for 2008-09 and 2009-2010 until after the block grants for those years have been allocated.

I assure Members of my commitment to provide a modern schools estate that is fit for the twenty-first century. Capital investment together with a sustainable approach to the management of the schools estate will achieve that and will lead to a more efficient use of resources.

Mr G Robinson: I have received complaints from parents and school staff in my East Londonderry constituency. Will the Minister agree that the money that she is wasting on daft ideas about changes to a perfectly good world-class education system would be more wisely invested in the essential maintenance of existing school buildings that are decaying by the day?

Ms Ruane: I do not agree with the Member. It is important to have a world-class education system. People are aware of the academic excellence that is part of our education system. However, people are also aware of the tail of underachievement. Perhaps the Member is OK with the fact that 12,000 young people leave our schools each year without GCSE English and mathematics; it is certainly not OK for me. We must provide a world-class education system for all our children and young people. It worries me that some Members do not understand the importance of that.

Capital funding is also important in making our school buildings fit for the twenty-first century. The Member will be glad to know that, in the past two years, £4.3 million capital funding has been spent in his East Derry constituency, of which £2.6 million was spent in 2005-06 and £1.7 million in 2006-07.

Three major capital projects are being progressed in East Derry. They have a total estimated cost of £10.1 million. The sum of £1.1 million has been allocated to the amalgamation of Largy, Dungiven and Burnfoot primary schools, and work started on that project in August 2007. A new building for Ballykelly Primary School has been allocated £3.3 million, and the estimated start date for that project is November 2008. The amalgamation of Lime Grove and Glasvey special schools has been allocated the sum of £5.7 million, and the estimated start date for that project is May 2009. Since 2003, funding of £865 million has been announced for 132 major capital projects across the North of Ireland.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the news from the Minister that money is being spent in East Derry, and I look forward to further announcements of that kind.

I also agree that too many children leave school without basic skills.

I ask the Minister for an assurance that capital projects that have been approved but held up have not been held up because of doubts about the future of post-primary education or sustainable schools.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. Thank you for that question.

Five other planned maintenance works were postponed or cancelled for reasons other than budget pressures. The installation of double glazing at Kilrea Primary School was held up because of high contract price. That work will be re-tendered in 2008-09 to achieve better value for money, pending availability of finance. Work at Garvagh High School on external redecoration and replacement windows was cancelled due to concerns about long-term enrolment.

Resurfacing work at Ballytober Primary School was cancelled due to the installation of new mobile classrooms, and repairs were carried out to bitmac surfaces only. Re-roofing of Culcrow Primary School was held up because of problems with asbestos removal, and work on a replacement roof is planned for 2008-09. Work on external redecoration and replacement windows for Coleraine College has been cancelled due to a proposed new-build scheme.

The Western Education and Library Board postponed two planned maintenance works in East Derry because of in-year budget pressures: window replacement at Limavady Grammar School and external redecoration at Ballykelly Primary School. The board hopes to carry out both works in 2008-09. Tenders for the window replacement work at Limavady Grammar School are currently being accepted.

The North Eastern Education and Library Board has postponed one maintenance works in East Derry because of in-year budget pressures — external redecoration at Cullycapple Primary School. The board hopes to carry out that work in 2008-09.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tugaim mo bhuíochas don Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she further outline her existing plans and tell me whether she feels they are on course to be delivered in time?

Ms Ruane: The Department of Education has a programme of investment that will update the schools estate to meet future education needs. That programme includes major building projects to improve the schools estate — including new schools, extensions and refurbishments. The programme also includes a range of minor works, including provision of specialist accommodation, health-and-safety works and improved access for people with disabilities. The Department of Education and the Strategic Investment Board are working collaboratively to introduce new procurement and delivery arrangements that will handle the increased level of investment effectively.

Classroom Assistants' Dispute

2. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Education to detail the progress she had made in resolving the classroom assistants' dispute. (AQO 1796/08)

Ms Ruane: Is conspóid chasta fhada í seo idir na boird oideachais agus leabharlainne mar fhostaitheoirí agus na ceardchumann. Tá socrúithe ann trína ndéantar caidreamh tionsclaíoch, agus ní bheadh sé oiriúnach domsa páirt dhíreach a bheith agam sna cainteanna.

This has been a long-standing and complex dispute between the education and library boards, as employers, and the trade unions. There are established arrangements through which industrial relations are conducted, and it is simply not appropriate for me to become directly involved in that negotiation machinery.

However, having accepted that the matter had gone on for far too long, I undertook to do everything in my power to encourage and assist both sides to reach a resolution that would prevent any further disruption to children, parents and schools, and which would enable classroom assistants to receive the money that they are due. Consequently, during the course of the dispute, I met and corresponded with representatives from management side, a wide range of officials from the four unions involved, classroom assistants, political representatives and school principals.

A collective agreement on the management side offer was reached at a meeting of the joint negotiating council on 30 November 2007, through unanimous vote on the management side and a majority vote on the trade union side. I will outline the main elements of that agreement, the first of which is a buyout of historic terms and conditions. All classroom assistants will receive a one-off payment of £2,478 or £1,603, depending on their length of service.

The outcomes of the job evaluation will be implemented based on three new grades: classroom assistant general, classroom assistant special needs, and classroom assistant additional special needs. Revised salaries and arrears will be paid on that basis.

The boards have agreed to implement substantial pay-protection arrangements and have agreed that no current classroom assistant will lose out on their pension as a result of the implementation of job evaluations.

I have instituted a ministerial review of the planning and management of the education workforce in schools. The boards and trade unions have agreed to work together to address other issues such as classroom assistants' qualifications, pay structures, terms and conditions and career development.

Although NIPSA voted against the proposed offer, the agreement is binding on the boards under the constitution of the joint negotiating committee. I have

been advised that the rules and constitution of the joint negotiation committee have been agreed by all parties, including NIPSA.

Letters were sent to all classroom assistants by the respective boards in December 2007 explaining the terms of the agreement and inviting their acceptance by 31 March 2008. I welcome that agreement, which represents significant progress for pupils, parents, schools and classroom assistants.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she accept that job evaluations are underpinned by the principle that an individual employee, whose job is being evaluated, will not lose out financially after the outcome of the process? Furthermore, will she comment on the current claims that special-needs classroom assistants will have their hourly rate reduced by as much as 95p an hour?

Ms Ruane: I have answered the question, and I will repeat my answers. The outcome of the job evaluations has been agreed by the joint negotiating committee, and will be implemented based on three new grades: the classroom assistant general, classroom assistant special needs and classroom assistant additional special needs. As I said, revised salaries and arrears will be paid on that basis. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor.

Ms Ruane: I am answering the question.

The boards have agreed to implement substantial pay-protection arrangements, and have agreed that no current classroom assistant will lose out on their pension as a result of the implementation of job evaluations.

Mr Newton: Answer the question.

Ms Ruane: I would be able to answer the question if I was not being so rudely interrupted.

I have instituted a ministerial review of the planning and management of the education workforce in schools. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra.

I thank the Minister for outlining the measures she has taken to try to resolve the classroom assistants' dispute and to bring about an improvement in that situation. Will the Minister give an assessment of the important role that classroom assistants play in helping children — particularly children with special needs — to develop both educationally and socially? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. Classroom assistants play an essential role in the day-to-day education of children with special-education needs. I have witnessed their work in special schools and in mainstream settings. They provide invaluable support

— under the close guidance of teachers — for children with special-educational needs, which includes personal care, medical needs and progress in the classroom.

Education and library boards take into account a number of factors when making recommendations for classroom assistant support. Boards consider the severity and nature of a child's disability, the number of children in a given class or school with similar special needs, the need to provide appropriate levels of support for the pupil for his, or her, education and social development, and the need to encourage the long-term independence of the pupil.

In recent years, the Education and Training Inspectorate has considered the use of classroom assistants in a number of surveys, and has advised that classroom assistant resources can be most effectively utilised when teachers and classroom assistants have a shared understanding of their respective roles.

The current review of special education and inclusion, which will be going out for public consultation in the coming months, has considered a number of issues, including the totality of in-school provision for children with special-education needs.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for the detail that she has provided so far.

A so-called collective agreement to resolve the classroom assistants' dispute was arrived at on 30 November 2007. Given that NIPSA represents 2,679 classroom assistants, whereas the other trade unions represent a combined total of 1,185 classroom assistants, how representative were the trade unions that arrived at that agreement?

2.45 pm

Ms Ruane: I hope that the Member is not trying to undermine the machinery of trade union and employer negotiations. He should do more research; NIPSA has provided figures from the education and library boards showing that it represents the clear majority of classroom assistants across the five boards. The Member is adhering to propaganda, which states that the views of the majority of classroom assistants are being ignored because NIPSA did not accept the offer. The membership figures that NIPSA quotes for each union are misleading, because they count only those classroom assistants who pay deductions to trade unions through the payroll. The boards pointed that out to NIPSA when they provided the information on deductions through the payroll. Although payroll deduction is the preferred method for the collection of NIPSA subscriptions, the other trade unions recommend that members pay their membership subscriptions by direct debit from their bank accounts. The only way to find out the complete number of classroom assistants in each trade union is to contact each

union directly. I respectfully suggest that the Member do that, rather than selectively quoting incorrect statistics.

Corpus Christi College, Belfast

3. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Education to detail progress on the development of a full service network school at Corpus Christi College, Belfast.
(AQO 1921/08)

Ms Ruane: Thug mé ceadú i bprionsabal do bhunú Lónra Pobail Lán-Seirbhíse a bheas láraithe ar Choláiste Corpus Christi ar 21 Samhain.

I gave my approval in principle to the establishment of a full service community network centred on Corpus Christi College on 21 November 2007. Since then, departmental officials have worked closely with the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) on the operational arrangements. I attended the launch of the new full-service school.

A project manager has been appointed and a project board established. The first meeting of the project board was on 29 January, chaired by the Belfast Education and Library Board, and it was agreed that the immediate priority was the finalisation of a project initiation document detailing the operational arrangements, aims and objectives of the project, and the completion of an action plan which draws on feedback already received from the local community and sets out in detail work already completed and priorities and actions for 2008-09, with further years in outline. The second priority is the development of a communication strategy that will ensure open and effective dialogue between the project manager and the local community. It is hoped that those objectives will be completed by 31 March 2008.

I have seen at first hand the benefits that accrue when schools work in close partnership with the local community. That was particularly evident when I visited the Belfast Model School for Girls, which has been working to create a full service school in partnership with the Belfast Boys' Model School. Specific interventions have been introduced to promote the value of education, to tackle some of the barriers that young people in that area face and to help raise levels of aspiration and self-esteem. Working holistically and in a joined-up way like that gives young people the best opportunity to succeed in education.

We want the full service community network for the Ballymurphy area to learn from the experience of the model schools and develop its own approach to meet the requirements of the community that it serves. The challenge is to raise the attainment of pupils, realise their true potential and support lifelong learning, in keeping with my Department's draft policy, 'Every

School a Good School', which is currently out for consultation.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I know that the Minister is aware of the problems in the Ballymurphy area. Will she outline the benefits that the network will bring to Ballymurphy?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. Is ceist an-tábhachtach í sin.

That is a very important question. The creation of a full service school network will help to provide the Ballymurphy area with a model to draw together the different strands of support that are available, and will lead to an improvement in educational achievement and social cohesion.

As the Member knows, that is one of the most disadvantaged areas and it is one of the top areas as regards the Noble indices. The full service network will establish and maintain strong links between schools; local communities, including statutory agencies; the business community; organisations in the voluntary and community sector; and parents — one of the key groups. The priority is to raise pupils' attainment and achievement and support lifelong learning. Therefore, the Department expects to see a strong focus in the network on better integration and partnering of services while providing opportunities for family learning.

Alongside conventional school programmes, we expect to see provision for preschool activities, health and well-being programmes and the base for other local services such as libraries, leisure facilities and healthcare providers.

Mr Attwood: A full service network school is an appropriate intervention in disadvantaged areas, not least in Ballymurphy, where there was the awful situation in which schoolchildren were in conflict with each other as a result of a wider situation. I acknowledge the work of CCMS, the school and the many individuals and families in Ballymurphy who, working independently or with others, have stabilised the situation greatly. However, given the scale of the full service network, does the Minister believe that that scheme could be rolled out in other schools and in other disadvantaged areas? As a result of the Budget negotiations, does she have a dedicated budget to do in other parts of Northern Ireland what she has outlined that this will do in Ballymurphy?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. I agree with the Member about the importance of a full service network school in Ballymurphy and in the Girls' Model School and the Boys' Model School. The work under way in Ballymurphy and the existing demonstration pilot in north Belfast presents real opportunities to test new ideas on how best to link schools more closely with their communities. We want to learn from those projects and look for ways to apply that learning in other locations.

I am considering my Budget allocations, and I will be making an announcement shortly. I will be looking at school improvement and literacy and numeracy, and I will be dealing with the tail of underachievement in our education system while continuing with our academic excellence. Those two schools are important projects and we will be studying the results carefully.

Mr McClarty: Given that the Minister's aim is equality, why are some schools in some areas selected and others are not?

Ms Ruane: I take equality very seriously. I have referred to the two schools that are full service network schools, the Girls' Model School and the Boys' Model School, and to Corpus Christi College in Ballymurphy. Obviously, the Member will know that I have launched my revised school-improvement policy, 'Every School a Good School'. I have been out and about in different parts of the North of Ireland visiting schools in disadvantaged areas and areas that are not disadvantaged, and I look forward to continuing with those visits. I wish that I had money for a full service school in every part of the North. The Department will look carefully at the results of the projects and how they can be improved. Go raibh maith agat.

Links Between Schools and the Business Community

4. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Education to detail her plans to strengthen links between schools and the business community. (AQO 1819/08)

Ms Ruane: Tá naisc láidre ag cuid mhór scoileanna le lucht gnó cheana féin, agus ba mhaith liom cur leo sin ar dhóigheanna éagsúla.

Many schools already have strong links with the business community, and I want to build on those links in several ways. Indeed, at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in Dundalk last week, we looked at developing the economy in Ireland and the important role that education will play in providing the necessary skills.

I will start with the revised curriculum. As a result of feedback from businesses, I had useful discussions with the CBI, the Institute of Directors and Business in the Community. We have introduced a much clearer focus on the skills needed to support the transition from education to the world of work; not just literacy, numeracy and ICT, but also the ability to make informed decisions, to work as part of a team and communicate effectively with others. We will continue to support employability initiatives to help schools and young people make connections between the curriculum and business.

A few examples are: the Foyle School and Employer Connections (FOSEC) scheme in the north-west, with

its adopt-a-class and work-experience programmes; Sentinus on the science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) agenda; Business in the Community, which organises work-experience placements for year 12 pupils; and the Aisling Bursary initiative in west Belfast, which is a very dynamic programme. I had the privilege of speaking at one of its events before I became a Minister.

My Department is working with the Department for Employment and Learning to improve the quality of careers education, information, advice and guidance and to explore ways of attracting more young people to careers in STEM — science, technology, engineering and mathematics — subjects; and I recently met the STEM review team. That work will provide more opportunities for business to work more closely with schools to ensure that young people are made aware of the career pathways that are on offer in their areas.

Finally, many local businesspeople are already directly involved in running schools as governors, and I pay tribute to them for undertaking that voluntary role and for their readiness to share important skills with school leaders. There is scope for many more people, not only from business but from all sectors of our community, to serve in that capacity, and I will examine the best ways in which to encourage them to do so.

Mr Moutray: Will the Minister tell the House how high up her list of priorities is the need to ensure that the education system in Northern Ireland produces a workforce that is more competitive, more effective, better skilled and more attractive to business investors than that of our closest competitor, the Irish Republic?

Ms Ruane: We do not need to be in competition with the South of Ireland; we must work collaboratively with it. That is one reason why that matter was high on the agenda of last week's meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council. We can learn from the South and the South can learn from us; we are not in competition with each other.

I agree with the Member that education is very important. I mentioned that 12,000 young people leave school without GCSEs in English and maths. That is a serious problem for our society, and I intend to deal with it. I look forward to working collaboratively with all Members in order to do that. The system must not continue to fail a huge percentage of our young people; we must build a flexible, dynamic and creative education system. There are some very interesting models of further-education colleges and post-primary schools working together, and we must continue with those initiatives. We must also develop creative ways of thinking, because many businessmen and women and entrepreneurs think very creatively.

Mr Neeson: Would the Minister consider introducing lessons in citizenship or civics into the curriculum,

because they would give students a greater understanding of business life and broader everyday issues, such as consumer affairs?

Ms Ruane: Citizenship is included in the curriculum; it is very important that that is included, and I share the Member's interest in it. Being a good citizen is important, especially given the times in which we live. Consumer affairs are increasingly important, given the wide array of foodstuffs and clothes that are available, and the effect that that has on our lives. It is important that we take a proactive approach in challenging discrimination. I cannot find the right word, but the Member will know what I mean. It is important that we have active, strong citizens who are prepared to stand up for their rights.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister agree that co-operation between business and education can be mutually beneficial, with the curriculum becoming more relevant to students and students having a better understanding of future job prospects? Does she have any specific, costed plans that would assist that aim; and how will she ensure that local chambers of commerce, trade bodies and individual businesses will create better connections with local schools?

Ms Ruane: First, I have had discussions with the CBI, the Institute of Directors and with Business in the Community. As I said, there were discussions at the North/South Ministerial Council, and it is important that we continue with initiatives to build co-operation. I am also working with Reg Empey, the Minister for Employment and Learning, on careers-development education and strategy, because that is a crucial area in post-primary education.

3.00 pm

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Careers Education

1. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions he has had with the Minister of Education on the enhancement of careers education. (AQO 1850/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I held discussions with the Minister of Education on two occasions, 5 June 2007 and 13 August 2007, in relation to the development of an all-age careers education, information, advice and guidance strategy for Northern Ireland. That work is being taken forward by officials from both Departments. The aim is to develop effective career decision-makers, leading to increased participation in education, training and employment. The joint strategy was issued for consultation in October 2007 and responses are being analysed.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Minister agree that, given the current weakness identified in the career structure of the school system, it is essential that businesses become more involved in careers guidance?

Sir Reg Empey: I agree. Developing employability skills and opportunities for work-related learning are key parts of careers education. Activities may include work-based assignments, industrial visits, mock interviews and industry days. Employers can play a key part by providing expert input to those activities and meaningful work-placement opportunities.

Enhanced careers education depends on full participation by the business community to ensure meaningful provision for all students. In Assembly debates in the past few weeks, particularly those relating to apprenticeships, I emphasised to Members the absolute importance of employer involvement. The Assembly cannot create apprenticeships: businesses must be part of the process. Ultimately, their future labour supply depends on it. Therefore, it is in their short- and long-term interests to assist us.

Mr Spratt: In recent weeks, it has been brought to my attention by students that many careers advisers place all the emphasis on third-level education. Although that must be encouraged, does the Minister agree that careers advice for people seeking vocational paths should run in parallel?

Sir Reg Empey: I thank Mr Spratt for his question; it raises a fundamental issue. As he knows, the Department is reviewing the careers strategy. Some proposals are designed to make it more accessible. It is free, and it has to be impartial and accessible.

There is a widespread problem in the community: the way the academic and non-academic routes are valued causes difficulties for pupils making choices at the ages of 13 and 14. The influences on them at that stage include those of parents, family and peers. What we have at the moment is not right. We undervalue non-academic courses and professional qualifications to the detriment of the successful operation of the economy.

Members have a role to play in making it clear that the choice of a non-academic route should not be devalued. Other nations in Europe manage this very successfully: the Germans are a shining example. Members will have seen the television advertisements, running currently, that illustrate how some parents may be forcing children to take the wrong decisions.

Mr Spratt's point is fundamental: we must attend to it if we want to build and sustain a successful and competitive economy.

Mrs D Kelly: As a result of the Budget allocation to adult apprenticeships, which is 70% of the original bid, there will be insufficient moneys and opportunities for people to change career or acquire skills after graduating

to university, particularly in areas where there is employer and business demand. Is the Minister concerned about that?

Sir Reg Empey: That is always a risk; however, money is not the only issue. The Department can only do so much with funds. Many bids were met with insufficient funds. However, as I have said repeatedly, apprenticeships are not provided by Government but by employers, who must understand the link between their future bottom line, and training people today. Sadly, in many cases, that is not the case.

The vast majority of employers do not provide apprenticeships. As a community, we have some way to go to get that message across. In the coming months, I hope that we will re-examine all aspects of our Training for Success programme to ensure that we are getting the balance right.

Publicly Funded Projects

Mr Adams: Ceist uimhir a dó.

Sir Reg Empey: At the risk of being flippant, I assume that that was question 2.

2. **Mr Adams** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the measures that he intends to put in place to ensure that publicly funded projects, involving Government partnerships with outside organisations, only take place with full, open and constructive co-operation between project partners, in order to reduce the risk of partners withdrawing, such as happened in the Springvale project. (AQO 1859/08)

Sir Reg Empey: I will ensure that when my Department is considering projects that are being promoted by organisations working in partnership, structures will be in place to provide transparency and co-operation between the respective parties. The lessons learned from the Springvale project will be applied to all future projects of a similar nature.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat. I can see why you are the Minister for Employment and Learning.

Mr McNarry: He does not speak Irish, yet.

Mr Adams: Ná bí ag caint mar sin.

I have two questions for the Minister, and I thank him for his answer. I acknowledge that the mishandling of the Springvale project predates his tenure as a Minister. Will the Minister outline how he intends to respond to the enquiries of the Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee, which have exposed an appalling failure at the highest level of the Department for Employment and Learning in the collapse of the Springvale university campus proposals? Will he agree with the recommendations that substantial investment in new educational facilities in West Belfast is still

required, not least to deal with the needs of the people of that constituency, which includes the Shankill. Those people were made a promise that has been reneged upon. Go raibh maith agat.

Sir Reg Empey: The Member will be aware that the Department of Finance and Personnel made a full response, as is the procedure, in that case. The Department for Employment and Learning accepted that it should have been more proactive in advising the community of the position regarding the university. However, it was the university that made the decision.

The Member asked about the educational attainment potential of the site, and he will be aware that a workforce and economic development centre and a community outreach centre will be built at Springvale. The question is whether that will be adequate for the needs of the community in that area. A substantial amount of capital resource, around £13.5 million, is being put into it. If anyone has any other ideas about further developments that they feel would be viable, they are welcome to put those to me.

Belfast Metropolitan College is enthusiastic about its current proposals, and it should be encouraged to get started. I hope that work will start shortly and that the centre can be open by 2010. That will be in the interests of the people of north and west Belfast.

Mrs Hanna: I regret that the University of Ulster, which had autonomy, withdrew from that site. Does the Minister agree that the strategy to develop the Springvale site, and to ensure that the people in that area have the opportunity to realise their potential, must involve not only the Department for Employment and Learning and the community, but the Department of Education, to ensure excellence at primary and secondary level, before excellence at third level is realised.

Sir Reg Empey: It is obvious that there is a relationship, because educational attainment does not start at university or at further education college — it starts at school. Clearly, there are problems in that area and, sadly, in others of a similar character. That is why groups such as the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Task Force were created. Special attention must be paid to that area.

Part of the Springvale site is owned by the Department for Social Development, which adds another dimension to the issue. The Member is correct that the problem cannot be chopped into individual segments. There must be a relationship from preschool through to further and higher education and work. It is a multidisciplinary issue. I regret that the Springvale project did not work out as anticipated, although a number of people at local government level raised warnings at an early stage of the process. It was most unfortunate that the University of Ulster's decision came at such a late stage.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Will the Minister confirm that the workforce and economic development centre is the only initiative that passed the test of potential viability?

Sir Reg Empey: A community outreach centre and the workforce and economic development centre have passed the necessary tests, and work has commenced on them. We look forward to the creation and development of the centres, because they will support business innovation and incubation, opportunities for individuals, the local community and small and medium-sized enterprises. They will provide pre-employment training and in-company training to enhance workforce skills, support product development, software engineering and other technologies. That area requires such training and, so far, those are the only matters that have passed through our processes. However, as I said to the Member for West Belfast Mr Adams, if other people come forward with ideas, we will be happy to consider them.

Review of the Apprenticeships Scheme

3. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give a time frame within which the consultation process will begin on the review of the apprenticeships scheme. (AQO 1828/08)

Sir Reg Empey: The Department met with the training suppliers in December 2007 and in January 2008 to assess the progress of the Training for Success programme and to discuss possible revisions. Officials are collating the responses into a proposal document, which will be issued at the end of February. The Department has also agreed to establish working groups, comprising training suppliers and departmental officials, through which any revisions to the provision will be finalised and issued by early May 2008.

Mr Shannon: Will the Minister accept that apprenticeship training is vital to underpin the success of the economy? Will he further confirm his intention to create career pathways for the vocational qualifications from levels 2 and 3, to include levels 4 and 5?

Sir Reg Empey: The honourable Member has raised this issue in the Chamber and through correspondence with me on a number of occasions; therefore, I understand fully his commitment to it. I reiterate what I said in answering a previous question: we can do everything possible to make schemes efficient and effective, but the employers are crucial in making them work. I do not wish to be overcritical, but there has been a reluctance — to put it mildly — to accept the need to provide apprenticeships.

When the Training for Success programme was introduced, we were moving from a point where employers took on apprentices for one year, to a point where employers are obliged to give apprentices a

contract and employ them. That was to prevent the exploitation of trainees and apprentices who worked for one year only to have the involvement with their employer ceased after that year.

3.15 pm

I have taken a long route in answering Mr Shannon's question, but I want to make the point that there is a problem in employers recognising the need to employ apprentices and provide that training. The Department for Employment and Learning can, and will, do everything in its power to place finished apprentices who cannot get jobs into the Job Ready strand of the Training for Success programme where they can prepare for future jobs and enter work placements. However, the fundamental point is that we need employers to engage and to provide the apprenticeship.

The apprenticeships scheme is being reviewed. That review is deliberate, because a number of Members have raised questions and issues about it. Training for Success only started in September, but if something is not right with it, what is the point of continuing with it as it is? We should be able to review it without having to apologise for doing so, and that is why the review is taking place. If it turns out that we have not got the balance right or that people tell us where we have gone wrong, we will do something about it. There is no point in having this place if we cannot react — and do so quickly.

I look to Mr Shannon, and others who have consistently made these points, for support. Now — during the review — is the time to give me your ideas. I will be happy to report to the Assembly on the outcomes of the review, which I hope will be available shortly.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I agree with the Minister. Employers must be encouraged to take on apprentices. However, there are added difficulties in constituencies such as Foyle, which I represent, where there is a shortage of employers. Subsequent to the meeting that I had with the Minister — which I appreciated — has he met with the North West Regional College to discuss its concerns regarding the review of modern apprenticeships in the north-west.

Sir Reg Empey: I understand the Member's concern about employers. However, we are where we are. There are a number of employers in that area; we must make the best of them and get the best from them. At our meeting, I told the honourable Member that some of her attention should be directed at employers, because they are the people who can provide the apprenticeships. The Department cannot manufacture apprenticeships, and we cannot force employers to take on apprentices.

If Members look at the national agenda, they will see that the treatment of apprentices is a big issue. Gordon Brown has focused on this widespread issue in recent weeks. I am aware of the issues in the north-

west. If there are aspects of Training for Success that do not meet the local requirements, and if, by amending the initiative, the Department can help to meet the local requirements, we will be foolish not to look at suggestions. However, I cannot prejudge the outcomes of the internal reviews, but the Member must relate with and talk to the local employers. They may be fewer in number than we would like, but they are the critical asset in that locality as far as apprentices are concerned.

Mr Neeson: Has the Minister identified specific industries where apprentices can be targeted?

Sir Reg Empey: Apprenticeships can be easily offered in some industries, such as construction. However, we are running into some difficulties in that area, because demand in the housing market has decreased in recent months. Migrant labour has also been available to us in recent years, but that was not available previously. I do not have the statistical proof, but the increase in migrant labour means that employers can ring an agent and request labour instead of having to train up apprentices for the future supply of labour. The risk with that is that a group of our local communities will be left behind. That is the danger of which we must be aware.

Regarding specific industries, there are many trades to which we are struggling to attract people. However, there are others in which we have achieved high rates of success — the Electrical Training Trust is achieving a success rate of about 85%. Therefore, there are good and bad results; however, in construction, we are experiencing problems.

Springvale Education Village Project

4. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the alternative measures that he is taking to help project promoters to fund the Springvale education village project, after the withdrawal of the University of Ulster from the partnership.

(AQO 1910/08)

Sir Reg Empey: Following the University of Ulster's withdrawal, Belfast Metropolitan College has taken over the Springvale education village project. It is now responsible for the community outreach centre and is working to deliver the workforce and economic development centre, which is a £13.5 million project that will be funded by my Department, the International Fund for Ireland and Belfast City Council.

I would be happy to consider any proposals for a potentially viable and sustainable development to provide additional educational facilities on the Springvale site.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle agus a Aire. You mentioned partnership approaches, and a partnership approach with DSD is

the basis of my question. Has the Minister's Department collaborated with the Minister for Social Development in order to advance the development of the Springvale campus? You said that the project has been badly handled, and as a representative for West Belfast, I must engage with you to ensure that that project succeeds. Have you met the Minister for Social Development to discuss that matter? Go raibh maith agat.

Sir Reg Empey: I cannot recall meeting with the Minister for Social Development to specifically discuss that subject. As the Member is aware, the site is divided into north and south sides, and, this afternoon, I have been referring to developments on the south side. The north side is owned by the Department for Social Development and, at this stage, I am not clear about its plans for that site. However, the International Fund for Ireland, my Department and Belfast Metropolitan College are proceeding to erect those centres, which I believe will be successful. I do not know of specific plans for the north side of the site, and we have not received any proposals other than those that I have outlined. I will refer the points raised by the Member to the Minister for Social Development.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister agree that, in order that community expectations are not built up only to be dashed, as happened in the past, any future proposals must be sustainable in the long term, and will he outline any development proposals for both sides of the Springfield Road?

Sir Reg Empey: I accept entirely the Member's comments about not wishing to repeat mistakes by unnecessarily raising expectations. As I said in my previous answer, no other proposals are on the table. The current proposal — which should be receiving more attention — is an exciting series of projects. I will also refer the Member's comments to the Minister for Social Development.

We are focused on delivering the projects in working order, hopefully, by 2010, and I believe that they will be a big boost for, and warmly welcomed by, people in that area. Considering the long time that it has taken — from 2000-01 to the present day and, indeed, for that site, long before — people want to see something happening and succeeding on that site, rather than just talking.

Independent Body for Student Complaints

5. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to establish an independent body for student complaints. (AQO 1941/08)

Sir Reg Empey: Although my Department has no plans to establish an independent body for student complaints, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has agreed, as part of its review of the Northern Ireland Ombudsman's Office, to consider extending the remits of the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and

the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints to include adjudicating on student complaints.

Ms Lo: Does the Minister agree that it is important to establish such an independent body, in order to achieve parity with the rest of the UK and so that students can have full confidence in their complaints being dealt with fairly, without undue influence from the university?

Sir Reg Empey: Clearly, that is the intention. There are a number of options. As Members know, there is a system of visitors at the two universities at the moment. I have looked at the number of complaints referred to the visitors at both universities; Members might be interested to know that, over the past five years, a total of 17 complaints have been so referred. There have been nine at the University of Ulster, and eight at Queen's, in the absence of a proposal such as the one that we are about to make. I do not know whether there might be more people prepared to make complaints under the revised arrangements, but the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is keen to proceed, and we will just have to see how it plays out.

I do not want Members to feel that there is no mechanism by which genuine issues can be dealt with; there is such a mechanism. OFMDFM's proposal to widen the remit of an existing structure is probably better than trying to invent a whole new free-standing system. The infrastructure is there, and I believe that it will meet any reasonable person's view of whether people have a proper mechanism for complaining.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome what the Minister has indicated that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister intends to do. However, would it not be more appropriate for the universities to establish, with help from outside, an independent body and mechanism beyond that of the ombudsman? My friend Mr Attwood has raised this with the Minister before. Perhaps that could be looked at by the universities.

Sir Reg Empey: I am aware of the issue. The way that OFMDFM is thinking at the moment is that this will be a totally free-standing, well-established, acknowledged and respected service, provided by the ombudsman's office, which is generally regarded as being free, independent and fair. It depends on what the workload might be. Seventeen complaints in five years is not exactly a heavy workload. I do not know how an independent body could be sustained on that basis. However, it is one of those things on which we will have to keep an open mind. I believe that there would be greater independence if this were dealt with through the ombudsman's office, which is widely accepted to be a fair and reasonable body to deal with complaints.

University of Ulster/ Queen's University: Research

6. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment he has made of the benefits

of the University of Ulster and Queen's University concentrating on a limited number of research areas in order to (i) develop specialisms; and (ii) attract funding to develop research and development opportunities.

(AQO 1935/08)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department has not carried out any specific assessment. However, given that there are only two universities, there is a need for them to provide a high-quality, internationally competitive research base to enhance the contribution that they make to economic, social and cultural well-being in Northern Ireland. This quality-related research enables the universities to lever funds from a variety of other sources, which allows them to develop specialities. The recently announced funding for additional PhDs will be targeted at STEM subjects, which I am sure the Member will support.

Dr McDonnell: Does the Minister believe that the moneys released for PhD students, all-island research and innovation are sufficient for our innovation, research and development needs? I understand that 40% of the innovation fund will take the form of a welcome and important contribution from the Irish Government. Does the Minister believe that the good research and development work undertaken by the universities could be better targeted and more effectively worked out? Is there a case for some sort of assessment of the productivity and outcomes of what we get in the end? I am asking for more money and more accountability.

Sir Reg Empey: I agree with the Member about the fundamental issue. My Department received the lion's share of the innovation funds; we would have liked to have received more moneys, but we have to make the most of it. Compared with our competitors, research and development is weak in Northern Ireland. Much of it is led by the universities and by Government, and private-sector research and development is at a low ebb. We have had some success from university spin-outs, but that must improve. Universities are about to undergo another five-year research vetting exercise, and I hope that they do well. However, we have a long way to travel if our research and development capability is to reach the necessary levels for a competitive economy.

3.30 pm

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 1 has been withdrawn.

Job Location and Unemployment Levels

2. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to confirm that findings presented to

his Department in relation to a previous audit of targeting social need indicate that job location is a factor in unemployment levels in areas of high deprivation such as West Belfast.

(AQO 1876/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): I am aware of the 2003 interim evaluation of new targeting social need (TSN) policy, which made reference to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's focus on reducing unemployment through job promotion. As the Department's key contribution to new TSN, I am fully committed to seeking to stimulate economic growth in deprived areas and to help to narrow the gap on key indicators such as unemployment and economic inactivity between those areas and the rest of Northern Ireland.

Under the new public service agreement (PSA) commitments for 2008-11, Invest Northern Ireland will encourage 70% of new foreign direct investment projects to locate within 10 miles of an area of economic disadvantage.

However, in seeking to close the gap on key indicators, it is important for the House to acknowledge that there are many deep-rooted social and economic issues to be addressed, which will require co-ordinated efforts from all parts of Government, with support from the private sector.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a thabhairt don Aire as an fhreagra sin.

I thank the Minister for his answer. This issue has been raised previously, particularly in relation to investment projects in West Belfast. The Minister has confirmed that Invest NI has not sought any inward investment in that constituency in the past 12 months. Does the Minister agree that the Deloitte targeting social need audit, which was commissioned by his Department, concluded that the location of investment had a significant effect on employment in an area?

Will he also confirm that the report found that airlifting investment and employment to areas of greatest social need — to constituencies such as West Belfast, including the Shankill Road district — had the potential to reduce long-term unemployment in those communities? Given Invest NI's shameful failure to bring about investment in West Belfast, can the Minister explain why the findings of this TSN audit report have been blindly ignored?

Mr Dodds: I listened carefully to the Member's comments. In areas of economic disadvantage — West Belfast, parts of my constituency of North Belfast and other parts of the Province — Invest Northern Ireland can offer enhanced capital grants of up to 50% compared with the usual capped rate of 30%. Under the new PSA commitments, 70% of new foreign direct investment projects must locate within 10 miles of an

area of economic disadvantage. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has allocated £3.4 million of Peace II moneys to workspace development, which will create some 350 jobs in areas of economic disadvantage. There is also a public service agreement (PSA) target to acquire and develop 200 acres of land for industrial use, with 75% of that being in areas of economic disadvantage.

West Belfast contains almost all Invest Northern Ireland's industrial land bank in the city of Belfast — 35 acres of available land, which gives the area a significant opportunity. In 2006-07 — despite what the Member says and contrary to his pejorative remarks — Invest Northern Ireland offered almost £1 million in grant aid to existing clients in West Belfast in support of follow-on development projects.

Eighty per cent of the projects that go into South Belfast are earmarked for the city centre, which benefits all the Belfast constituencies and further afield. Council areas and parliamentary constituencies are not self-contained labour or employment areas, a point that I have made on several occasions.

Forty-four per cent of people of working age in West Belfast work in that constituency; the remainder work outside the constituency. That proves the point that creating jobs in travel-to-work areas does not simply involve what is located inside a parliamentary constituency, but the reasonable distance that people can travel.

Mr Beggs: Some areas with lower levels of unemployment also have the lowest job densities in Northern Ireland. For instance, people who live in Carrickfergus have to travel to Belfast to work.

Does the Minister agree that skills, training, good transport to allow people to get to their places of work and mobility for those who seek work are important?

Mr Dodds: The Member has made an important and useful point, and he is right to do so. I work closely with my colleague the Minister for Employment and Learning on developing skills. Moreover, I am the spokesperson and champion of the economy in the Executive, not only for my own Department. I want further investment in employment, learning and skills. I want investment in infrastructure in the Department for Regional Development and in telecommunications and energy. All those cross-cutting issues can help to improve economic productivity and prosperity.

The Member's point about travelling to work relates to my previous answer about people who live in one constituency and travel to work in another. An example of that is Seagate Technology Ltd, about which we recently had terrible news; I hope that future news will be good. Of the 766 people employed at Seagate, 261 lived in the Limavady area, 327 in the Londonderry area and 50 in the Coleraine area. I reiterate my point

that council areas or parliamentary constituencies are not self-contained labour markets, and people must bear that in mind when they raise such issues.

However, it is important that investment reaches all areas of the Province, including areas of high economic disadvantage.

Mr Gallagher: The Minister's Department gave a commitment in the Budget to wealth creation and job opportunities for all. Last week, before the ink was dry, Invest Northern Ireland announced that all future foreign inward investment would be directed towards Belfast and Derry. Can the Minister explain that? Does he understand that neither Belfast nor Derry is in the travel-to-work area for disadvantaged areas of Fermanagh and Tyrone?

Mr Dodds: I assure the Member and the Assembly that the targets set out for Invest Northern Ireland and for my Department were agreed in the Programme for Government and the public service agreements. The revised foreign direct investment key goal in the Programme for Government is to:

"Secure ... inward investment commitments, creating a minimum of 6,500 jobs, 85% of which will be above the NI private sector median wage."

That is important in cutting the productivity gap between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Seventy per cent of new foreign direct investment projects will be located within 10 miles of an area of economic disadvantage.

I am sure that many Members are aware that much of Invest Northern Ireland's assistance is demand-led. Ultimately, investors will decide whether to invest and where. To a large extent, where they invest will depend on a range of issues and on the nature of the service, trade or product of the investor. There may be a need for university graduates, good road infrastructure, large labour pools or other factors — all of which are relevant when an investor comes to deciding where to invest. The targets are clearly set out and do not discriminate against any part of the Province.

Next-Generation Broadband Coverage

3. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the steps being taken to ensure next-generation broadband coverage.

(AQO 1807/08)

Mr Dodds: The delivery of next-generation broadband coverage is the subject of a debate in Northern Ireland, across the United Kingdom and in Europe among regulators, telecommunications companies and consumers.

My Department is taking part in the debate through discussion with the industry, the regulator and the major telecommunications companies that operate in

Northern Ireland, all of which are in the early stages of developing their approaches to next-generation services. It is important that we continue to engage with the private sector in taking that work forward, and we have made a commitment in the Programme for Government to deliver widespread access to a next-generation broadband network by 2011.

Mr Buchanan: Does the Minister foresee any obstacles to meeting the Programme for Government targets or to delivering a next-generation broadband network by 2011 that will be available to all homes and businesses in Northern Ireland no matter where they are located?

Mr Dodds: Northern Ireland can be rightly proud of being the first region in Europe, not just in these islands, to have 100% broadband availability, whether by telephone line, cable or satellite; that commitment was delivered as a result of co-operation between British Telecom (BT) and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI).

The Member talked about ensuring that the next-generation of broadband is made as widely available as possible, and he is right to stress that. There are many complex issues that will be the subject of much discussion between the private sector, Government and others. In November 2007, officials from my Department attended a summit hosted by the then Minister of State for Competitiveness, Stephen Timms, along with industry stakeholders, to consider how next-generation broadband coverage would be delivered.

However, there are many problems, such as the digital divide, which must be reduced as much as possible. A steering group is to be formed to provide a shared vision for next-generation broadband coverage for the Minister on the mainland by summer 2008, and he can be assured that my Department will be fully engaged in all the discussions on next-generation broadband.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for his comments; I am absolutely delighted that we are moving on second-generation broadband.

However, I am given to understand by some people, particularly in the far rural west, that although we claim 100% broadband access, there are still pockets that do not have functional access to first-generation coverage. I know that 100% may mean technically that there is broad coverage, but what can we do to ensure that people in the far end of Fermanagh or Tyrone get access to first-generation coverage before we worry too much about the second generation?

Mr Dodds: I appreciate the Member's question, which is an issue that has arisen before in the House. Perhaps I can explain, because it is an important, complex technical matter.

As a direct result of the contract between my Department and BT, every household and business across all of Northern Ireland that wishes to avail of a broadband service can now do so at an equitable price. The problem is that 99% of broadband services in Northern Ireland are available over telephone lines, and 1% is delivered through wireless systems, specifically satellite. We have 320,000 customers whose service is delivered over telephone lines; 40,000 receive their broadband from cable television services; and some 680 have their services delivered by satellite.

As a result of the contract that was entered into between DETI and BT, the maximum cost, no matter how the service is provided, satellite or otherwise, is £27 a month with a £70 installation charge. In contrast, the cost of satellite broadband elsewhere in the United Kingdom is £72 a month with £1,400 for installation. The problem is the means by which the broadband service is delivered. Ninety-nine per cent receive broadband by telephone line, but there is a small group of people who, because of geographical remoteness, have to receive it by satellite.

As a result of the Government's contract with BT, however, broadband is still delivered at an extremely reasonable price, compared to the cost for its availability in other parts of the country. I hope that that goes some way towards explaining the issues.

3.45 pm

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. To some extent, the Minister has answered my question. Nevertheless, I will ask it again: does he still stand over his Department's claim that there is 100% access to broadband and equality of access? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Dodds: The answer that I gave just a moment ago dealt with that point. Nevertheless, I understand the Member's concern.

Compared to other regions of Europe, Northern Ireland's broadband coverage, right across the Province, is probably the best. When it comes to marketing the Province in pursuit of inward investment, that advantage is one of our unique selling points, which I am keen to see maintained. Several Members have raised specific issues on the matter, and I want my officials to tackle and try to resolve those issues. Individual cases should be drawn to the attention of officials, and we will look into those and clarify matters.

I hope that the House will be reassured that enormous efforts have been made, at expense to the public purse, to provide the type of coverage that people want. We do not want to create the digital divide that would otherwise have occurred.

Williamite Trail

4. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the progress that is being made on the setting up of a Williamite trail to encourage tourists to visit Northern Ireland. (AQO 1855/08)

Mr Dodds: The Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland is leading on the development of the Williamite trail in Northern Ireland and in the Irish Republic. Tourism Ireland is examining the scope for the production of promotional material for a Williamite trail and is discussing those matters with the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland.

I know that the Orange Order is keen to make the 12 July demonstrations and other associated events as accessible and positive as possible to both local people and visitors alike. As part of their efforts to build positive working relationships with the Orange Order, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board facilitated Welcome Host training with the marshals from last year's Enniskillen parade, which was one of two flagship events for the 12 July celebrations in 2007. Furthermore, I have accepted an invitation to a meeting with representatives of Belfast Orangefest Ltd later this month to discuss those matters further.

Mr McQuillan: What more can be done to maximise the tourism potential of events such as the shutting of the gates during the Relief of Derry celebrations, the Royal Black Preceptory parades, and the sham fight at Scarva?

Mr Dodds: Those events are well-known locally. Some may not be as well-known internationally, but they excite attention from people who are interested in cultural matters. The Scarva sham fight is mentioned in the accommodation guide that is produced by the Armagh Down Tourism Partnership. The annual Relief of Londonderry celebrations are promoted on the Tourist Board's website. I encourage any of the organisations that the Member mentioned to promote their events, if suitable, on that website. Some organisations have not been forthcoming and should therefore make full use of any promotional opportunities that are available.

InBev

5. **Mr Adams** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the assistance that Invest NI provided to InBev to relocate from the Glen Road to another site in West Belfast. (AQO 1860/08)

Mr Dodds: As the InBev facility located on the Glen Road was no longer engaged in manufacturing, it ceased to be eligible for assistance. Therefore, no Invest Northern Ireland (INI) support was provided to assist with the relocation. I understand that InBev intends to relocate the remaining distribution and

warehousing aspects of the business to a site on the nearby Boucher Road in south Belfast. Approximately 60 staff will be involved in that move. I welcome the fact that the site remains within reasonable travelling distance from the Glen Road location.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. However, it is very disappointing. I am aware of all the details of this matter, and I have spoken to InBev.

The company was keen to remain in west Belfast. However, it did not receive any help from Invest NI, despite the agency's having extensive vacant sites available. I want to register that fact.

Does the Minister accept that Invest NI's appalling record in retaining employment, such as that of InBev in west Belfast, is surpassed only by its chronic failure to attract new employment to the area? What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that Invest NI's policy and strategy are subject to equality impact assessment before the inward investment conference in May? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Dodds: I hope that the Member, and the whole House, listened carefully to the remarks that I made in response to a previous question. A common theme is emerging on the part of Mr Adams and some of his colleagues: attack Invest NI at every opportunity. In politics — and when one is seeking to take a political stance — perhaps everything is fair game. However, let us introduce some facts to the matter; let us have a little bit of objective analysis and sweep away some of the propaganda and PR. The fact of the matter is — as I have outlined already — that there is assistance. In 2006-07, £1 million was used to support existing clients. There have been successes there.

Of course, all of us who represent areas of great economic need want to see that more is done and that it is done more quickly. I am determined that all of Northern Ireland should benefit from the opportunities that now exist. Let us face the fact that we would have been a lot further down the road, and there would have been a lot less deprivation, if we had not had to endure the past 35 years of murder, madness and mayhem. Therefore, when people speak loudly in criticism of Invest NI and other agencies that are working hard to do what is necessary to bring in employment opportunities and wealth creation, let those people look occasionally at their contribution to society over the years.

I am determined, given the PSA targets and the Programme for Government commitments, that all of Belfast — north, west and other parts — will benefit from economic uplift and upturn. I am determined that Invest NI will deliver on the targets for the greater Shankill, and elsewhere, that I have set.

Mr Attwood: It is unfortunate that InBev is leaving the constituency, because it has been there for 100

years. Will the Minister consult INI to see what measures were taken to assist InBev to remain, given that — as the Minister indicated earlier — there is a 35-acre single parcel of INI land in West Belfast?

The Minister visited West Belfast before Christmas and met Delta Print and Packaging Ltd. It is one of our most successful indigenous employers, with factories in India and China. It was not a matter of propaganda when that company told him that it had had to jump enormous hurdles with INI to get grant aid. Will the Minister see whether INI — in that and other cases — will assist companies with marketing, capital, and training assistance?

Given that, as the Minister said earlier, businesses go where they want to go — which appears to be south Belfast, east Belfast and the city centre — is there a danger that the 35 acres of INI land in west Belfast will simply remain undeveloped and not be used for economic renewal?

Mr Dodds: I am sure that the Member will be the first to welcome any future investment. As far as the latter point is concerned, Invest NI holds about 190 acres of land in west Belfast, of which approximately 157 acres are occupied by client companies. That leaves 33 acres for industrial use. It is available for any eligible Invest Northern Ireland client.

In the past 12 months, Invest NI has sold three service sites that cover an area of 3.5 acres, 50,000 sq ft of factory sales, and 95,000 sq ft of building leases from its property portfolio in the west Belfast and greater Shankill area to client companies in support of development projects. There have been many expressions of interest in the land available, and I am confident that that will continue to be the case.

I want to point out the facts about InBev — facts are awkward things that sometimes get in the way of propaganda, but they are stubborn things that do not go away. In 2005, Invest Northern Ireland's selective financial assistance was available to companies operating in manufacturing and tradable services.

Before InBev's decision to close the site, the Glen Road brewery manufactured products, which it sold and distributed to Northern Ireland, the rest of the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic. When the company decided to cease manufacturing there, the brewing and soft drinks manufacturing lines were closed and the facility became a warehousing, sales and distribution operation only, with all products handled by the company being manufactured outside Northern Ireland. The consequent reduction in added-value activity meant that the company was no longer eligible for selective financial assistance, as was the case with Cantrell and Cochrane on the Castlereagh Road in 2001. Those are the facts.

The Member mentioned Delta Print and Packaging Ltd. I was delighted to visit the company recently to congratulate it on the tremendous strides that it has made in its joint-venture successes in India and China. The company has received significant assistance, and I commend those involved in the company for the way in which they have taken the business forward. I had a very useful meeting with the company's management, and I will continue to ensure that that relationship between the company and Invest Northern Ireland continues to grow and consolidate.

Mr McCausland: Will the Minister comment further on the position of Delta Print and Packaging Ltd in West Belfast and on Invest NI's support for the company?

Mr Dodds: It would not be terribly productive to go into the recent torturous history between Delta Print and Packaging Ltd and Invest Northern Ireland in detail. Suffice it to say that I am delighted that some issues have now been resolved. Both the company and Invest Northern Ireland are to be commended on their progress, and Invest Northern Ireland officials must be commended on the work that they put in to ensure that matters moved forward.

Delta Print and Packaging Ltd is a significant and valued employer in west Belfast, and it is truly internationally focused. It has done so well because it is innovative and sees its future as being export-oriented and internationally driven, and because of the skills and energy of the workforce. We need to grow our local indigenous companies' interest in, and commitment to, innovation, productivity and export growth.

Renewable Energy Target

6. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the steps that he is taking to ensure that the renewable energy target of 12% by 2012 is met. (AQO 1870/08)

Mr Dodds: The Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO) is our main support mechanism for encouraging generation from renewable sources. It continues to be very successful in stimulating renewable energy developments, especially wind farms. The Department expects that the support available to developers under NIRO will ensure that Northern Ireland meets, by 2012, its 12% target for the proportion of electricity consumption that will come from indigenous renewable sources.

Mr P Ramsey: Does the Minister agree that merging the fragmented energy bodies in Northern Ireland into one body, similar to Sustainable Energy Ireland, would better promote renewable energy and focus efforts to meet renewable energy targets. Has the Minister had

any discussions with the Energy Saving Trust advice centre in Northern Ireland?

Mr Dodds: I am grateful for the question. The Member raises an important issue. My Department is interested in exploring the proposition that there should be a more co-ordinated and strategic approach to renewable energy. As the Member knows, my Department is the lead Department in this area. I would like to closely examine whether there is room for a more united and cohesive approach towards the number of bodies in this area. My officials are in contact with a wide range of groups, and I look forward to having more meetings with them in the weeks and months ahead.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for his answer. The renewable energy target of 12% by 2012 is quite aggressive, and I welcome it.

What percentage of those renewables will be met by wind generation? The Minister may not have the information available today, but I would appreciate it if he could provide a breakdown of the make-up of the different types of renewables that are included in that 12% target.

4.00 pm

Mr Dodds: I will certainly provide more detail for the Member on that issue. The 12% target will be met primarily from large-scale wind generation. Micro-generation does contribute but will not be a critical factor in achieving the 12% target. Therefore, the vast majority of that target will be met through wind production and wind farms. As I said, I will write to the Member in more detail regarding that matter.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question Time is now at an end.

Mr O'Loan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I refer to the Standing Orders dealing with questions for oral answer. Twenty questions are listed for each Minister during Question Time. Today, the respective Ministers answered four, six and five of the listed questions. Therefore, one Minister answered only one in five of the listed questions. That creates a lot of frustration and annoyance among Members whose questions have been listed and who wait to pose those questions. It also frustrates Members who have submitted their names to be considered to ask supplementary questions. I know that this issue has already been brought to the attention of the Speaker, but I want to highlight the annoyance that a lot of Members feel.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will certainly note the Member's point, which was not a point of order. A rotation system is in place and the questions and supplementary questions are part of that. The Speaker or Deputy Speakers have no control over the length of the questions or the length of the answers.

Mr McCarthy: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. If the Speaker and Deputy Speakers

have no control over the length of time that Ministers take to answer questions, surely Members should. Members are entitled to have some sort of regulation as to the length of time that Ministers can take when answering questions. Often Ministers are simply waffling.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McCarthy, you are a member of the Business Committee. I am certain that the Business Committee will be able to deal with that issue.

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The allegation of filibustering has been made against Ministers who speak in both Irish and English. What is the excuse for those Ministers who speak in English alone?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That point was not raised today. As I said, the Business Committee will address all of the issues about Question Time and the answers given by Ministers.

PRIVATE NOTICE QUESTION

Clostridium Difficile

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of deaths in relation to which clostridium difficile has been a contributing factor, across each health and social care trust; and, in view of the widespread public concern about the issue, to indicate what plans he has to authorise a full public inquiry.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Interim figures show that clostridium difficile was mentioned on the death certificates of 77 people during 2007. Fourteen of those deaths were in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust area, 32 were in the Northern Trust area, 14 were in the South Eastern Trust area, seven were in the Southern Trust area and four were in the Western Trust area.

I have asked the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) to conduct a detailed independent review of all of the circumstances surrounding that incident and to make recommendations. That is a proportionate response, and I have no plans to authorise a public inquiry.

Mr McLaughlin: I am disappointed with the Minister's answer. When this issue first emerged in late January 2008, there were justifiable complaints about the drip-feeding of information. Various trusts said that statistics were unavailable and that they had different systems for recording such instances. To be fair, one trust was forthright about the circumstances with which it was dealing.

My understanding of the Minister's initial position is that he is requesting the investigation in the Northern Trust area only. Circumstances have demonstrated that a much wider investigation is required. The Minister appears complacent. To continue in that vein reflects an unnecessary level of denial and an alarming dimension of complacency. There is widespread public concern.

Thirty of the 77 deaths recorded in 2007 were reported in the last quarter — that is a 250% increase, and it raises concerns and questions. The public are entitled to have their concerns addressed by the Minister. Families who have lost loved ones are entitled to answers. Families with loved ones in hospital — particularly those who are old and frail — and people who have an upcoming stay in hospital, need to be assured that hospitals are safe places.

The Minister's statement is totally unsatisfactory. I know that there is widespread concern in the House, and I ask Members to make it clear to the Minister that the current situation is not acceptable. A full public inquiry is required: we need to know the reason for such a dramatic increase in what has been a long-

standing problem that has never been properly resolved.

Some medical professionals have said that it may not be possible to eradicate the problem, and have then gone on to say that the people who died were suffering from other illnesses and difficulties. The public deserve better than that; and they are entitled to better than that. It is up to the Assembly to ensure that they get it. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr McGimpsey: Although Mr McLaughlin is disappointed with what I have said; he did ask me for a statement of fact about how many people had died, which I have provided.

He then asked me to consider a full public inquiry. Although there are circumstances in which a public enquiry would be appropriate, in this case an independent review under the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) is the appropriate response, not least because it is much quicker than a public enquiry. The investigation team will be drawn from outside health and social care organisations, and the RQIA has robust powers to make enquiries and call people to account.

The key elements in any enquiry or review are the terms of reference. In this case, the terms of reference are: the circumstances contributing to the rates of clostridium difficile in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust in 2007 and 2008 including the recent outbreak; the trust management and clinical response to the clostridium difficile rates and outbreak, which includes the actions to inform patients, their relatives and the public; the trust's arrangements to identify and notify cases, outbreaks and deaths associated with the infection; the trust's governance arrangements; the actions of the Northern board and the Department in the management of the outbreak in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area; to examine any other relevant matters that emerge in the course of the review; and to identify learning from the management of the incident. That is a comprehensive set of terms of reference by anyone's criteria.

The review is the most appropriate option because it will be completed quickly, whereas public enquiries are inclined to run. Without pointing fingers at anyone, a public inquiry into the incident would take too long to get answers to the questions I have asked. I have not been complacent about this matter, and my Department has made a series of responses: the action plan 'Changing the Culture', which was already in place; the response from the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, which the review will show, on the key steps of containment — antibiotic policy, infection control and environmental cleaning, and the actions of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust replicated by other trusts through the prudent use of antibiotics, hand

hygiene, environmental cleaning, isolation-cohort nursing and use of personal protective equipment by staff. I met the chairpersons of the trusts last week, and I will meet the chief executives of all the trusts this week. I have been briefed on the issue daily. I went to Antrim Area Hospital and visited the isolation ward and met the staff there; I was very encouraged by the staff and the steps that are being taken. As of Friday, there are seven active cases with four in recovery.

The Member said that we “may” not be able to eradicate the infection. I correct him: we will not be able to eradicate it. Around 30% of those who are aged over 65 carry *clostridium difficile*. When antibiotics are used, for good reason, to combat infections in the elderly and the frail, there is the possibility that those patients may develop the *clostridium difficile* infection and that it may not immediately —

Dr Deeny: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGimpsey: No; I am making an important point.

The difficulty lies in finding the infection quickly and isolating it. It is not always possible to be absolutely certain immediately about whether patients have the infection. Antibiotics are used to deal with any outbreak, and most patients recover. However, the infection reoccurs in around 30% of patients.

We are battling with those situations. I believe that an independent review conducted by RQIA is the appropriate response. That is because that body has clear terms of reference, it can carry out the inquiry quickly, and the matter would not hang around. A public inquiry is liable to go on for months; indeed, we have seen some public inquiries run for years. We need a faster and more focused investigation, and we need the answers quickly.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Spring Supplementary Estimates 2007-08 and Vote on Account 2008-09

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves that a total sum, not exceeding £11,851,642,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2008 and that total resources, not exceeding £14,429,839,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2008 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Columns 2(c) and 3(c) of Table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2007-08 that was laid before the Assembly on 31 January 2008. — [*The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson).*]

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £5,335,212,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund on account for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2009 and that resources, not exceeding £6,493,908,000, be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2009 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Columns 4 and 6 of Table 1 in the Vote on Account 2008-09 document that was laid before the Assembly on 31 January 2008. — [*The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson).*]

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): We had a very useful and wide-ranging debate this morning, and many important points were raised. Although some may not have been pertinent to the Supply resolutions or the Budget Bill, which I will introduce later, they touched on the wider Budget considerations that Members felt were important and wanted to debate. With your latitude, Mr Deputy Speaker, and given the spirit in which Members have raised those points, I will do my best to respond as fully as possible.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel made several points about the necessary roles that spring Supplementary Estimates play in the overall financial management process. I welcome his recognition of that, and I thank him and his Committee

for the valuable contribution that they have made to the process.

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

I welcome the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel and other Members' endorsement of my call for Departments to improve their financial management. In that context, it is essential that Departments spend the money that they have been allocated within the specified time and with due regard to proper value for money and accountability.

My good friend the Member for North Antrim Mr Mervyn Storey, along with Mr Declan O'Loan and Mr Alex Attwood, raised issues that relate to education. A more sensible approach might be for me to take a more circuitous route on that issue, but in dealing head-on with post-primary education, I must state my strong view that people outside the Chamber will not think well of us if we cannot reach agreement and resolve the issue. I want to avoid as much as possible the flexing of muscles that I have noticed taking place on the issue over the past few weeks. In my view, post-primary education is a vital matter and one for the Executive to address in the coming period.

At St Andrews clear guidelines were laid down on how to deal with such matters. If matters are cross-cutting, and if there is a financial requirement, they are automatically cross-cutting; or if they are novel, and no one would argue that the Minister's proposals do not come under that heading; or if they are contentious, and some people would argue that the vision statement was contentious; the agreement of Executive colleagues must be sought on them. That is the place in which to work out an agreement. The proposals will then become the responsibility and come under the ownership of the Executive as a whole. The Education Minister would not stand on her own in arguing her case, because her Executive colleagues would have to stand with her, having agreed an approach for dealing with the matter.

4.15 pm

I noted with interest the comments of the Member for Upper Bann John O'Dowd on 'Hearts and Minds' last week. I do not know whether he was speaking tongue-in-cheek or whether he was being mischievous when he said:

"St Andrews did protect academic selection; it did not state that the Department had to fund academic selection. So if a school wishes to bring in academic selection, that is up to the school. What we are saying is,"

—I am not sure to whom the "we" refers —

"the Department should not be funding this system".

Although I am sure that it was a small part of his intention to stir up debate on the programme, I am

equally sure that the Minister of Education could not possibly be thinking along the same lines, because both the Member and the Minister will know the circumstances of any Department's spending. If there was a suggestion that any Department in Northern Ireland was discriminating against children, as in that case, or against any others, I would be forced to remove its delegation to spend money. Under the legislation, approval from DFP is required. As a matter of good working practice, a delegation is given to each Department to allow it to spend money. If there was an issue about how money was being spent or not spent, my Department would have to go back to it.

I am pretty sure that the Member was simply using a wooden spoon to stir the argument on television and was not seriously committing himself, his Minister or his party to that approach. I am sure that he does not want to play hardball on an issue that is vital to the future of so many people in Northern Ireland. I state again that the education issue can be resolved only by agreement, and the processes for obtaining agreement exist. That matter must be dealt with urgently.

The Member for North Antrim Mr Declan O'Loan raised the issue of how we might fill the additional requirement if we were to adopt a new policy that had a significant cost attached to it. One of the key decisions that the Executive must take in examining any proposal from any Department is whether they can fund the policy; if there is insufficient money to fund a policy, it cannot go forward in that shape and form. That is why Executive approval and agreement are required on all such issues.

If I might turn to comments made by the tax-and-spend party — the party that wishes to get its hands into the pockets of the people of Northern Ireland — the Alliance Party gave its views on several issues, particularly taxation.

Departments and public bodies in general must not overspend or breach control limits set by the Assembly. Hence, there will always be a degree of underspend. The balance is that all permanent secretaries — the accounting officers for each Department — know how difficult their lives will be if they overspend. They are careful not to commit that unpardonable financial sin. Therefore, of necessity, there will always be some level of underspend. However, that is already mitigated — to some extent — by the level of overcommitment in our financial plans for each year.

Under the Treasury's end-year flexibility (EYF) mechanism, underspend and slippage — both in resource expenditure and capital projects — are carried forward for the Executive's future use in Northern Ireland, so the money is not lost. However, as I indicated earlier, we have to fight for it to be made available to us in each financial year. We succeeded to a great extent in

getting it front-loaded in the three-year Budget period that we are soon to be entering.

The Alliance Member for North Down argued that the public sector takes too large a share of GDP, and I agree with him entirely. That is a sound argument, and no one will quarrel with it. However, having recognised the cumbersome and burdensome size of the public sector, it is contradictory of the Member to go on to suggest more and more public expenditure and an increase in the public sector. I expected more suggestions as to how the private sector might be invigorated, the proper controls applied and the best value for money obtained. I agree with him that there is a need for more funding for key services, and that has been reflected in the Budget; however, it will not be delivered in the short or medium term from what the Member describes as “the shared future”.

I am still waiting and hoping for the request from the Alliance Party for a meeting on that issue. It may have come in but not been brought to my attention. I urge that party again to come and see me; the party talks plenty about its proposals in the Chamber, but it has not met me to talk about them, how we might advance them or what room exists in public services for a more efficient use of resources.

I turn to the issue of rates. Members will note that, in its response to the Executive’s draft Budget, the Confederation of British Industry welcomed the commitment to limit non-domestic regional rate increases to 2.7%. The reason that it gave for so doing was the significant cost faced by the business sector over the Budget period. The CBI will not want to speak out of two sides of its mouth at the one time; if it has recognised that it was proper for the Executive to ensure that there would be no real increase in business rates because of the burden carried by the business sector, then — given the even greater burden being carried by the domestic sector, where rates have increased much more than in the business sector — the CBI will also agree that the Executive did the right thing in freezing domestic rates. The same logic should apply to both domestic and non-domestic rates.

The CBI assumed 2.7% as the rate of inflation, and was prepared to accept that kind of increase in the domestic rate. However, if it looks at the figures, it will find that such an increase would not remotely cover what it wanted the Executive to fund from that form of taxation.

I hope that that answers the questions that the Member posed from a sedentary position about whether we agreed with the CBI. On many issues, we do. More accurately, the CBI agrees with us on many issues. On this issue, logic is on our side.

The approach adopted by the Executive balanced the need to provide appropriate levels of funding for public services against the significant pressures faced

by local households in the context of the increases in domestic regional rates that were experienced in recent years. In one year, there was an increase of 90%, and an increase of over 60% has taken place in the past five years. The need to reduce the taxation burden has been recognised more generally by the United Kingdom Government in the overall outcome from the comprehensive spending review. That has also been recognised by the Scottish Executive in its commitment not to increase council taxes in the coming years.

The Alliance Party has also highlighted the negative impact of regional rate increases. In September 2006, the Alliance Party’s chief whip said:

“rates hikes punish those on low incomes and must be scrapped immediately.”

The Alliance party’s manifesto in 2005 said that Alliance councillors would work to achieve better value for money by:

“Keeping local rates down, while providing quality, cost-effective services”.

It seems that the Alliance Party, rather than wanting to keep rates down, wants to put them up. That is contrary to its own electoral commitment. More recently, the Alliance Party’s manifesto for the 2007 Assembly election warned that:

“It is likely that any future devolved Executive will seek to abuse the regional to raise additional sums of money, without facing up to the need for reform.”

It is the Alliance Party that seeks to abuse the rate by increasing it, and, sensibly, it is the Executive that want to hold it down.

Dr Farry: Will the Minister give way?

Mr P Robinson: I will be glad to. Is the Member absolutely sure?

Dr Farry: Yes, I am sure. Will the Minister accept that there is some sense in trying to keep a balanced approach to the regional rate, and to keep increases in line with the rate of inflation, rather than going from one extreme to the other? The previous Administration went for hikes of between 8% and 19%, and the current Administration is going for a freeze, which, in real terms, is in fact a cut at the expense of public services. The appropriate approach is to keep the regional rate in line with inflation.

Mr P Robinson: The Member would do well to consider the list of items of expenditure that he has sought to get from the increase in rates. As my friend from Strangford said, funding of the expenditure list that the Member produced would require the doubling of the regional rate. I do not consider that to be a reasonable increase, and I am sure that the electors and ratepayers of North Down would not consider that to be a reasonable increase. Of course, if the Member wants to argue for the doubling of the rate, we will

meet him on the hustings. I have no doubt what the verdict of the electorate will be on that issue.

Almost 10,000 submissions were received in response to the public consultation process on the draft Budget, and the associated Programme for Government and investment strategy for Northern Ireland. Although a broad range of issues were identified, the main themes were around the need for additional funding for specific areas. I am still waiting for someone who has gone through those 10,000 responses at close quarter to find one that has asked me to reduce expenditure in any area. Whatever we do in Northern Ireland must be within the affordability limits. Although there were 10,000 requests for more funding in various areas, it is up to the Executive and the Assembly to determine where the balance should lie. The revised Budget document, which was agreed unanimously by all four of the parties in the mandatory coalition on 22 January 2008 and passed in the Assembly a week later, included increased support for mental health, the arts, libraries, victims and children and young people. That represented a positive response to the main issues raised in the public consultation.

Far too often, Ministers in Northern Ireland ignored consultation processes. I would have thought that the Member for North Down Dr Farry would have applauded the Executive, as they have been prepared not only to listen to the consultation exercise but to respond positively to it. The Member thought that he had the clincher when he said that there was a need to increase expenditure on health but that some of my colleagues — presumably including me — said the very same thing eight years ago during the Assembly's first mandate. I have no doubt that we probably made those remarks.

4.30 pm

Dr Farry: The Minister did not make those remarks. They were made by Members of the SDLP.

Mr P Robinson: I congratulate them, because eight years ago, the SDLP's Minister of Finance and Personnel may not have allocated sufficient resources to health. Since then, expenditure on health has doubled from around £2 billion a year to over £4 billion a year. Therefore, significant additional funds have gone into health. I believe that the community will welcome the additional priority given by the Executive to health issues, even if the Member for North Down does not welcome it.

Although an increase in regional rates could provide additional resources for Departments, more can be achieved through improved efficiencies in the public sector rather than further increasing the burden on households. Additional taxation would also increase inflationary wage pressures, as workers attempt to maintain living standards so that at least part of the

cost would be borne by business impacting on the competitiveness of the local economy, one of the knock-on impacts of the policy being advocated by the Alliance Party.

The Member for North Down Dr Farry — and I hope that he appreciates my spending so much time on his comments — raised the issue of the Varney Review. He wondered why the Executive had not stated their case on the matter. We have published a strong case on the issue, and it is in the public arena. If the Member does not have a copy of that, I will have one forwarded to him. He will know that we were disappointed, but not surprised, at the outcome of the Varney Review; it was not unexpected. However, I welcome the Varney Review II. It can deliver an objective analysis of the policies that the United Kingdom Government and the Northern Ireland Executive — either separately or collectively — need to pursue to bring about greater economic growth in Northern Ireland.

I have insisted that the Varney Review II will have direct ongoing input from Northern Ireland Executive officials, and, indeed, that is already happening. That will ensure that the review is aware of the full range of evidence on policies in Northern Ireland. The Varney Review II will conclude before the United States investment conference, which will take place in Northern Ireland in May 2008. I hope that its outcome will be helpful and will be an incentive to those attending the conference.

The regional economic strategy will be revised in the light of the Varney Review II and in the light of the priorities set out in the Programme for Government and the final Budget.

The Member for West Belfast Jennifer McCann raised equality issues. I share her view that there is a need to assess the impact of all spending proposals fully. However, I urge caution that we must focus on ensuring the maximum benefit for all the people rather than artificially imposing the same benefit on all. That smacks of Marxism, which has failed throughout the world, and we should not try to introduce that dogma into Northern Ireland. She also suggested that the Executive might want to consider the transfer of taxation powers.

I urge caution there also. Northern Ireland benefits significantly from being part of the United Kingdom. Members will see from the motion that the Estimates being brought forward are for expenditure on resources and capital to the tune of more than £14 billion. We also receive about £8 billion under annually managed expenditure for various benefits and pension payments. That means that we receive £22 billion from the Exchequer. The Exchequer receives funds from Northern Ireland by way of taxation, but there is still a deficit of £7 billion or £8 billion per annum, which has to be

funded by the Treasury. That amounts to about £9,400 per member of population in Northern Ireland.

Therefore, before anyone considers the approach advocated by the Member for West Belfast Jennifer McCann, and looks at the Sinn Féin/Alliance Party proposals for greater flexibility on tax matters, they must ensure that the deficit is sufficiently reduced.

Rather than take the approach advocated by Ms McCann — which amounts to telling business where it should go — I prefer the approach that was summed up by a former President of the Irish Republic Seán Lemass and popularised by President Kennedy. They said that:

“a rising tide will lift all boats”.

I recommend and advocate that approach.

I agree with all the comments made by my colleague Peter Weir, who is not in the Chamber. He made his points well, and he was right to say that the focus must turn to delivery and away from spend. I have said it twice in the Chamber, and I say it again today: in three years time, the people of Northern Ireland will not be asking how much money was allocated to each Department; they will be asking what each Department delivered.

There is a clear need to drive forward the performance and efficiency of public services in Northern Ireland. To maximise gains, we must become more radical in our approach to identifying ways of improving services. In that context — and as I have previously advised the Assembly — I have established a performance and efficiency delivery unit to take that important work forward.

The Member for East Antrim Mr Roy Beggs commented on the Main Estimates and raised a number of issues about the figures in the spring Supplementary Estimates for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, among others. The major issue for the Department of Finance and Personnel is the increase in the superannuation scheme. There is a net increase in the provision of £160 million in relation to the annually managed expenditure component which covers pensions, lump sums and gratuities associated with the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme Northern Ireland. As that is annually managed expenditure, it does not detract from the amounts of departmental expenditure limits available for local services. The decrease in the net cash requirement of £200 million from the 2007-08 Main Estimates to the 2007-08 spring Supplementary Estimates reflects a delay in the need to provide for a potential transfer-out payment in respect of staff employed in Northern Ireland Water.

The Member for West Belfast Mr Alex Attwood raised issues regarding innovation and skills funding.

Anyone who listened to his speech might have assumed that the only money available for innovation and skills was £90 million, but that was the additional amount that we got from resources. He is right to identify that part of the amount came from the Irish Republic, but £25 million came from the package that the Chancellor of the Exchequer provided at the start of devolution, and the remainder came from the block grant.

Of course, in addition to that there will be approximately £140 million from the EU competitiveness and employment programmes 2007-13. However, the Member should note that other policies and programmes will feed into that area of activity and that most of DEL's budget will be directed towards skills and training. Therefore, even if the figure of £90 million is upgraded by European funding, we should not treat it in isolation.

Although that investment will not address all our economy's problems, it still represents a good first step towards reducing the productivity gap. Furthermore, there would be little point in pumping massive investment into innovation activity if there is insufficient capacity to absorb such funding.

The Department for Employment and Learning is responsible for skills policy and between 2006-07 and the end of the Budget period its overall funding level will increase by more than a third.

The Member for West Belfast mentioned the role of opposition in Committees. When he reads the Official Report tomorrow, he will find that I did not suggest that there should not be opposition; I suggested — and I hope that he will agree — that there should not be opposition for opposition's sake. In fact, I am pretty sure that he will agree with that because both he and his party were signatories to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which set out the functions of those Committees. The function of opposition — and certainly not the function of opposition for opposition's sake — appears nowhere in the functions set out and endorsed by the SDLP.

Our circumstances are unique because none of us would choose a mandatory four-party coalition with a requirement to have parties in Government irrespective of whether there is an ideological glue to hold them together. Given the divisions in our society and the fact that we are working our way out of a long period of instability, we must work in those circumstances until we can establish more stable and permanent structures. In doing so, I hope — I am sure — that we will have the Alliance Party's support. However, while this system lasts and in order to ensure that the right policies emerge for the benefit of all the people of Northern Ireland, there is a role for the Committees to probe and assist their relevant Minister — not just to oppose everything that he or she happens to say.

Mr Attwood: The Minister is anxious to ensure that Hansard accurately reflects his comments about opposition for opposition's sake; in order to do that he may wish to correct two points in his speech. First, Mr Seán Lemass was never President of Ireland; secondly, it was not the Anglo-Irish Agreement that brought about the establishment of the Assembly's Committee system; it was the Good Friday Agreement. My recollection is that the Minister did not use the phrase "opposition for opposition's sake", although, if he did, I will be happy to correct my version.

Nevertheless, the more substantial point is that the Minister indicated that it would be inappropriate to allocate money that might not be spent. Although the universities might have exaggerated their capacity to spend £100 million, they have stated that they would require such money in order to participate in Science Foundation Ireland — an all-Ireland research and development and innovation strategy that would position the North in the island economy and in the global economy. Could such money not have been spent for that purpose and been healthy for our society?

4.45 pm

Mr P Robinson: In the House of Commons, when a speech is made by way of an intervention, the Speaker usually reminds Members that interventions are, by their nature, supposed to be brief.

Foreign affairs were never my strong suit, and I accept that Seán Lemass was Prime Minister, not President. I also accept — as, I hope, will the Member — that we were both wrong about the agreement. I do not recognise any "Good Friday Agreement".

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr P Robinson: There is a Belfast Agreement, and it is that to which I referred.

I turn to an issue that was raised by the Member's colleague Tommy Gallagher, namely the Northern Ireland Civil Service childcare-voucher scheme. The Civil Service is committed to the introduction of a salary-sacrifice childcare-voucher scheme, and work has been under way for some time to ensure that that can be delivered as part of the new payroll system.

That scheme should become operational later this year, and I shall attempt to define that timescale more clearly for the Member. When we have such an indication, I will write to him and to other Members who have written to me on that matter.

The new system is in its final stage of development, is being tested, and is likely to be introduced, we hope — although I do not want to commit myself to any particular date — before the summer.

The Member for West Tyrone Kieran Deeny raised health issues. I welcome the Member's recognition of

the scope for further efficiency savings in the Health Service. Those matters were robustly laid out in the Appleby Report. I have made the same points on many occasions and, as part of the final Budget, the Executive agreed that the Health Minister could retain the proceeds of additional efficiency savings above the 3% that applies to other Departments. Each percentage point equates to £40 million.

I entirely accept that the Health Minister will need some time to roll out the efficiencies before he can take full advantage of them. However, there is an incentive for greater efficiency if the Health Minister can ensure that he uses those funds directly on front-line services that are provided by his Department.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister has a further five minutes.

Mr P Robinson: I wish to again thank Members for their contributions to the debate. As I indicated earlier, it is important in a democracy to hear the views of Assembly Members and to debate the issues fully. It is also important to reiterate the point that the responsibility of Assembly Members to hold Departments to account for what they spend does not end today. I consider that the Assembly and the Executive carry a heavy weight of responsibility to prudently manage public expenditure in Northern Ireland on behalf of the taxpayer.

In an ever-tightening fiscal environment, the delivery of real efficiencies by Departments to fund improved front-line services is one of the greatest priorities for Ministers, along with delivering a sustainable twenty-first century infrastructure. At the same time, the Executive's top priority of growing a dynamic innovative economy over the lifetime of the Programme for Government is crucial if Northern Ireland is to have the wealth and resources that are required to build a peaceful, prosperous, fair and healthy society, which the people of Northern Ireland now expect. I ask all Members to support the motions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before the Questions are put, I remind the House that the votes on the motions require cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a total sum, not exceeding £11,851,642,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2008 and that total resources, not exceeding £14,429,839,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2008 as

summarised for each Department or other public body in Columns 2(c) and 3(c) of Table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2007-08 that was laid before the Assembly on 31 January 2008.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £5,335,212,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund on account for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2009 and that resources, not exceeding £6,493,908,000, be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2009 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Columns 4 and 6 of Table 1 in the Vote on Account 2008-09 document that was laid before the Assembly on 31 January 2008.

— *[The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson).]*

Budget Bill: First Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): I beg to introduce the Budget Bill [NIA 10/07], which is a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of the years ending 31st March 2008 and 2009; to appropriate those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance and Personnel to borrow on the credit of the appropriated sums; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources for the years ending 31st March 2008 and 2009; and to revise the limits on the use of certain accruing resources in the year ending 31st March 2008.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I inform Members that the Speaker has received written notification from the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel to confirm that the Committee is satisfied that, in accordance with Standing Order 40(2), appropriate consultation has taken place with the Committee on the Bill's public expenditure proposals. The Committee is therefore content that the Bill can proceed by accelerated passage. The Bill will receive its Second Stage tomorrow, Tuesday 12 February.

Review of Draft Planning Policy Statement 14

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

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

That this Assembly notes the emerging findings of the review of draft Planning Policy Statement 14 ‘Sustainable Development in the Countryside’.

I said in the Assembly on 25 October that I would chair the Executive subcommittee to oversee the review of draft Planning Policy Statement 14. I am delighted to have this opportunity to talk about the subcommittee’s work, and to hear Members’ views on the emerging findings.

My colleagues on the subcommittee are the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Minister for Social Development, the Minister for Regional Development, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, and both junior Ministers. That is the group that will progress the review’s work, with both departmental perspectives and direct experience being brought to bear. I appreciate the contribution that all members of the subcommittee are making.

We have made substantial progress, with consensus emerging. That progress is on track, and, subject to the agreement of the Executive, my aim remains that a revised draft PPS 14 should be published at the end of April 2008, at which time draft PPS 14 will inform and be taken into account in planning decisions. After April, there will then be four months of full public consultation before it is finalised.

To help me develop my proposals, I have decided to engage with stakeholders on the findings emerging from the subcommittee’s work. I have prepared a paper as a basis for discussion, and I have organised eight stakeholder meetings in different locations from 15 to 22 February 2008. The independent report of those events will help inform the rest of the subcommittee’s work.

Of course, it is too early to say what my final proposals to the Executive will be. However, I can give Members a flavour of the thinking so far, and that is why I wanted to come before the House this afternoon.

On 25 October 2007, I said:

“my Executive colleagues and I wish to develop a policy based on the principles of sustainability that strikes a balance between the need to protect the countryside from unnecessary development and supporting rural communities so that they can flourish both socially and economically.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 24, p508, col 1*].

One of the greatest challenges when undertaking that work is the matter of knowing exactly where to strike the balance between restricting development in order to protect our landscape and habitats, and relaxing restrictions in order to allow development where it is needed. I see scope for greater relaxation of some policies outside the green belt, but I will detail that as I go through the emerging findings.

Many rural dwellers are farmers, but non-farming rural dwellers also make a vital contribution to the sustainability and vibrancy of communities. Therefore, PPS 14 is relevant to the whole community, and in reviewing it, the subcommittee seeks to address the needs of all rural dwellers — both farming and non-farming.

The subcommittee has taken the view that, outside green belts and countryside policy areas, it may be appropriate to allow for the development of appropriately sited small groups of houses. We are therefore considering the reintroduction of dispersed rural communities, which existed prior to draft PPS 14 and which allowed for appropriate development to meet local need, including small groups of houses.

Draft PPS 14 already allows for groups of up to eight social housing units in the countryside. I would like to broaden that policy to cover affordable housing, with the possibility that the maximum number of houses in a group increases to 14, outside green belts and countryside policy areas.

Previously, there was a policy that provided for a dwelling to be built when people’s personal or domestic circumstances meant that they would suffer genuine hardship if they could not live on a specific site. An example might be a person with a severe, long-term health problem or a disability who needed ongoing family support. PPS 14 did away with that policy; however, I know the difference that it could make to some people’s lives, and I would like to see it reinstated.

It is wasteful that vacant houses are left to decay, while new houses are being built from scratch on fresh greenfield sites. More could be done to reuse or replace existing buildings. We would be keen to encourage sympathetic conversion of suitable buildings — such as traditional barns, churches or schools — as individual dwellings. That fits in well with the Executive’s policies on sustainability.

In relation to replacement, the so-called abandonment test — which I am sure all Members are familiar with — is much maligned. We believe that it is over-restrictive. I have therefore asked officials to do some work on an alternative test, which would be based on the condition of the remaining structure. We have also discussed whether extra flexibility might be allowed outside green belts.

There are policies in draft PPS 14 that deal with farm dwellings, farming and forestry development, and

farm diversification. Of course, one of the bugbears for farmers is the farm viability test, which requires that a farm should be capable of supporting a farmer more or less full time. That test does not sit comfortably with modern farming conditions. Technological change and economic pressures mean that many farmers run their farm enterprises in conjunction with other businesses, and they derive substantial proportions of their incomes from contracting, off-farm or non-agricultural activities. Department of the Environment officials are working to try to find a more appropriate and acceptable approach.

We want to look again at retirement dwellings on farms. Draft PPS 14 permits a new dwelling for a retiring farmer or a surviving spouse.

The idea of a nice, cosy retirement cottage is very attractive. However, such a policy means that the retired person would have to move out of his or her home — perhaps the only home that they have ever had. That seems unnecessary. The policy could be made more flexible so that either the retiring person or the incoming farmer could apply for planning permission for a new dwelling.

5.00 pm

As regards diversification, farmers sometimes experience a mismatch between planning policy, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's diversification policies, and the statutory requirements they need to meet in relation to a specific proposal. That situation could be improved by amending draft PPS 14 to: recognise that diversification businesses are run in conjunction with farms and do not necessarily complement the farm business; include forestry as well as farm diversification, and recognise that new buildings may sometimes be needed in order to meet food hygiene or other statutory requirements.

Farming is not the only rural business present in the countryside. Draft PPS 14 also contains policy on non-agriculture businesses, including provision for a dwelling beside a business where a need can be demonstrated.

Finally, there has been a lot of discussion about the need to protect the rural character of an area by maintaining vernacular buildings and ensuring that appropriate designs and sites are used. There are already policies in draft PPS 14 covering those issues. However, 'A Design Guide for Rural Northern Ireland' could be updated to take account of contemporary designs and materials; drawing on local building traditions and styles, while clearly indicating what styles of developments are not acceptable.

As the policy is important to many people, I am opening the debate out beyond the subcommittee. I look forward to this afternoon's debate and, with the stakeholders, I will look at the views expressed today. The final version of draft PPS14 will be issued in April 2008.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her co-operation on the matter. Although, I will be speaking in the debate as the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, I will first make a comment as an MLA for Mid Ulster. The retention of countryside policy areas, 50% of which cover the swathe of the Magherafelt District Council area, has profound and serious implications for available and affordable housing for rural dwellers in that area.

As Chairperson of the Environment Committee, I will comment on several issues that arose following the briefing last Thursday. Draft PPS 14 introduced the concept of presumption against planning approval. In order to be eligible, individual applicants have to tick a number of boxes. Some clarity from the Minister would be helpful regarding that issue.

Although welcoming the theme areas that the Minister announced today — farm viability, farm diversification, replacement and some issues around affordable and social housing — I note that the Executive subcommittee is seeking to address the needs of farming and non-farming rural dwellers. My chief concern arising from that is that although it is important to focus on replacement, farm viability, affordable housing, clustering and similar issues, potentially 75% of rural dwellers do not have access to an old house that could be replaced; do not live on a viable or working farm, or do not have an old barn, school or church that could be converted. There needs to be much more concentration on developing a policy that will meet their needs, within the usual constraints of location, site and proper design.

There is an issue with respect to the reintroduction of dispersed rural communities. Although that will have some effect — certainly in Mid Ulster, where there are two — the effect will be minimal in the North overall.

As regards affordable and social housing, I note that the number of groups of clustered houses is being increased from eight to, potentially, 14.

I would welcome information from the Minister about the determinant for affordable rent. Will she also tell us how housing associations can introduce co-ownership when their houses are for rent?

Mr T Clarke: Is the Member speaking on behalf of the SDLP or as Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment?

Mr McGlone: I am speaking as Chairperson of the Committee.

Draft PPS 14 was deficient in complying with equality legislation over health and personal circumstances, and I am glad to see some movement there because that issue has come up several times at the Committee and elsewhere, as Members are aware.

The reuse of non-residential buildings for residential purposes is a good idea. The policy on replacement came up again during the Committee's discourse with departmental officials on Thursday, and the unanimous view was that the test of abandonment was much too stringent. I welcome the Minister's advocating measures on that front.

There are problems around the expansion of businesses in the countryside. Although we are dealing with PPS 14, perhaps the Minister could tell the House something about PPS 4, which has had consequences for those who have established businesses — some of them in my constituency of Mid Ulster — in small industrial units and who want to expand but cannot, and therefore jobs are not being created.

It is good to hear acknowledgement that the farm viability test was much too stringent, out of kilter with twenty-first century farming conditions and did not recognise that people need to live on the farm where they were brought up. It has been suggested that exceptional permission may be granted for a farmer's son or daughter working on the farm even when it is not strictly necessary for him or her to live there.

Mr Weir: I welcome the debate on PPS 14, because the Assembly is the right place to start it, and we should remember that we are at the start of a debate.

Although the focus has been on the effect of PPS 14 on rural areas, any planning issue of such magnitude has an effect throughout the country, even putting pressure on urban areas.

We should remember that we are having a debate because PPS 14 was like taking a sledgehammer to crack a nut, and many mistakes were made; I hope that those mistakes will be redressed in the final policy. There was a problem in the rural community; we cannot go back to the free-for-all that existed before PPS 14: a Monopoly board with houses and single dwellings scattered around the countryside. That would be a regressive step. The Minister made the point about striking an appropriate balance, and many of the proposals that have been put forward today, albeit in draft form, are to be welcomed.

Cluster settlements need to be looked at closely, because the previous arrangements were unduly restrictive. The increase in the numbers of affordable and social houses is a positive step in addressing the needs of the rural community.

The restrictions on the reuse of non-residential buildings that have fallen into decay are also too strict. Where a disused school or hall has fallen into disrepair in a rural community it makes sense to use the space rather than constantly put up new buildings.

Against that, we must ensure that there is some degree of protection against the fraudulent abuse of

planning regulations by people who throw a few stones together and pretend that a building existed in the past. Planning applications must be made in the proper way.

I welcome the relaxation of the rules in relation to health and personal circumstances. In my constituency, which is not particularly affected by PPS 14, there have been circumstances in which the Planning Service has taken an unduly restrictive attitude towards attempts to re-establish a farm on the grounds of health and personal circumstances, which seems to defy logic.

The changes in the farm viability test are to be welcomed. The present arrangements are overly restrictive, and, as has been said, do not reflect the reality of farm life today. Although it is an area that may well fall outside the remit of PPS 14, we must also consider whether the development limits around many towns and villages in Northern Ireland are appropriate. We must create a situation in which there is sustainable development in the countryside that meets the proper needs of the rural community, but does not open the floodgates to the ruination of the countryside. Consequently, the proposals that have been put forward today form the basis of an opportunity to move forward on this difficult issue, and provide a balanced approach.

I look forward to the stakeholder meetings that will be held across the country, which will allow a degree of input. I welcome the idea that proposals, subject to further consultation, will be immediately effective. We cannot have a situation in which people take advantage of a closing window of opportunity to flood the Planning Service with inappropriate applications. It is important that everyone is on a level playing field.

The proposals that have been put forward today by the Executive subcommittee and the Minister provide a positive way forward. They provide a sensible balance that will protect the countryside while removing some of the unwanted excesses of PPS 14. I welcome today's debate.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, Mr Boylan.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá ar an ábhar seo. I welcome the opportunity to scrutinise PPS 14 in my role as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment. I will make most of my comments today, however, as an MLA for Newry and Armagh.

I welcome the Minister's briefing on the emerging findings of the Executive subcommittee as regards a way forward on the matter. I am pleased that she has given serious consideration, along with her ministerial colleagues, to the introduction of a policy that will reflect the need for the social, economic and environmental sustainability of rural communities.

It has been said many times in these debates that rural dwellers deserve the right to build a home in the countryside rather than allowing developers to build large and unnecessary houses. However, that right does not just apply to rural farming people. Non-agricultural rural dwellers also need our support.

Fellow Members often mention the west of the Bann. May I suggest to the Minister and her Department that there is a need to carry out an appraisal of all rural areas that will identify high, medium and low-pressure development areas, and which will be reviewed at regular specified intervals? The situation west of the Bann must be addressed.

I hope that the Assembly will adopt a balanced policy that will allow extended families to remain settled in communities that their forebears inhabited for generations. There are many young couples in rural communities who cannot get houses, while their neighbours are granted planning permission as a result of bad or inconsistent policy decisions that were made in the past.

5.15 pm

Among the various findings that have been expressed by the Minister, the most welcome is the option to reinstate the designation of “dispersed rural communities”, with the emphasis on clachans and groups of dwellings. I hope that she will also consider the idea of clusters. A review of a possible relaxation of cases in ribbon development with regard to infill and gap sites — I should like the Minister to elaborate on that, because it should incorporate the issue of build-up. I should hope that, within a cluster of three or four buildings, one might be able to incorporate another one or two dwellings.

I welcome the reuse of non-residential buildings, such as barns and barn conversions. The current criteria for abandonment are far too restrictive, and should be addressed. I hope that the Minister will clarify exactly what the criteria will be. Will they include four walls, or a roof, or whatever? I also support the idea of building a modern dwelling where there is an existing footprint. It is also important to consider rural dwellers who are not, necessarily, from a farming background and to recognise and meet their concerns. Those people make a serious contribution to the rural economy. I hope that weight is given to that fact.

All in all, I welcome these emerging findings. I thank the Minister, and her colleagues on the subcommittee, for their initial work on the matter. Needless to say, there is a lot of work to be done. From my perspective as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, I hope that we get the opportunity to scrutinise that work. I hope that the Minister will bring forward further findings that may emerge from her discussions with my colleague and the other Ministers on the subcommittee to ensure that Members are kept fully informed.

The findings are a basis on which to build final proposals. We must finally eradicate the nightmare that was imposed on the rural community by Mr Rooker, who never understood life in rural communities. We have the opportunity to put that right, and I hope that as many stakeholders as possible will take part in any future consultation. However, the timings need to be reviewed. It is unacceptable to allow only seven days for all of those consultations to take place. We need to look at that. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for bringing the emerging findings of the review of draft Planning Policy Statement 14 before the House today. Any relaxation of that punitive and restrictive planning policy statement is welcome, since it placed large parts of the countryside in what amounts to a planning freeze and put unnecessary strains on many rural dwellers and rural communities.

As an environmentalist, I have always opposed bungalow blight and I understand that PPS 14 was drafted in the first place as a reaction to that problem. However, it was an overreaction and, I believe, politically motivated. It was one of many means that were used to bring pressure on the political parties to make a settlement. Whatever the motivation, changes in that appalling document are to be welcomed.

I lend my support to several of the findings that have emerged from the review. According to paragraph 12:

“some rural communities are under social and economic pressure and could benefit from appropriate development in the countryside.”

That is an understatement.

The decision to retain a restrictive approach in green belt and CPA areas and to relax it elsewhere seems, at first sight, sensible. However, I would counsel a closer look at the extent of the Belfast metropolitan area green belt as shown in the regional development strategy. It is an enormous stretch of land that extends as far as Lurgan and Waringstown, in my Upper Bann constituency; as far as Killyleagh and Strangford to the east; and to Larne, and beyond, in the north. Designating such a large area may inhibit proper development and have a negative impact on social housing and affordable housing policies, especially when it is so close to the main urban heartland of greater Belfast and Lisburn.

We may find that that is a real barrier to finding solutions to housing problems. A more regular review process may need to be considered, especially if vast areas of the Province will be segregated, with areas that are close to existing major urban areas being subject to a more restrictive planning regime, while the more remote rural areas that lie far outside the Belfast urban area are subject to a less rigorous and restrictive planning regime. What does that say about preserving the countryside? Must we be harder on those developments that are close to Belfast and softer on those that are

further away from Belfast? Could there be a rush to develop in areas that are outside the more restricted greater Belfast zone?

As I have said before, the countryside must be a living thing and not a dead national park. I welcome the concept of a clachan development; I am a firm believer in a living, working countryside with people living in real communities. Some 150 years ago, far more people lived in the countryside than do today. I counsel the Minister that it is a little restrictive to set 14 as the maximum number of dwellings that can be in a group. We must consider the creation of sustainable communities, which means communities that can sustain a school, a post office, a rural shop and other amenities. I advise further relaxation of the number of houses and urge that special consideration be given to allowing larger, more diverse schemes that satisfy a pre-agreed set of sustainable criteria.

I welcome the recognition in this consultation that many people live and work in the countryside, and I welcome the measures that have been suggested to relax draft PPS 14 in that regard. More flexible criteria for the reuse and adaptation of existing rural buildings for non-residential purposes, including appropriate industrial, tourism and recreational development, are to be welcomed.

Rural development and tourism need to be energised in this Province, and the sooner that that happens, the better. I particularly welcome the reorganisation of —

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

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for bringing this motion to the Assembly today. I also thank her for supplying an advance copy of her paper, which enabled some of us to do our homework over the weekend. It will come as no surprise to some of my colleagues on the Committee for the Environment that I am speaking only in a personal capacity and on behalf of my party colleagues.

The paper seems to set out a broad outline of some key themes. It may be an old cliché that the devil is in the detail, but, unfortunately, in this case, the detail is not there, and much of the devil is loitering between the paragraphs.

Nonetheless, clear signs are emerging as to where we may be going with this particularly difficult rural planning-policy issue. Nobody in the Assembly wishes to see the destruction of rural communities, but our approach must be clear and realistic. The notion of a rural community does not equate solely to single houses in the countryside. As Peter Weir acknowledged, rural communities are centred around villages and hamlets. In order for a shop or a school to be viable in a rural area, any settlement would have to be significantly larger than the suggested small group of affordable housing units.

I welcome the fact that draft PPS 14 allows groups of up to eight social houses, and the Minister's consideration, following the publication of the Semple Report, would allow perhaps a slight increase on that figure. That is an example of where the devil may be running away with the detail. Where Sir John Semple talked about 12 houses, there is now talk of 14, and already in the Chamber this afternoon, there has been pressure to go beyond that figure. If we are to make meaningful plans to protect the countryside, we must be realistic about what constitutes a small settlement. Similarly, the word "clachan", as I understand it, applies to a very small number of upland farms, where farm buildings have been integrated for use by several families at once. It is not a housing pattern that spreads across the whole of lowland Northern Ireland, and to present it as such is unrealistic.

A key issue that has caused concern is that of personal circumstances and health. That is one area in which there was a need to relax what went forward in draft PPS 14. However, the fact that someone in the family may need to live beside the elderly parents does not mean that everyone needs to live beside them, especially if there are three, four or five children.

I welcome the references in the review to the idea that any such housing must be part of the farm cluster and does not have to occupy the available site at the top of the drumlin. That is a way in which the personal needs of those who genuinely want to live beside their farms can be met. The alternative is that personal circumstances are allowed to become a Trojan Horse that undermines any coherent planning policy.

There are clearly benefits in the suggestions to reuse existing buildings that were not previously dwellings and may be of reasonably sound character, and to have greater relaxation of the rules regarding replacements. However, we also need to be careful that we are not simply creating another measure by which people may build more houses than can be justified in a particular area.

One of the most difficult problems that the Minister and her colleagues must tackle is the issue of farm viability and diversification. There is no doubt that relatively few farms are currently viable purely on the basis of their agricultural activities. Many people run successful businesses —contracting work, for example — that easily complement their farms.

The Minister talked about activities carried out "in conjunction" with farming. If that policy is to proceed, she will need to make it clear exactly what the term "in conjunction" means. Does it refer to something that is entirely unrelated to the main farm business but that happens to be situated there? Does it refer to a business that may or may not employ two or three other people? Involvement in such areas goes beyond maintaining the viability of a farm and is an entirely different

enterprise that would need to be treated in some other way. Such issues must also be addressed. However, I welcome some of the points that the Minister made about issues such as updating the design guide, which is clearly totally inadequate for this day and age.

When I was reading the review, I hoped that I would be able to welcome the findings and congratulate the Minister on resisting the demands for the wholesale scrapping of draft PPS 14. After listening to her comments, I am not sure how much of those congratulations I want to deliver at this point. However, it is clear that there is greater recognition that we have to stick to something close to draft PPS 14. I welcome that, and I look forward to the publication of her plans, which I hope will ensure that we genuinely protect the countryside in the future.

Mr I McCrea: Unfortunately, I am not sure whether Mr Ford wants changes to draft PPS 14, or whether he wants even more bans imposed. I am not sure what the people of South Antrim will think, but I am sure that other Members from that constituency will address that issue later.

I welcome the Minister's statement on the emerging findings of the ministerial subcommittee's work on draft PPS 14. I congratulate the Minister on her efficient handling of draft PPS 14 since the outcome of the judicial review in October 2007. That proves that we have a DUP Minister who takes seriously the needs of rural Northern Ireland.

The Minister made a statement to this House on 25 October 2007. At that time, I stated that it was about time that this policy found its way back home to the Department of the Environment. The proof that that was the right move has been demonstrated by the fact that the emerging findings report has been published just three months later. That is a testament to the commitment of the Minister and her subcommittee to proceed with much-needed changes to draft PPS 14. It also proves that this Assembly and, indeed, the DUP are committed to providing the much-needed good government that this country deserves.

The Minister talked about a balanced policy. I agree that that must be the basis of any new policy, as we cannot return to the days of building anywhere throughout the countryside. Since the introduction of draft PPS 14 in March 2006, I, like other elected representatives, have been contacted by many constituents who have been affected by that policy. Farmers, joiners, builders and many other individuals who play a part in the farming scene have been affected by it.

It is widely known that very few farms throughout Northern Ireland can meet the terms of the rigid farm viability test. The subcommittee's report recognises that the implementation of that policy will most likely lead to failure when the main source of income is from

another job. I welcome the fact that the subcommittee is examining that.

5.30 pm

The Minister will agree that, when draft PPS 14 was first introduced, genuine concerns were expressed because many people in the rural community felt that it challenged the right of families that had lived in the countryside for generations to build on their own land. Many of those people were forced to move into towns and villages and pay exorbitant prices for houses, while environmentally friendly sites were refused planning permission. No one with an interest in protecting our countryside would suggest a return to the situation before draft PPS 14. However, we must ensure that our country schools and churches are equally protected. For generations, rural Northern Ireland has been protected by true countryside dwellers who were worthy custodians of the natural beauty of Ulster. It is important that those families continue their work for generations to come. We owe those families a debt of gratitude for their stewardship, and to them I say — well done.

However, the effects of draft PPS 14 were felt throughout the construction industry. In addition to joiners and bricklayers — who were self-employed and built houses in rural areas — welders and steel workers who made gates, and so forth, depended on work in rural areas. Those people now find it difficult to survive. I trust that they will find some comfort in the Minister's paper and will await with interest the final policy that the Minister hopes to publish in draft form by the end of April 2008.

Mr Paisley Jnr: As well as identifying the pressures that draft PPS 14 has put on builders and joiners, as the Member has rightly done, does he accept that it has put immense pressures on our towns and villages? Developers have been forced to buy up large town houses and overdevelop those sites, which has changed, and destroyed, the character of many of our towns and villages. The Minister's new policy is also a way to resolve that problem.

Mr I McCrea: I certainly agree. Overdevelopment has had a major impact on our towns and villages as well as on our water and sewerage infrastructure.

It is important to remove the abandonment test on the reuse and replacement of dwellings, which has been far too restrictive. Throughout the country, there are many derelict houses that merit being replaced or reused but are eyesores and could never prove, as is required in policy CTY 5 of PPS 14, that they are — or were last lawfully used as — dwelling houses and have not been abandoned. I welcome the Minister's announcement that the subcommittee will readdress that important issue.

The debate will raise many issues, but I will speak about retirement dwellings on farms. Like everyone

else, farmers retire. However, until now they have had to move out of their family homes when they do so. I welcome the emerging findings report —

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

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement and the Ministers on the subcommittee for all their work to date. I welcome the progress that has been made on draft PPS 14. There are many aspects of the emerging findings paper that are progressive and will benefit our rural communities.

Draft PPS 14 was far too restrictive and, if fully implemented, would have fractured many rural communities, businesses, schools and services. A common-sense approach that takes account of the requirements of rural communities, as well as the need to protect the countryside and the environment, is required. It is important to get that balance right. I welcome the subcommittee's intention to put sustainable development at the heart of a revised PPS 14 and that it will be based on the principles of sustainability. Although I recognise the need for countryside policy areas (CPAs) to protect our most scenic areas, we must not forget that there are many rural communities in those CPAs that also require protection.

As in many rural areas, planning is a major issue in my constituency. People living in the glens of Antrim, which is an area of outstanding natural beauty, are beginning to see the fragmentation of their community because of the pressure of planning restrictions. Therefore, as the Minister advances this process, some consideration must be given as to how to help such communities and develop locally based solutions, which ensure that they, and the rural services of which they avail themselves, are sustained.

We must take account of cases where there are compelling personal-health or domestic circumstances that require someone to live on a specific site. Compassion should be shown and the policy relaxed. Changes must also be made to the farm viability test.

In relation to replacement dwellings, the Minister should liaise with other Departments and look at the possibility of providing some kind of rate relief as an incentive for people undertaking to renovate and reuse abandoned buildings rather than knocking them down.

The Assembly has responsibility for planning policy, but the implementation of that policy will be the key to success. As Members have said, there are many obvious inconsistencies in planning that need to be addressed. Planning policy must be enforced effectively, especially with regard to the integration of buildings with the landscape and ensuring that the size, design and materials are appropriate for the environment.

I welcome the start that has been made by the Minister and the subcommittee, and I hope to see a more balanced draft PPS 14 before the House in April that will take account of the needs of rural communities. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr T Clarke: Draft PPS 14 must be one of the most contentious issues affecting the Northern Ireland countryside, and deservedly so. The imposition of draft PPS 14 has done damage to rural communities and it has not taken into account the needs and requirements of rural dwellers. I am fully aware of the need to protect our countryside, but that must be balanced with the genuine need and desire of the rural population to continue its lifestyle. The difficulty is reaching a consensus that we can all support.

Small local developments of housing to meet local need must be an integral part of the review, along with returning to the situation where people with long-term health and disability requirements were taken into account in planning applications. Living in the country is a way of life for many. Why should they be forced to give up that lifestyle because of poor health or disability?

I support fully the Minister's decision to revisit the abandonment test. Dilapidated properties litter the rural landscape, and the abandonment test would help to have those properties redeveloped, which would avoid the need to develop new sites. Abandoned barns or disused schools could also be redeveloped and that would also reduce the need for new sites to be identified and developed.

The viability test is the most important aspect for farmers, and several Members mentioned that. The viability test requires a farm to be capable of supporting full-time employment, which is not a sensible approach in 2008. I urge the Minister to see how that matter can be adapted to assist either farmers or their families in building a new dwelling if and when the need arises.

Increasingly, farmers are having to diversify to survive financially. Draft PPS 14 made it difficult for the construction of the additional buildings needed to diversify. A common-sense approach is vital in such situations so that diversifications can be supported and encouraged; that, in turn, would aid the development of Northern Ireland's rural economy.

Mr I McCrea: Does the Member agree that it is important that the Department takes note of all the views of those who attend the stakeholder meetings that will be held throughout Northern Ireland to ensure that policy reflects the needs of the people of Northern Ireland? It is also important that people attend those meetings.

Mr T Clarke: I agree wholeheartedly.

The Minister should ensure that the continued development of new materials for construction should

be introduced easily via the planning system. Northern Ireland needs a flexible and continuously evolving planning system that is proactive rather than reactive and will benefit rural communities. I congratulate the Minister on her efforts thus far. I am confident that she is taking the correct and positive approach in addressing the review of draft PPS 14.

Mr Armstrong: There is no doubt that something must be done to protect the Northern Ireland countryside. However, draft PPS 14 is not the answer; it is too restrictive and amounts to a blanket ban on development.

There is an old saying that states that a developer is someone who wants to build a house in the woods, whereas a conservationist is someone who already owns a house in the woods. That might be a touch cynical, but there is a grain of truth in it.

More must be done to enable rural dwellers to remain in the countryside in order to promote sustainable rural communities. The rural economy and rural society have faced many difficult times. High house prices, falling school enrolments, the closure of rural post offices, falling farm incomes, increasing farm costs, and foot-and-mouth disease — I could go on — all combine to make life more difficult for those who live in rural areas, particularly those who are engaged in the rural economy.

There are sound public-policy reasons for ensuring that rural life is supported. A lack of housing stock in rural areas will not only push up house prices even further, it will make it impossible for young people, in particular, to remain there. In turn, that will affect rural schools, which are experiencing falling enrolments, and the fabric of rural life.

It is in no one's interest to see the countryside depopulated. A way must be found to measure genuine need, so that those who live and work in the countryside can continue to do so. Members who represent rural constituencies will be familiar with families who have tried unsuccessfully to build an additional dwelling, either as a retirement home for a farmer who wishes to pass the family farm on to his son or daughter or as a residence for a son or daughter who helps on the farm. More understanding is required when dealing with such cases.

However, I wish to sound a familiar note of caution. In the past, there has been some tension between those who were born and bred in rural areas and those who might be termed, somewhat unkindly, "blow-ins" or "townies". Such tension could be limited if a policy included a presumption against the development of housing clusters near working farms, so as to limit complaints about the inevitable noise, smells, etc, which are part and parcel of working farm life.

In summary, it is vital that the Assembly and the Minister find a way forward, keeping common sense to

the fore, in order to arrive at a sensible planning policy that will protect the countryside from inappropriate development while ensuring that the viability of the rural way of life and the rural economy are maintained and enhanced by supporting the development of sustainable rural economies.

Mr Gallagher: I welcome the Minister's statement, and I commend her endeavours to introduce new planning regulations. The blanket ban on development under draft PPS 14 is unacceptable. Although the system that existed before draft PPS 14 was a little bit better, it had some flaws, such as the farm viability test that has already been mentioned. The previous planning regulations also had some serious shortcomings, such as inconsistency and unfairness. Members will be familiar with examples of holdings in respect of which four or five planning applications were approved, while others had none. Such circumstances are completely unfair, and we want to ensure that we do not go back to that system.

I support entirely the inclusion of principles of sustainable development in planning policy, be it urban or rural. At this juncture, it is very important to undertake wide and detailed consultation and to ensure that stakeholders will have the fullest opportunities to contribute. I wish to inform the Minister that the times that have been allocated for stakeholder meetings are most inappropriate.

5.45 pm

I note that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is present; she is a member of the Executive subcommittee. I appeal to both Ministers, who are my constituency colleagues: they know what it is like in the countryside. The people whose voices we need to hear will not be at meetings timed for 9.30 am or 3.00 pm. Such were the times arranged for meetings in Enniskillen. At a 3.00 pm meeting, only the usual suspects from Government or community organisations will turn up. Farmers will be out working at such a time, as will others who live in the countryside. Women in the countryside will be collecting children from school or waiting for them to get off the school bus. I appeal to the Ministers, on behalf of Fermanagh and South Tyrone and the other rural constituencies, to arrange meetings for stakeholders at 7.00 pm or 7.30 pm, when everyone has a fair chance of being able to attend the discussions and feed in their views.

In any planning policy for the countryside, a key concept is that of presumption. Under draft PPS 14, there was a presumption against development; prior to that, there was a presumption in favour. It is important, if rural dwellers are to get a fair crack of the whip, that we return to a presumption in favour of development. A presumption in favour is merely a starting position; after that, applications must pass the criteria. If, on

grounds of sustainability, there are concerns about returning to that, it may be balanced by the introduction of new, strict criteria against which applications may be measured.

With respect to replacement dwellings, abandonment has been mentioned: how that has been applied under draft PPS 14 is a vexed question. As Members know, it is not a matter of looking solely at abandonment. Four key tests are applied in relation to abandonment, all of which are considered in detail.

The paper also uses the term “exceptionally” in the case of some rural dwellers who, regardless of whether they work on a farm, may be considered for a building on it. Rural dwellers do not see it that way; they do not regard their entitlement to have a site on a farm as something exceptional.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, welcome the interim report and this debate on the emerging findings.

I challenge the notion, myth or misconception that, prior to 16 March 2006, there was a free-for-all rural planning policy. That idea was advanced by Peter Weir during the course of the debate. There never was such a policy. It is an unfortunate term that gives the impression that the countryside is awash with hacienda-style houses. That is definitely not the case in West Tyrone, as you know well, Mr Deputy Speaker. *[Laughter.]*

Many Members, who are or were councillors, have attended hundreds of site meetings. Even in the days when there was a presumption in favour of development, applications will have been subject to various criteria: whether the house integrates; whether the development amounts to build-up, or even to a tendency towards build-up; whether it amounts to ribbon development; and whether it is an overdevelopment of a restricted site. If any of those boxes were ticked, the planning application was not passed.

There never was a free-for-all in rural planning policy. Everyone knows that solutions may be achieved by use of appropriate materials, or adoption of a different approach to the scale, design or visual impact of a house.

This debate can be emotive, because it is about people, their lives, their hopes and dreams to live where they were reared.

I will not name the family concerned, but I do not apologise for citing the circumstances of a lady from Creggan in mid-Tyrone. In October 2007, I drew attention to her plight. She wanted her son and daughter-in-law, who has a nursing background, to be close at hand in her final years. Unfortunately, any building had to be site-specific; it had to be adjacent to the family dwelling if planning permission were to be granted. Circumstances did not allow for that, and

when the uncle of the man in question gave the couple a site two miles away from the man’s mother, they were unable to secure planning permission. The lady died recently, and to her dying day, she very much regretted the fact that she could not have her son and her daughter-in-law at close hand.

That is why the Minister’s paper ‘Findings Emerging from the Review of Draft PPS 14’ contains two paragraphs on compelling personal health and domestic circumstances. Even so, a more flexible approach is required. Why does it need to be site-specific?

This is one of the biggest issues, if not the biggest single issue, that rural dwellers are raising with MLAs. A more flexible approach is required generally. Tommy Gallagher and Cathal Boylan mentioned the stakeholder meetings that are being facilitated by Community Technical Aid. Those meetings are too restrictive — people attending must have a pass and must provide advance notification that they are attending. Even key stakeholders, such as local government authorities, are being told over a seven-day period that they are being allowed only two places and that notification must be received in advance. The process must be opened up. Who are the stakeholders? The rural dwellers are the stakeholders.

I am glad to see Minister Foster and Minister Gildernew in the Chamber. I encourage the subcommittee to further revise farm viability criteria to reflect the reality of modern-day farming in counties such as Tyrone and Fermanagh, where farmers need to have a second job. Some are already involved in plastering, joinery or driving school buses.

I welcome the exploration of creating further categories of dispersed rural communities along the lines of clachans. There are also interesting proposals about how a gap site might be filled. As regards abandoned dwellings, why could the principle of establishing a dwelling not be accepted in situations where there was once a house? Even if a dwelling were in ruins, what would be the problem? A presumption could be made in favour of development, but tests such as integration and personal occupancy would have to be passed. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Having returned from darkest Tyrone, I call the Rt Hon Jeffrey Donaldson.

Mr Donaldson: Mr Deputy Speaker, we were all trying to work out what your connection was with west Tyrone. No doubt that will be revealed in due course. My maternal grandmother came from south Tyrone, and I am afraid that that is my only connection with the county.

I congratulate the Minister on her statement: it is refreshing to see the gradual progress that is being made in reforming planning policy and the planning system in Northern Ireland. The Minister is giving the

matter the highest priority, and that is important because planning is a big part of Northern Ireland's future development as a region in the United Kingdom. Rural planning is no small part of that.

My friend the Member for South Down Mr Wells is not here this afternoon, and whether he would agree with the statement is one thing, but he would certainly want to draw a little place called Hanna's Close to the Minister's attention. Hanna's Close is in the kingdom of Mourne, not far from where I was brought up. Today, it is the only fully functioning clachan that continues to exist in Northern Ireland. I know that the Minister has visited Ballinran, and if she has been to Hanna's Close that is good. It is well worth a visit. That type of model is well worth considering for addressing rural development in Northern Ireland.

I want appropriate rural development in my constituency of Lagan Valley. I want farmers, their families and those who contribute to the well-being of the rural economy to continue to have the opportunity to live in the countryside and to have their place in those communities. However, as I look around the countryside in my constituency, at times, I wonder how on earth planning permission was ever granted for some dwellings.

Rural County Down is drumlin country, and in many cases — well before the Minister's time — planning permission was granted for houses that were perched on top of drumlins and spread all over the countryside. We must do something to ensure that development in the countryside is appropriate, that it is in the appropriate place, and that it integrates well with communities. The Minister's objective is to find a balanced approach between sustaining rural communities and the rural economy and, at the same time, ensuring that development is appropriate and that it is in the appropriate place.

Draft PPS 14 has created controversy, difficulty and hardship for rural dwellers. I have spoken to families — as I am sure have other honourable Members — who are experiencing hardship as a result of draft PPS 14. Indeed, Members opposite also mentioned that. There are people with genuine medical conditions living in the countryside, and they need family support. However, owing to draft PPS 14 and the fact that medical conditions are not treated in a special way at the moment, they are unable to obtain planning approval for dwellings to support and sustain those elderly or ill relatives. I welcome the Minister's indication that there could be more flexibility on that matter.

It is hoped that a more flexible approach will be adopted to replacement dwellings, and I welcome that. One looks around the countryside and sees dwellings that have been derelict for some time but do not meet the 10-year rule. It would make sense to replace them,

as they are well integrated into the countryside, rather than to grant permission to build in the middle of a green field or on top of a drumlin, as has been the case. I hope that there will be a more progressive policy in that respect.

Finally, the position of farmers and their families is particularly important. The Minister and her colleagues must find some way of reflecting the special contribution that they make to rural life, to the rural economy and to sustaining our environment. At times, farmers are much maligned for damaging the environment, but there are none who contribute more to sustaining and protecting the environment in the countryside than farmers, and the planning system must recognise that.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement on the emerging findings of the review of rural planning policy. I support some of the comments that have been made. Mr Paisley Jnr mentioned that, in the past, some people could have obtained planning permission in a rural area, but are being forced to live in a town or village.

I declare an interest as a member of Strabane District Council. In my council area, a young couple — one of whom came from the nationalist community, and the other from the unionist community — with a child tried five times to obtain planning permission for a site. Eventually, they were told to go to Donemana, as there were plenty of houses there.

That couple was told — in a blasé manner — that they did not have to live with their people or rear their child with their people; they could live five miles down the road. That is one couple's story, and I hope that the Minister will consider such personal situations — such as that described by Mr McElduff — when she introduces a planning policy. There are human situations to be considered, and I think that the Minister will take those into account.

6.00 pm

Mr T Clarke: Does the Member accept that people will use a family member's disability or a need to be close to their family as an excuse to build a house in a particular place? People have done that in the past, so a measure must be put in place to ensure that that does not happen. Does the Member accept that the Planning Service has problems in that regard and that something has to be done to prevent people from abusing the system?

Mrs McGill: I accept that, but the couple that I mentioned were not abusing the system. There have been instances of abuse, but the planning policies and measures that the Minister introduces should be robust enough to deal with them: they have to be. Tommy Gallagher mentioned the inconsistencies in planning regulations before PPS 14, which gave rise to problems; perhaps that is what Trevor Clarke was referring to. I

hope that the Minister takes my comments into consideration. Go raibh maith agat.

Dr W McCrea: Planning is an important issue, and no issue has exercised the minds of rural Northern Ireland so much as PPS 14. It is disappointing that only three of South Antrim's Members — representing two parties — have spoken in the debate: my honourable friend Trevor Clarke, myself, and David Ford from the Alliance Party. Mr Burnside has probably gone back to London, and other Members are not interested; Sinn Féin certainly has no interest in this.

Planning is an important constituency issue, because it affects the lives of rural Northern Ireland. Members must be sensitive when demanding that the Minister make changes to PPS 14. I listened with the greatest respect to Patsy McGlone who spoke in his capacity as Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, but I wondered whether he was looking for a free-for-all. That will not sit well with the Department of the Environment or its Committee, which I chaired in a previous incarnation of the Assembly. We must be careful that planning is not opened up for a free-for-all. We cannot go back to those days.

I commend the Minister for the manner in which she moved the motion and for the measured and balanced way that she presented her case. We must be careful that we continue in that vein, because it is important that equality and uniformity are applied and that everyone works on a level playing field.

I lived west of the Bann, and I hear Members say that the Minister of the Environment must implement measures for Tyrone and Fermanagh. Northern Ireland does not consist only of Tyrone and Fermanagh; there is also Londonderry, Armagh, Antrim and the rest of Northern Ireland to consider.

Some Members: Down.

Dr W McCrea: Down must also be treated equally. The Assembly must be careful that its planning policy covers all the Province. The Minister must be careful in developing PPS 14, because I fear that there could be discrimination. For instance, most of Newtownabbey is in the green belt, so we must be careful that the people who live there are not discriminated against. Discrimination will not be accepted. Members who represent constituencies west of the Bann are demanding a free-for-all.

Mr McElduff: Will the Member give way?

Dr W McCrea: No, I will not give way. The Member had his time to speak, and he did not make use of it. With regard to planning, the Assembly must ensure that areas west of the Bann and areas east of the Bann are treated equally and that there is uniformity and balance under PPS 14.

I thank the Minister for considering the issues, including the farming community's situation, genuinely. I am disappointed — and I have made this clear in the past — by the manner in which the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development deals with planning issues. If someone's planning applications do not state what man-hours are required to establish the viability of an additional dwelling, the Department dismisses them as though they do not count. That is an absolute disgrace. Instead of supporting the farming community, that Department often abuses farmers. Therefore, when it comes to deciding the new policy, I ask that the Minister gives genuine consideration to that community.

Throughout Northern Ireland, few farms can offer the man-hours that are required to sustain a farmer and his family. When I was growing up, a small farm could have sustained not only a farmer, but his son's family. Those days are gone, and that is the reason that we must ensure that rural dwellers get the Assembly's full support. They have lived in their communities for generations and are, as my honourable friend from Mid Ulster said, the worthy custodians of rural Northern Ireland — a role for which I congratulate them.

I congratulate the Minister and ask her to consider Northern Ireland's interests in this matter. I am certain that she will do that.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Elliott: As always, speaking after my good friend from South Antrim is difficult. I am pleased to hear him say that there should be equality for all in Northern Ireland and not just in Fermanagh and Tyrone. I hope that he will remind some of his colleagues of that, given that they seem to think that everything gravitates to within a 10-mile radius of Belfast.

Dr W McCrea: There should be equality for all.

Mr Elliott: Thank you very much.

However, I welcome the Minister's statement on emerging findings. Although I accept that we have just a broad outline of what we will get, as one would expect with such findings, much of the detail is yet to come. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating.

It has been stated clearly today that what we had in the past was inappropriate. Pre-PPS 14 regulations were, to put it mildly, too flexible on certain aspects but not flexible enough on others. Draft PPS 14, on the other hand, ruled out almost anything and did not give members of the rural community a fair chance to set up home in the areas in which they had lived for a lifetime or in which their ancestors had lived for generations.

I am glad to see that the phrase "balanced policies" is used in the emerging findings document. Although I understand the Member for South Antrim Reverend Dr William McCrea's perspective, one size does not fit all in Northern Ireland. What is good for people in some

areas may not be good for others a few miles down the road — even in the same constituency — or indeed, on the other side of the Province. We must be careful not to imagine that a single policy will fit everybody's requirements. That is not the way it is or how it will happen. Greater emphasis must be placed on area plans, which provide an opportunity to give different areas a certain degree of flexibility.

Although dispersed rural communities have been a big issue in Fermanagh and South Tyrone for some time, the inconsistencies of wider rural communities still exist, and we must catch up.

I am keen to discover how many planning applications were submitted and approved under the affordable and social housing criteria of draft PPS 14.

I suggest that that number is extremely low, if not zero.

Health and personal circumstances were addressed in the planning strategy for rural Northern Ireland, but not in PPS 14. That matter was given hardly any weight in PPS 14, and if that policy is to be really significant, genuine weight must be given to health and personal circumstances. Otherwise, it will be a return to the old, no-good planning strategy. On such matters, there must be clear guidance from professionals. In other words, on a medical issue, there must be clear guidance and recognition on the part of the medical profession. There is no way that a planning officer can adjudicate on a medical condition, but I am afraid that that is what has been done in the past.

The issue of replacement dwellings is one of the most significant issues dealt with by PPS 14, and I welcome the fact that there is going to be another in-depth examination of that matter. The abandonment criteria have been totally inflexible, and there has been no reasonable working of that policy. Many people believe that they have met the four abandonment criteria, only to be told all of a sudden by the planners that they have not. Very few replacement dwellings eventually get through the planning process on abandonment grounds.

That brings me to the policy on vernacular dwellings. When a person meets the criteria for abandonment, the next thing that the planner tells them is that the building is now a vernacular dwelling, so must be retained.

My time is running out, but it would be remiss of me not to mention farm dwellings. I totally support Dr McCrea: the criteria used by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development are outdated and outmoded, and should be replaced immediately. I know that the Minister of the Environment cannot do that by herself; she needs the help of the Minister of Agriculture.

Mr P J Bradley: I welcome the statement of the Minister of the Environment, and her presence in the Chamber. The Minister of Agriculture has left the Chamber, but I welcome her attendance as well, because

the concept of joined-up responsibility will be found in every line of the debate when one reads the Hansard report. This has to do with farmers, as well as the environment and agriculture.

I wish to begin with a quotation from the Hansard report of 18 January 1999:

“Forced migration from rural areas has reached an unacceptable level in many parts and must be urgently addressed. I look forward to the day when planning, and in particular rural planning, becomes the responsibility of those who know the area and understand the needs of the local people.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 1, p388, col 2*].

That was not a quotation from any world-renowned figure, but something that I said myself in this Chamber on the subject of areas of outstanding natural beauty and green belt areas, way back when. It is probably more appropriate now than ever.

We have now reached the stage at which an Environment Minister is in situ, and I have no doubt that, as a grass-roots country lady, she is fully au fait with the problems of rural areas. I hope that I will be able to praise her work on a continuous and ongoing basis in the future as she advances the cause of farmers on planning matters.

In previous Assembly debates on this issue, I continually referred to rural brownfield sites — although no such thing exists — in the hope that, one day, they might become a reality. I referred to the benefits that could be brought about by the provision of small, 10- to 12-house settlements, and I called for the restoration of what we in south Down — and Jeffrey Donaldson referred to this earlier — name “closes”. I named some of them in my own constituency, such as Fegan’s Close, Byrne’s Close, Hanna’s Close, and Flanagan’s Close. There are other areas in places such as Cabra and Ballela that would certainly benefit from the restoration of such settlements.

Reference has been made to stakeholders’ meetings, and I have just learned that Newry and Mourne is not included as a venue for one of those meetings. That area has probably suffered most as a result of PPS 14, areas of outstanding natural beauty and green belts. I ask the Minister to review that situation, and to consider the possibility of holding a 7.30 pm meeting in Newry to suit the farming and rural community.

Mr Shannon: To allow time for milking the cows.

Mr P J Bradley: That is right. Unlike Mr Ford and the other privileged people, I received a copy of the emerging findings only this afternoon, so I have had time only to glance at them. However, I have selected a few points on which I would like to comment on the record. Paragraph 15 refers to looking after:

“the needs of both farming and non-farming rural dwellers.”

I suggest that there is a third category: part-time rural farmers who are no longer working a viable farm, but

who still must provide man-hours to a farm in order to maintain it. That matter has already been mentioned by others.

6.15 pm

Paragraph 21 of the review's emerging findings, under the heading "Affordable and Social Housing (CTY6)", mentions building:

"near a traditional focal point such as a church."

If it is not too late, I should like to see "or school" included after "church".

It became like an auction in here for a while, as Members bid for the maximum number of social houses that should be permitted in a group to be increased to eight, 10, 12 or 14. The eight-house or 10-house models that we had in the 1950s or 1960s made for excellent projects that provided rural areas with a valuable asset. Great families came from those homes, and many of those hamlets that were created were the pride of the countryside.

The emerging findings discuss what is eligible to replace a dwelling. When I became a councillor in 1981, a black dot on an Ordnance Survey map was sufficient evidence that a house was situated there, and planning permission would be granted. However, before long, and before a replacement dwelling could be authorised, planners started looking for existing rubble or stones, before moving on to looking for walls. Having found them, planners began to ask to see panes of glass or a roof before approving the construction of a new dwelling. They were looking for children running around the house by the time they were finished. The reason for that was that planners were looking for a house to be lived in before it might be replaced.

However, it is not the owners of new homes, or even their agents or architects, who are to blame for this blight on the countryside. No one other than the Planning Service is to blame. As I have said in the Chamber before, perfectly good sites could be found up and down lanes and boreens. Those sites were secluded, well protected and often away from view, with mature trees around them, yet planners did not allow houses to be built on them. I have visited a number of sites that planners would not accept, and I could never understand why. However, what did they permit? They permitted people to clear a green field at the edge of a road on which to build a bungalow. No one who thinks along those lines has any right to call himself or herself a planner. They have much to answer for.

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

Mr Ross: Other Members have already mentioned the significance of this particular piece of planning policy and stated that direct rule Ministers made somewhat of a mess of it all. As my colleagues Mr Weir and Mr Paisley Jnr mentioned, it is not only rural

communities but urban communities that the policy affects. Now that devolution is up and running, it is to be welcomed that local representatives, many of whom live in rural areas, have a say on draft PPS 14. Indeed, we have heard pitches from all sides of the country today. I also welcome the Minister's decision to engage with stakeholders on the Executive subcommittee's emerging findings from the review of draft PPS 14.

When discussing the review of draft PPS 14, it is important not only that we state what we oppose but what we want to see included in rural planning policy. We all wish to see the balance about which the Minister spoke earlier achieved — the balance between protection for the countryside and appropriate development.

Although Mr Wilson, our sole Green Party MLA, is yet to speak in the debate, I am sure that he is concerned that some of us are looking to have a free-for-all. That is not the case. That said, we must recognise that draft PPS 14 went too far and was too restrictive. Rural communities must be allowed a future in which they can prosper, not only economically but socially. We have all heard about the many young people who lived in rural areas all their lives, only to be unable to build a house there when the time came for them to build their own home.

Moreover, in debates on other subjects since May 2007, Members have talked about the importance of rural communities and rural schools. Earlier in this debate, my colleague Ian McCrea talked about the importance of rural churches, too. Such issues must be raised if we are to have a vibrant rural community. The issue of those who wish to live close to sick, elderly or disabled family members in the countryside has also been raised. Indeed, the Minister spoke about the importance of that in her opening comments.

Therefore, there is no doubt that massive challenges lie ahead with this policy. We must remain committed to recognising that the countryside needs a vibrant rural community — one that can prosper, evolve and be sustainable. At the same time, however, we must recognise that no one has a divine right to live in the countryside. My colleague Rev Dr William McCrea said that if we were to go down the route for which some Members have argued, which was that the needs of all rural dwellers must be catered for, we would not so much be relaxing the policy as getting rid of it all together, and that would lead to the free-for-all that Mr Wilson will no doubt refer to later in the debate. We can find a way forward, because —

Mr Boylan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: Yes.

Mr Boylan: Does the Member not agree that the policy should be about all rural dwellers? Most of the comments that have been made in the debate have been done so from a farming perspective. There are

many people out there who may have lived in rural areas for three or four generations, so does the Member not agree that they are entitled to remain there and to continue to be part of the community?

Mr Ross: Those who have lived in the countryside for so long are certainly not the sort of people who wish to see it destroyed, and that is an important issue on which all of us can agree. Therefore, I believe that we can find a way forward that will meet the needs of both sides of the argument, and that we can strike a balance between those who want to see more development in the countryside and those who want to see it given more protection.

I welcome the fact that the Minister and her Executive subcommittee have taken the view that, outside of green belts and countryside policy areas, regulations can be relaxed. I also welcome the subcommittee's recognition that farming is no longer necessarily the primary source of income for many rural dwellers. As the Minister said, the viability test does not sit well with farmers who understand modern farming conditions. Other Members, including the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, also made that point. Indeed, that Committee received evidence from the Ulster Farmers' Union to that effect.

I also welcome the Minister's assertion that small developments of homes will be permitted in order to meet local need. The Minister mentioned the possibility of allowing the development of up to 14 affordable houses, which would undoubtedly help to combat some of the concerns raised earlier about people who have lived in the countryside for so long and who are trying to find a home there.

Mr Trevor Clarke raised the contentious issue of replacement dwellings, vacant homes and the very restrictive abandonment test. Mr Weir talked about common sense prevailing, and, although common sense may be lacking in some quarters some of the time, the Minister's suggested review of the abandonment test is a common-sense approach to dealing with the issue.

Although we are taking a more relaxed approach to conversions, it is important that the tests remain so that there is no abuse of that system. Many of the more detailed policy points will be teased out over the coming weeks and months as engagement with the various stakeholders gets under way. Therefore, I urge Mr Ford to be patient, because I too look forward to having the opportunity in Committee to examine some of the more detailed proposals as they emerge.

We must recognise the direction that the Minister and her subcommittee are taking, and welcome its emerging findings.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am sure that I am not the most sensitive of rural dwellers; however, I am sensitive to some of

the comments that I have heard during the debate. Mr Weir spoke about houses scattered around the place, but he should remember that those houses are homes, with people in them, and with children playing in the back garden. That is what we are interested in — getting homes for our people, not impersonal houses.

On the radio this morning, I heard the leader of the Green Party talk about haciendas on the hillsides. All those buzzwords, such as “bungalow blight”, are all anti-rural ideas, and they are used by non-rural people. It is amazing the kind of things that people say. For example, Mr Ford said that he does not see why, if children want to be near their parents, that they all have to be near their parents. He advocated that, in a family with three children, two could live beside their parents and the other one could go to Belfast. However, it would be difficult for the planners to decide who would live beside their parents and who would not. That is the silly kind of stuff that non-rural people say all the time.

We must get rid of the anti-rural bias that exists. Some non-rural people believe that the issue is an environmental one; however, I think that it was Alastair Ross who said that nobody looks after the environment better than the people who live there.

I can tell great stories about such environmentally sensitive city folk. For example, when preparing a site for development, a friend of mine had to seek planning permission. The Environment and Heritage Service notified him that there were two badger setts on his piece of land. My friend was a keen environmentalist, and he knew that there had not been badgers in those setts for 30 years. He proceeded to describe how a young lady arrived on his land to look for the badger holes — he even described the length of her skirt and how she was fresh-faced from university. He showed her where the holes were and asked her whether she had ever seen a badger herself, to which she replied that she had seen them on the television. That is the kind of thing that we are up against. Those are the kind of people who are examining rural people to see whether they are fit to live in the country and to build a house there.

However, I strongly welcome this measure, because like so many others who live in rural areas, I and others have been pestered by people who wonder what will be done. They wonder whether we will wait until the entire countryside has been decimated, with schools being forced to close and local football teams disappearing. Entire communities that have been built up over generations would have been destroyed had no change been proposed.

I am particularly delighted that we may, hopefully, get rid of the farm viability assessment. In the area where I live, which one might describe as the greater Dungiven area, there are only two full-time farmers. Everybody knows who they are: Ian Buchanan and

Donal McReynolds. All others in the area are part-time farmers who do their farming because that is what their families have done and how they have lived for generations. I live on the fringe of the Sperrin Mountains, and farming there is not easy, but that is what those people love doing. They have to go wherever they can get work, for example, to a building site or they may even take some contract work on a farm, if possible. After doing their day's work, they come back to their homes, which should be on their land. There should not be any reason that they do not have such homes.

I told Members the story about the two brothers, one of whom was left the home house and the other was left the home farm. The brother who had been left the farm —

Mr Savage: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brolly: Yes.

Mr Savage: The Member has raised a very good point: farmers want to work. Farm replacement is a very important issue. I urge the Minister to ensure that farms or dwellings are replaced with bungalow-type houses, rather than with mansions. People will then support the proposals. Those mansion-type homes have blighted our countryside for the past number of years.

Mr Brolly: I agree with the Member. We are all very sensitive to what is built in rural areas. In the area where I am from, the neighbours would complain if somebody in the community got above their station. In fairness to the Planning Service, it has been very particular in our area in deciding what can be built. We have bungalows, and it is easy to see how nicely the houses integrate into the surrounding area.

Finally, I welcome the ending of the use of the term “abandonment” —

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

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

Mr B Wilson: I welcome the opportunity to debate the review of draft PPS 14. I am very concerned about the tone of the debate. It suggests that Members wish to make the legislation so flexible that speculators and developers could drive a coach and horses through it, with the result that our countryside could be blighted with a hacienda on every hillside.

The presumption against development that is contained in draft PPS 14 must be retained, although certain exceptions for hardships, sickness and some family circumstances, could be extended. We must remember why PPS 14 was introduced — there was a growing concern about the number of single dwellings, spreading like acne, across the face of our countryside. In the year before the introduction of draft PPS 14, 9,000 applications for single dwellings were submitted, which is the equivalent of a medium-sized town. In

Fermanagh alone, 1,000 applications were received, compared to five in North Down, which has a bigger population. It was clear that the bungalow blight that had destroyed the landscape of Donegal was inflicting itself on parts of Northern Ireland, and that had to be stopped.

The rural landscape is being destroyed, even though it is one of the most attractive features of Northern Ireland that greatly enhances our appeal to tourists. In addition to destroying the character of the countryside, single dwellings generate greatly increased car use and require considerable expenditure to be made on the infrastructure in order to provide services such as water and sewerage. In many cases, sewage disposal will lead to the pollution of local rivers.

The opponents of draft PPS 14 have a mountain of very effective propaganda, but many of their claims are misleading. Many Members have expressed concern today that the measures were causing hardship for farming families. There were also claims that its repeal would regenerate rural industries and schools and would provide affordable housing for young families. Those claims have little substance. Draft PPS 14 does not stop all building in rural areas or prevent genuine cases of a farming family, or a retired farmer, requiring and getting a new dwelling.

6.30 pm

It does not affect the supply of affordable housing for first-time buyers, as no low-income family could afford one of those sites, which often sell for £100,000. In many cases the occupants of those single dwellings do little for the rural community; they rarely mix locally; they commute, shop and socialise in the larger towns, such as Belfast; and, instead of attending the local village primary school, the children are driven to the larger schools in the nearby town. While providing no benefit to the rural community they cause the maximum environmental damage, requiring the installation of new services, septic tanks and the upgrading of roads and highways.

The campaign against PPS 14 is not only misleading, it is short-sighted and will lead to the destruction of our countryside. Furthermore, it will restrict the development of the tourist industry, which is the fastest-growing sector of our economy. The real issue is nothing to do with protecting the rural community, but with protecting the profits of property speculators, who are determined to site a single dwelling on every hillside. The vast majority of the applications do not meet genuine housing need.

Mr Boylan: Will the Member give way?

Mr B Wilson: No.

We are all aware of developers who have accumulated a large number of sites assuming that PPS 14 will be

lifted and that they will make another fortune. It is time we moved from the culture of having a hacienda on every hillside and planned the development of rural areas to the highest environmental standards. That can be done by expanding existing settlements, hamlets and villages, as suggested in the review. They already have services, such as bus routes, and can provide affordable housing for young couples.

I recommend that Members look at Ireland's first eco-village, Cloughjordan, which demonstrates how sustainable, environmental and affordable housing can be provided in the countryside.

No one disputes that PPS 14 should be amended to take account of difficult cases — *[Interruption.]*

However, the way forward must be by thoroughly planned, environmentally-friendly settlements and not the free-for-all speculators' paradise that existed before PPS 14.

Mr Shannon: PPS14 was a bane o' contention i Norlin Airlan iver sine Lord Rooker brocht oot thon blanket ban. Efter mich pressure an' legal stramashes hit was foun' tae hae bein' uised un laa'fully an' hit was owreturned an' the issue left tae mae weill thocht o' colleague Minister Arlene Foster fer development at ansuers the needs an' wants o' fowk theday wi'oot daein haim tae the ability tae meet thaim o' generations tae cum.

PPS 14 has been a bone of contention in Northern Ireland since Lord Rooker saw fit to introduce the blanket ban. After much pressure and legal wrangling, it was deemed to have been illegally applied and was subsequently overturned. Consultation was carried out on PPS 14, and the results were shocking: 99% of those questioned were against it; 75% felt that it was badly thought out; and 67% felt that it adversely affected family life in the rural communities. Those were the views of everyday people, whose lives were affected by this policy. There is one everyday person, who does not seem to understand that, and he refers to haciendas on every hillside. I do not know in what world he lives, but it is not the one in which I live.

I am reminded of the words of a song from Scotland. It is not a Scottish song — there is a difference.

"We'll keep a welcome in the hillside".

There will be a welcome, not only in the hillside, after the Minister's statement today, which will now go out for consultation, but in Strangford, where she has given people opportunity. The Minister has indicated that there is a clear need for change. She knows that she is always welcome in Strangford. If Members were to go down Strangford Lough way, in lesser spotted Ulster, they would see the good things about Strangford. Furthermore, they would see the need for housing in the area of Strangford that I have the pleasure to represent.

I wish to comment on the Minister's point about the dispersing of rural communities, and on affordable and social housing.

Does the Minister's statement refer only to non-green belt areas? Will the clachans — which is a good Ulster-Scots word — be used as a model for affordable, social housing in the countryside? Such a model is important. Moreover, it will give the housing associations the opportunity to build.

The Minister's proposal to increase the number of houses that will be permitted to form clachans from eight to 14 is good news. That means that rural communities can grow and that people will be able to live there in future.

I also welcome the Minister's remarks about non-residential buildings. For too long, barns and other farm buildings have been left unused that could be replaced by residential dwellings. The Minister's announcement that the policy on replacement dwellings will change is good news, and I welcome those changes for the better.

I am a wee bit concerned about the meaning of "abandonment" as opposed to "ruins". If a storm takes the roof off a house, or its blue slates are stolen and it falls into disrepair, does that constitute abandonment, or is it a ruin? Such issues must be taken into consideration.

The Minister made some welcome comments on ribbon development, but I want her to go further. Although it is good that ribbon developments present opportunities, they should not be restricted to the edge of the road. Groups of houses arranged in a circular fashion often have room for "rounding-off", and I ask the Minister to consider that.

I am glad that she mentioned business in the countryside. Businesses must demonstrate whether there is a need for their services, but I want the Minister to comment on forestry and equine industries. Those matters may not fall within her remit; they should be the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and should be regarded as agricultural industries. Therefore, people involved in forestry and equine businesses should be entitled to the opportunity to live in rural dwellings.

I welcome the relaxation of the man-hours requirements of planning applications for countryside dwellings. A planning application for a farm dwelling will not be tied down to the requirement that 2,200 man-hours must be worked on the farm; that is important.

With three seconds to go, I want to make one last point in relation to the three to five to 10 years —

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

Mr Shannon: I will ask the Minister about that matter again.

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster):

This has been a very good debate, and I have been writing notes furiously. Members have made several points, and I want to address as many of them as I can.

In his capacity as an MLA, the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, Mr McGlone, raised the issue of countryside policy areas. Those will be retained because, as Mr McGlone knows, they protect areas of the countryside that are under pressure from development. They also protect the visual amenity of areas of landscape quality and maintain the rural character of the countryside. It is important to state from the outset that countryside policy areas will remain in force.

As Chairperson of the Committee, Mr McGlone made comments about presumption against development, which was the cornerstone of PPS 14 when it was introduced in March 2006. That issue was raised by several Members, but the debate around presumption for and against development is divisive and is a debate that we do not need.

My aim, which is shared by the subcommittee, is to create a balanced policy. Some voices have been raised to say that it is not balanced, which is wrong. We are working towards a balanced policy, based on sustainability — a point made by the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, Mr Boylan, and by Daithí McKay. Sustainability is the key that underlies the policy, which should be remembered when people read the emerging findings paper. We have not yet finalised our views, but I also feel strongly about the issue of sustainability.

The restrictive nature of the farm viability tests was mentioned by virtually every Member who contributed to the debate, including Ian McCrea, Dr William McCrea, Tom Elliott, Francie Brolly, the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment and Uncle Tom Cobbleigh and all. David Ford expressed concerns about the replacement of the farm viability tests. We must examine those tests actively, because they do not take account of the realities of modern farming practices.

Francie Brolly made the point that he knew of only two full-time farmers in the area in which he lives. That is something of which we must have cognisance. The replacement for the farm viability test should be fair, transparent and, above all, straightforward in its application.

Some Members raised the issue of a wider social test and non-farming families who continue to live in the countryside. I have had some discussions with stakeholders about that matter and, today, I met members of the Rural Development Council. We have also had discussions with the Ulster Farmers' Union,

and we will talk to other stakeholders, in the coming days, about the matter.

Some stakeholders have suggested that some sort of rural social test should be used as a way of assessing whether people who are not farmers should get planning permission in the countryside. I stress that, while we are still considering that, there are difficulties with regard to the kinship option. Members will know that the Republic of Ireland is, at present, experiencing some difficulties with those issues. It is something to which I am, and will continue to be, alert. I do not want to lead us into more legal difficulties with those policies, but it is something of which I am aware.

Other Members, including Tom Elliott, the Committee Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson, spoke about social and affordable housing. We are glad that the Minister for Social Development is on the subcommittee and contributes well to it. Draft PPS 14, in its present form, allows for groups of social housing. Mr Elliott asked if I knew how many successful planning applications had been made. I do not have those figures, to date, but I am happy to communicate with him about that.

Currently, where Northern Ireland Housing Executive has identified a local need, and where there is no space to build in the nearest village, a group of up to eight social houses may be built close to a settlement or near to a traditional focal point, such as a church. I accept Mr P J Bradley's point about including a school as a focal point. I am happy to take that suggestion on board.

We have considered extending the definition to cover affordable housing and to increase the number of houses to a maximum of 14. Some concerns have been expressed about that idea, but it is worthwhile to increase the number of houses and to look at it as a way of providing more affordable and social houses. It will also assist other Ministers — and that is what joined-up government is about — in what they are doing with regard to affordable housing. That is essentially led by the Housing Executive, however.

The Chairperson of the Environment Committee talked about equality, and Dr McCrea reminded me that there are more places in Northern Ireland than Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Although, as Mr Deputy Speaker might imagine, it is sometimes hard to recognise that. I am conscious of the need to consider how the policy will impact on all those who live and work in the countryside, no matter where they might be. We must take the whole of Northern Ireland into account. I want to ensure, therefore, that the policy proposals that we bring forward take equality considerations fully into account and are fair in respect of the whole rural community. Like all planning policy statements, PPS 14 will be subject to extensive public consultation and the statutory equality process.

The Committee Chairperson also mentioned businesses in the countryside. PPS 4 is currently being developed in conjunction with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. We hope that a draft PPS 4 will be published in the summer. Peter Weir spoke about the mistakes of PPS 14, which he described as a sledgehammer to crack a nut. He said that we must not return to a free-for-all. Later on in the debate, others said that that was pejorative language. Unfortunately, the debate has been characterised by a great deal of pejorative language, right across the spectrum. That is one of the most regrettable elements of it.

Mr Weir talked about farm viability and the need for a balanced approach. The Deputy Chairperson referred to sustainability, which is one of the underlying key areas that I wish to pursue. He also made reference to ribbon development, which was also mentioned by Jim Shannon at the end of the debate. Some Members felt that allowing infill in ribbon developments would simply make the situation worse.

Rather than permitting new houses to extend a ribbon development, we are trying to allow infill in the ribbon, which will minimise impact. The Department's suggestion is that such development would occur outside green belts and CPAs. If there is a suitable small gap, it could be dealt with appropriately.

6.45 pm

Other members, including George Savage and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, Mr Boylan, mentioned the danger of a cottage being replaced with an inappropriate building — George mentioned a mansion. Neither the subcommittee nor I envisage that the new policy would result in such an outcome. Draft PPS 14 states that a replacement dwelling should generally be within the curtilage of the original dwelling and of an appropriate design for its rural setting. Furthermore, it should take account of local distinctiveness and style overall, and its visual impact should not be significantly greater than that of the existing building. I have no plans to change those specifications, which are right and proper, and they will cover any proposals for the increased replacement of buildings. We must consider design, which is why the Department hopes to update the rural-design guide.

There has been much talk about the stakeholder events, and Members have complained about both the times at which they have been scheduled and the short period over which they are being held. Invitations to stakeholder events were issued about two weeks ago, and, as of lunchtime today, 240 people have confirmed that they will attend. Eight stakeholder events are being held across Northern Ireland, with at least one in each county. There will be three in the morning, three in the afternoon and two in the evening, with the aim of facilitating everybody across the spectrum. I know

that some people feel that farmers will not be able to attend at that time of day, but this stakeholder event is for everybody across the rural spectrum, not just farmers; indeed, as some of my honourable friends said, it affects urban developments too.

Those events are part of the review process and will help us to complete our work on those issues. This is not a consultation; it is stakeholder engagement. Mr McElduff asked about the consultation period, and I can tell him that there will be four months of consultation after draft PPS14 has been published. I am content that people will participate in that consultation. He also said that only two council members per council would be allowed to attend the stakeholder events. I have listened to Omagh District Council — as I always do — and four council members can now attend. I know that the Member will welcome that news.

Mr McElduff: It is very welcome.

Mrs Foster: Having listened to David Ford, I get the feeling that I cannot win. I bring the emerging findings document to the House as soon as I possibly can to allow Members an opportunity to consider the Department's thinking on the new policy, only for Mr Ford to tell me that not enough detail has emerged. The Department is trying to get the House's view on the revised policy to work that into the emerging findings and to any further details on it.

Mr Ford also mentioned personal health circumstances, as did Mr Elliott. I want there to be independent medical verification of health conditions. Mr Elliott is right: planners are not properly qualified to deal with such issues. I think that it was my friend Iris Robinson who first mentioned that matter to me, and I am happy to take on board her comments and any other comments — we need independent medical verification for planning applications in which personal health conditions are cited.

Barry McElduff wanted to put an end to the myth that there was a free-for-all before draft PPS 14 was introduced. In his very passionate speech Brian Wilson did not agree with that, referring to a hacienda on every hillside, which is rapidly becoming his single transferable slogan.

Mr Shannon: Hacienda Brian.

Mrs Foster: Hacienda Brian is right.

It is unhelpful for colleagues to engage in such debate. We are trying to have a balanced discussion, which I thought Brian Wilson from the Green Party would have welcomed. We are not going back to the situation that obtained before PPS 14 was introduced in March 2006, although some colleagues advocate that. Likewise, we must take into consideration what rural dwellers — and town dwellers — are telling us, the political representatives for Northern Ireland. We cannot ignore what people have mandated us to do.

It is unhelpful for Brian Wilson to make gross generalisations about people who live in the countryside travelling past schools to bring their children to schools in town. I do not do that, and I am sure that there are plenty of other Members who live in the countryside who do not do that either. I had wondered whether Mr Wilson had even listened to what I had to say at the beginning of this debate; then I remembered that he had been on Radio Ulster this morning telling everyone what was going to happen in this debate. Obviously, he had sight of what I was going to say even before I said it.

Jim Shannon asked an important question about the differences between green belt and non-green belt areas. Again, it is too early to be definitive, but we have considered that outside green belts and countryside policy areas, relaxation might include the reinstatement of dispersed rural communities, up to 14 rather than eight dwellings in an affordable housing group, a more relaxed approach to replacement policy, and suitable small gaps in a ribbon development — which is what was talked about before — with a substantial and continuously built-up frontage possibly being filled by two houses rather than one on some occasions. That is outside green belt and countryside policy areas; all the other proposals will apply inside the green belt areas as well.

I am not getting into a debate with Mr Shannon on whether a horse is an agriculture animal; that is a debate for another day. Others may have strong views on that issue. However, I appreciate what he said about the equine industry, and it was a point that was well made.

I thank all the Members who contributed to this debate; their points were well made. I look forward to coming back to the house in April with the finished product.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the emerging findings of the review of draft Planning Policy Statement 14 'Sustainable Development in the Countryside'.

Adjourned at 6.52 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 12 February 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

British-Irish Council — Environment Sectoral Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of the Environment that she wishes to make a statement on the British-Irish Council (BIC) ministerial meeting in the environment sectoral format.

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): The eighth British-Irish Council environment sectoral meeting was held in the Clandeboy Estate, Bangor, on 1 February 2008. The following report provides an outline of the meeting and has been agreed with Minister Ritchie, who also attended.

As Minister of the Environment for Northern Ireland, I was delighted to host the first British-Irish Council environment sectoral meeting to be held in Northern Ireland. I am grateful to Margaret Ritchie, the Minister for Social Development, for agreeing to be the accompanying Minister on this occasion.

The UK Government were represented by Joan Ruddock MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State with responsibility for climate change, biodiversity and waste, who also chaired the meeting. The States of Guernsey Government were represented by Deputy David de G de Lisle, Minister of the Environment Department. The Welsh Assembly Government were represented by Jane Davidson, Minister for Environment, Sustainability and Housing, and the Scottish Executive were represented by Michael Russell, Minister for the Environment. The Isle of Man Government were represented by John Shimmin, Minister for Local Government and the Environment, and the States of Jersey Government by Senator Freddie Cohen, the Minister for Planning and Environment. The representative for the Irish Government was John Gormley, the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

The meeting considered a paper on a climate change adaptation work programme, which was produced by the United Kingdom Government. That document updated the climate change work topics that were agreed at the previous BIC environment ministerial meeting, which was held in Guernsey on 26 July 2006.

Mr Roger Street, technical director of the United Kingdom Climate Impacts Programme (UKCIP), gave a presentation on the development of a new climate change update. That presentation explored the launch of a fifth-generation set of climate scenarios that will be a significant advance on earlier work. The climate scenarios will offer a comprehensive and user-friendly package of climate information that will allow users to assess the potential impacts that different scenarios will have and to identify effective responses.

Dr Jeremy Tomkinson, chief executive officer of the National Non-Food Crops Centre, gave a presentation on the renewable fuels and materials programme on behalf of the UK's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). He advised the Council that DEFRA and the UK's Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform published a joint strategy — renewable fuels and materials — in November 2004, which had been updated in 2007. The strategy covers all renewable materials derived from crops and animals for industrial use, bioenergy and transport. His presentation highlighted the business opportunities that exist for converting renewable material into products that would appeal to the marketplace.

The UK Government presented a paper on the work of the integrated coastal zone management (ICZM) working group. Ministers were updated on the progress of developing ICZM national strategies, and the paper covered a number of recent developments in the field.

Having considered various ICZM and coastal integration issues and strategies, Ministers agreed that each member Administration should continue to share ideas and ensure co-ordination between individual coastal policies and strategies, through the BIC ICZM working group and by other means where appropriate.

Minister Gormley suggested that the proposed paper on Sellafield and radioactive waste be tabled at a future meeting. He indicated that officials from the Irish and Manx Governments are working on the structure and content of a revised joint discussion paper on Sellafield and radioactive waste, which will address current operations at Sellafield, the safety of those operations, the final disposal of radioactive waste and the control of environmental discharges.

The Isle of Man Government presented a paper and a short film on the Fishing for Litter initiative. Although the initiative has been seen principally as environmental in purpose — by helping to solve the problem of marine litter — it was recognised that it

offers significant benefits to the fishing industry, which suffers damage to fishing tackle and contamination of catches, with a consequential detrimental effect on coastal communities.

Ministers agreed to support the concept of the Fishing for Litter initiative and agreed to ask the appropriate Departments in each member Administration to examine the feasibility and potential cost to fishing industries and Departments of developing and implementing such schemes in their own jurisdictions.

The group also discussed the results of the British-Irish Council environment work review. Several issues concerning future working arrangements were explored, such as: frequency of meetings; developing common areas of interest; and ensuring clear and defined outputs that add real value to policy development through a joined-up approach.

The meeting concluded that the climate change adaptation work programme should continue, and that the Council should receive further updates next year; the Republic of Ireland Government should submit their joint discussion paper on Sellafield and radioactive waste; more supporting analysis should be provided on the feasibility and costs of the Fishing for Litter initiative; and member Administrations should continue to share ideas and ensure co-ordination between individual coastal policies and strategies.

It was agreed that items for discussion at the next meeting of the Council should include waste; climate change; Sellafield and radioactive waste; and integrated coastal zone management. The Council agreed that its ninth ministerial meeting in environment sectoral format would be hosted by Jersey.

Mr Ross: I thank the Minister for her statement. As always, we welcome increased east-west co-operation. Following the Council meeting, the Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie, was very vocal about nuclear power — seemingly ignoring the fact that, to some degree, we are already relying on nuclear power in this country. First, is nuclear power within the departmental remit of Minister Ritchie? Secondly, we know that Patrick Moore, the co-founder of Greenpeace, is now a supporter of nuclear power, but does the Minister have any concerns about nuclear power stations being built in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: Nuclear power is not within my remit or the remit of the Minister for Social Development. Energy policy is a matter for the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. However, nuclear energy and nuclear installations are excepted matters and remain the responsibility of the UK Government under the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

However, my Department is responsible for ensuring that the environment of Northern Ireland is not adversely affected by activity elsewhere. A continuing

programme to monitor the effects of radioactive discharges from nuclear installations in Great Britain on the Northern Ireland coastline has shown negligible levels of contamination on our population and marine environment. Therefore, I have no reason, on environmental grounds, to oppose the building of new nuclear power stations. I read in the press that the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment is considering the issue, so we will await its outcomes.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I apologise for my little outburst in the Chamber a couple of weeks ago.

In light of recent reports about departmental websites being hacked into, and the current problems with the 20/20 system in the Planning Service, can I ask the Minister whether such issues were discussed with representatives of other legislatures at the BIC sectoral meeting? When does the Minister intend to introduce the Electronic Planning Information for Citizens (e-PIC) system into the Planning Service? Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs Foster: That is not only the most interesting question that I have had on a BIC environment sectoral meeting but the most inventive use of a statement.

We are investigating the hacking incidents of 2 and 3 February; given that the Member is the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, I am happy to report to the Committee when the full details are available. The e-PIC system is almost complete, and we hope to roll it out in the coming year; I shall also report to the Committee on that issue.

Mr Armstrong: I thank the Minister for her statement. Does she agree that waste-repair units would have less of an environmental effect in Northern Ireland than Sellafield-type plants, if they were to be built in certain areas of the United Kingdom?

Mrs Foster: I am not sure what the Member is talking about. Is he referring to the waste management strategy, which envisages power plants being built in Northern Ireland?

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to clarify his question.

Mr Armstrong: Some people talk about waste repair as incineration.

Mrs Foster: I think that the Member is referring to power from waste, which is Arc21's preferred option in the waste management strategy. Funding has now been granted to Arc21, and it is rolling out its plans. It does not use the word "incinerator", it uses the expression "power from waste", which will be developed over the coming years. I am sure that the Member, and the House, will agree that we must find alternative ways to deal with waste. We must fulfil our obligations under the European landfill directive, and I know that the Member will support measures to deal with those targets.

Mr Gallagher: I thank the Minister for her statement. Many people, especially those living on the east coast of Northern Ireland, are genuinely concerned about contamination and pollution from Sellafield, and I welcome the fact that that issue was discussed at the BIC sectoral meeting. I note that there is a working group on integrated coastal zone management. Given that Northern Ireland is aligning itself with the UK marine Bill, can the Minister confirm our representation on that working group and give the House further details? I welcome every voice that speaks on our behalf.

Mrs Foster: I am happy to do that. The Northern Ireland integrated coastal zone management strategy was launched in June 2006; a key element of that strategy was the establishment of a coastal and marine forum in Northern Ireland, which has been up and running since that time.

That forum co-ordinates research and provides expert advice and support towards achieving the strategy's objectives. As well as our own forum, through the integrated coastal zone management working group in the BIC, we, from the UK perspective, co-ordinate with other involved member states.

10.45 am

In December 2007, the Northern Ireland forum published the first in what it is hoped will be a series of booklets on the many important issues facing Northern Ireland's coastline. It was entitled 'Striking a Sustainable Balance'. Moreover, the Member will be aware of the National Trust booklet, 'Shifting Sands', which had some stark findings regarding three of its properties in Northern Ireland.

Integrated coastal zone management is a phrase that will be heard more and more by the Assembly, and the Department wants to assist that where possible.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive report on what was, obviously, a very interesting and inclusive meeting, given the number of topics covered.

Mr Gallagher highlighted the ICZM issue; however, I have questions on two other matters. With regard to business opportunities for renewable fuels, and the detail from the climate change programme, how does the Minister intend to get that information out to the people and businesses of Northern Ireland? The meeting might otherwise make no great impact beyond having been useful to Ministers.

Mrs Foster: In relation to Mr Ford's first point, Dr Jeremy Tomkinson gave an excellent presentation on hemp and its uses. The Minister for Social Development, who accompanied me, found what he did with housing, for example, very interesting. Furthermore, in light of what said he about non-food crops, we suggested that Dr Tomkinson should contact the Minister of Enterprise,

Trade and Investment about the business opportunities that are available to Northern Ireland.

Roger Street spoke very well on climate change, and Jeremy Tomkinson asked what we intend to do about UKCIP on climate change and our ability with the very useful tools for adaptation that will be available from November 2008.

Perhaps it is not a good thing to mention, given the day that is in it; however, I hope that we will be able to do something on the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) website. I hope to use the information technology available to the Department to bring the matter closer to the Northern Ireland people. Again, I shall use the Committee for the Environment, as well as this House, to publish the messages on climate change adaptation, which, it is hoped, will be available to everyone in the UK to see what can be done at a local level to deal with climate change.

Mr Hamilton: The Minister, in her statement, spoke of the intriguingly titled Fishing for Litter initiative. Will she outline the advantages and potential problems associated with implementing such a scheme for the fishermen of my Strangford constituency and from elsewhere in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: The Isle of Man Government presented a very informative video, which, I presume, came from Scotland because a lot of Scottish people appeared in it. Scotland and the Isle of Man have operated the Fishing for Litter initiative for some time, and there are obvious benefits for the environment. Benefits for fishermen include a likely reduction in the risk of damage to their fishing gear and in contamination of their catches. However, further issues must be explored with regard to funding, and we are happy to be part of a feasibility study on possible costs.

On a more general point, initiatives to reduce marine litter benefit everyone, and fit well with integrated coastal zone management. Marine life would benefit from such a scheme, and we hope to develop that in conjunction with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD).

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Was there any discussion of the possible development of nuclear facilities along the west coast of Britain, and the possible environmental implications of that? Research has been carried out on the east coast of Counties Dublin and Louth on the proven high levels of radioactivity in those areas. Does the Minister have any plans to look into the possibility of carrying out research along the coasts of Antrim and Down to see whether there are higher levels of radioactivity there than in other parts of the North?

Mrs Foster: There was only the briefest of discussions on nuclear power, because the Irish and Manx Governments intend to bring a paper to the next BIC

detailing the concerns that they voiced briefly at the meeting. There was no discussion about future installations on mainland UK, or anything of that nature.

I hear what the Member says about monitoring and what has been found in the Republic of Ireland. However, as I said in response to the first question this morning, there is a continuous programme of monitoring the effect on Northern Ireland of radioactive discharges from nuclear installations in GB, and that will continue. At present, it shows that contamination is negligible in terms of its impact on both the population and the marine environment. I have no plans to step that up, because it continues to be there.

Mr T Clarke: I join with other Members in congratulating the Minister on bringing this statement to the House today. Were any specific items discussed at the meeting that are unique to Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: No, because it was a meeting of the British-Irish Council. What we do is share information across Administrations on the issues that affect us all. I found the discussions with the Manx Government, in particular, to be very useful. As the Member knows, we are only a short distance away from the Isle of Man, and they had some useful things to say about waste, for example. That is one of the areas that we are hoping to look at at the next BIC meeting.

Mr Cree: In light of the fact that over 50 illegal landfill sites containing waste from the Republic have been discovered in Northern Ireland, and given the Environment and Heritage Service's (EHS) estimate that there are some 250,000 tons of household waste in Northern Ireland that have come from the Republic, did the Minister discuss the issue of financial compensation for the return of illegal waste to the Republic with her counterpart, Mr Gormley?

Mrs Foster: As this was a BIC meeting, that was not discussed formally. However, the Member may be aware that I took the opportunity to speak to Mr Gormley on the sidelines. Progress on the repatriation of illegal waste from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland has been much too slow. I also gave Mr Gormley a letter in which I proposed a way forward, in so far as we would remove the waste from one particular site in County Fermanagh that is causing concern, and it would then be taken to a landfill site in the Republic. I am awaiting his response.

The Member is correct; a road map was set out for dealing with illegal waste between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and I am concerned that progress is not being made. I am taking this very seriously. That is why I mentioned it to John Gormley at the BIC meeting and why I will continue to monitor the situation.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister and her ministerial colleagues for the work of what seems to have been a

very good meeting. I have to correct the Minister on a reference that she made to the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee: the Committee is not looking at the issue of nuclear power. Passing observations on the part of a Committee member were elevated into a news report that stated that the Committee is conducting an inquiry. I miss one meeting, and I have nuclear fallout to deal with.

From my perspective as Chairperson of that Committee, I welcome what the Minister said about the business opportunities in the field of renewable energy, rather than just looking at it in terms of challenges and obligations.

Will the Minister say whether, at future meetings, she and her colleagues would be prepared to consider a framework for marine management organisations or one organisation for all these islands? That issue arises, of course, in the context of the UK Climate Change Bill [HL]. There will also be the issue for us of what discrete legislation is required here, with a discrete organisation, too. Given the content of the Minister's statement, which focused on our shared marine life, it seems to me that there could be a distinctive role for an east-west body, or at least a clear network and co-ordinating framework on an east-west basis, in the area of marine management.

Mrs Foster: Marine management organisations are dealt with in the marine Bill, on which subject I will come to the House very soon. I have been talking to DEFRA about how we might take that issue forward. Before devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, it would have been much simpler for DEFRA officials because there would have been only one marine management organisation. Now Scotland wants its own organisation for those areas that have been transferred. Wales is also looking into the matter. We are considering a marine management organisation for Northern Ireland, but we will remain linked into the UK one, which has the expertise.

As I said, the matter will come before the House soon, and I am in close contact with DEFRA. We do not want to lose control of our marine life, which is why we are considering our own marine management organisation for transferred matters only.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I had not intended to speak, but I want to set record the record straight. I chaired the meeting of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment at which the nuclear explosion erupted. Some journalists reported that the Committee was to undertake an inquiry into nuclear energy. As far as I am concerned, that has never been on the agenda. The Chairperson and I put out a statement to that effect, but it did not get any press coverage.

I take this opportunity to ask the Minister whether it would be worthwhile exploring with her counterpart, John Gormley, a common position on nuclear energy.

Mrs Foster: As I have already indicated, nuclear energy is the responsibility of the United Kingdom Government, so, from that perspective, I will not be considering a common position with the Republic of Ireland Government. My obligation as Minister of the Environment is to decide whether there is any environmental impact on the Northern Ireland population and on the marine environment. I am satisfied at present that there is not. I will continue to monitor matters, and unless there is something that causes grave concern, I see no reason to worry about the situation as it stands.

Mr Storey: I welcome the focus on the east-west relationship. With regard to ICZM and the coastal marine forum, will the Minister assure me that issues relating to the only inhabited island off Northern Ireland's coast — Rathlin, which is part of my constituency — will be dealt with in a way that engages fully with the islanders and ensures that they are fully informed about the proposals and of the impact that they are likely to have?

Mrs Foster: I am very happy to do so. Rathlin is much visited by my Department, and I know that the Member visits it all the time. EHS values Rathlin very much. It is carrying out a seabed exploration around the island, and some of the findings will be of great interest to environmentalists across the UK and Europe. Rathlin is a jewel, and I know that the Executive have a plan specifically for it. I look forward to visiting it again in June.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Budget Bill: Second Stage

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

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 10/07] be agreed.

I want to draw attention briefly to a few points. I am not sure whether I am able to get Members of the House to concede yet — they have been talked to death in around half a dozen finance debates during the past few weeks. Today's debate follows the Budget Bill's First Stage yesterday. It also follows the Supply resolutions for the 2007-08 spring Supplementary Estimates and the 2008-09 Vote on Account, which were also considered and approved yesterday.

11.00 am

As I explained during yesterday's debate, for logistical reasons, accelerated passage of the Bill is needed in order to ensure Royal Assent in March 2008. It is needed to provide the legal authority for Departments and other public bodies to spend the cash and use the resources in the 2007-08 financial year and to ensure a seamless flow of public services into 2008-09 by the Vote on Account.

I am glad to state that the Budget Bill can be given accelerated passage because the Committee for Finance and Personnel confirmed that, in line with Standing Order 40, it is satisfied that there has been appropriate consultation on the public-expenditure proposals contained in the Bill. The Committee's confirmation was given in a letter dated 6 February from the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel to the Speaker. Once again, I welcome and appreciate the Committee's assistance in the matter.

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

The Bill's purpose is to give legislative effect to the 2007-08 spring Supplementary Estimates and the 2008-09 Vote on Account, approved through the Supply resolutions passed yesterday. Copies of the spring Supplementary Estimates, the Vote on Account, the Budget Bill and the explanatory and financial memorandum have been made available to Members. I do not intend to detain the Assembly with unnecessary repetition of the details that I gave to Members yesterday. However, in accordance with the nature of the Second Stage debate that is envisaged under Standing Order 30, and for the benefit of Members, I wish to summarise briefly the Bill's main features.

The Bill's purpose is to authorise the issue of £11,851,642,000 from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund and the use of resources that total £14,429,839,000 by Departments and certain other

bodies detailed in the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2007-08. Those amounts supersede the Vote on Account that was passed at Westminster in February 2007 and the Main Estimate provision in the Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2007 that was passed the Assembly in June 2007.

The sums to be issued from the Consolidated Fund are to be appropriated by each Department or public body for the services set out in schedule 1 to the Bill, whereas the resources are to be used for the purposes specified in schedule 2. The Bill also authorises a Vote on Account for 2008-09 of cash of £5,335,212,000 and resources of £6,493,908,000 to allow the flow of cash and resources to continue to public services in the early months of 2008-09 until the Main Estimates and the related Budget Bill are approved by the Assembly in June 2008.

Again, the cash and resources are to be appropriated and used for the services and purposes set out in schedules 3 and 4 respectively. In addition, the Bill revises the 2007-08 limit on the use of operating and non-operating accruing resources, and specifies the purposes for which they may be used in schedule 2. Mr Deputy Speaker, you will have gathered that the Bill is technical. However, and finally, clause 5 of the Bill authorises temporary borrowing by the Department of Finance and Personnel at a ceiling of £2,667,606,000 for 2008-09.

The Budget Bill represents the end of the Budget process for the financial year 2007-08. In this year, the Assembly has begun to juggle priorities, meet emerging pressures within a finite budget and make the difficult decisions that it is our responsibility, as publicly elected representatives, to make. As we enter 2008-09, that will continue to be the challenge, alongside the requirement to maximise efficiencies and deliver on the targets and outcomes envisaged in our Programme for Government.

As I have said on more than one occasion in the Assembly in the past weeks, the public will now be seeking the delivery of improved public services in health, education, roads, the environment and many other areas. This Administration must move on and develop a culture of delivery in public services, rather than constantly focusing on spending and attaining additional money.

The spending plans in the Budget Bill were yesterday approved and endorsed by the Assembly — the Assembly has few more important duties than authorising public expenditure by Departments. As the Bill gives legal form to the same issues that were discussed yesterday, there is little more that I can usefully add without tiresome repetition. Although Members may feel talked out after so many debates on

financial issues in recent days, I am still happy to deal with any points of principle that may arise.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his opening remarks and ask him not to be too concerned, because the intricate and technical details of the Bill are, obviously, meat and drink to my colleagues on the Finance Committee.

As I reported in the Assembly yesterday, at its meeting on 30 January 2008, the Committee heard evidence from the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) officials. At a further evidence session on 6 February, officials took the Committee members through the detail of the Budget Bill.

The Bill gives formal legal authority for Departments to incur expenditure and to use resources as set out in the 2007-08 spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account for 2008-09. Following the evidence sessions, and in light of its scrutiny of the in-year monitoring rounds, the Committee was satisfied that it had received appropriate consultation on the public-expenditure proposals in the Budget Bill. Therefore, the Committee was content to grant accelerated passage to the Bill in accordance with Standing Order 40(2).

Yesterday, I spoke of the Committee's active scrutiny role in the quarterly monitoring rounds throughout 2007-08. The Committee published an extensive report in early January on the Budget allocations for 2008-11, of which the Vote on Account for 2008-09, which was agreed yesterday, was the first step. A formal response to that is due from DFP in March, and we await that with interest.

Due to the timing of restoration in May 2007, the Committees and the Assembly did not have the opportunity to scrutinise the draft Budget proposals for the current financial year. Instead, it was inherited as a *fait accompli* from the direct rule period. New circumstances now pertain, and there will be a need to establish processes that maximise the role of the Assembly and its Committees.

One of the issues raised in the Committee's report was the need to implement an effective process to scrutinise the Executive's Budget proposals as soon as possible. The Committee's report also included recommendations on several strategic and cross-cutting issues relating to the improvement of financial management across Departments — in particular, the important work to be carried out by the capital realisation task force and the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU).

The Committee looks forward to working with the Minister and the Department on those issues, and supports the Bill. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs I Robinson: The Minister will forgive me for selfishly focusing on a matter close to my heart. As he is aware, we in the Castlereagh Borough Council area of the Strangford constituency have been working closely with other agencies — not least the former South and East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust — to build a centre in Ballybeen square for the 10,000-strong community following the demolition of the Enler old people's home.

At one stage, Ballybeen had been designated a targeting social need (TSN) area, but it lost that status as a result of the attention that was being given to rural communities. More recently, however, the Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie, identified it as an area at risk, and her Department earmarked considerable money for the Enler project. However, she and her ministerial colleague the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety withdrew their financial offers, despite our taking seven years to work out our plans. Those plans included engaging with the whole community to identify what it saw as important facilities for the community. Those facilities included a senior citizens' day centre, a start-up business unit, childcare facilities, a crèche, and shops, which are often in short supply in such large estates. It was also hoped that a new sub-post office could be attracted to the area, given that the previous one had been removed as a result of the recent cutbacks in post office services.

I believe that the decision to withdraw the money at the last minute — when we were ready to build — was politically motivated, despite the fact that capital expenditure was not a problem for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). The impact of those actions put in jeopardy our International Fund for Ireland funding, never mind the hundreds of thousands of pounds that were lost in the years during which feasibility studies were being prepared.

Does the Minister agree that additional moneys given to those two Departments would ensure that sufficient funding would be available to enable that life-changing facility to be core funded? That would, of course, depend on people's having the will to overcome the type of petty point scoring that followed the farce of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety denying during the debate on the draft Budget that he had signed off on that document at a meeting of the Executive Committee, even though he is a member of the Executive. Sadly, Minister Ritchie felt the need to follow her new coalition friends. Will the Minister join me in convincing those Ministers that the long-suffering people of Ballybeen should not be left totally disenfranchised as a result of that behaviour?

I am sure that the Minister will join me in congratulating the people who are involved in pushing forward the Enler project. They include Paul Carland from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, officials from our own Castlereagh Borough Council, Sammy Douglas of the International Fund for Ireland, the Ballybeen Improvement Group, and Maurice Kinkad, who did sterling work on raising money and on core-funding projects.

Does the Minister agree that if the project does not go ahead, the plans for improving Ballybeen square will be affected? That area has been a trouble hot spot throughout the period of unrest in our Province. I apologise if I have put the Minister on the spot — not the hot spot — but he will be aware of the need to show that predominately Protestant area that this Government will roll out programmes of funding to areas, particularly those in loyalist and unionist communities, that have, sadly, been so wantonly discriminated against by successive Governments.

Mr Beggs: I understand that Second Stage is the opportunity to consider the general principles of a Bill. Given that, I agree with the Minister that there is little point in covering areas that were discussed during the Budget debate. I could have taken this opportunity to highlight the lack of capital investment for health facilities in my area and the need for health and care centres in Larne and Carrickfergus. However, that is not the purpose of this Stage, so I will not continue along those lines.

The Minister said that the Budget process can be complex, particularly when we try to understand the spring Supplementary Estimates. I have a mathematical background, but one would need to be a well-trained accountant to better understand the spring Supplementary Estimates. I have attempted to gather the information as best I can. However, I hope that the Minister will accept that it would be useful for all Members, including members of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, to be given some training in that area, because it would help us to scrutinise better such matters in future. I simply wished to make that point about the process, and I hope that the Minister will consider my suggestion.

11.15 am

Mr O'Loan: A further debate on budgetary matters might give Members a sense of it being:

“like déjà vu all over again.”

My party has made its basic stance on the Budget clear. Having talked about the principles of the Budget Bill, we can see that there is a clear need for it, and we will not oppose it.

I do not wish to labour points that have already been made. In yesterday's debate on the spring Supplementary

Estimates, I talked about the important issue of secondary education. Today, I wish to refer briefly to water charges, about which substantial uncertainties remain. The strand-two report is presenting important proposals on the governance of NI Water, which will have implications for the level of funding required and the charges levied. The exact manner of charging remains to be defined; and, therefore, my party will continue to watch that issue with great interest.

Yesterday, important points were made about underspend and overcommitment, and I welcome the steps being taken to better control those related issues. Efficiency savings have been mentioned, but I wish to speak at length about efficiency in broad terms. There is significant inefficiency and waste in our public services. That is no criticism of public servants, the vast majority of whom are committed and hard-working. However, systems are frequently weak and do not provide optimum service; they are not effective in identifying and correcting instances of underperformance.

The SDLP is committed to social justice and equality — but low-quality public services can make no contribution to social justice. We do not want equality in inferior service. The word “transformation” has been used in relation to the recent changes that have been made, and continue to be made, to the National Health Service in England. Transformation is not a word that we use frequently here, but we must incorporate the concept into our thinking and vocabulary when examining our own public services. The challenge facing the Assembly is the transformation of the quality of our public services.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel’s principle vehicle for transforming public services will be the performance and efficiency delivery unit. When that idea was presented to the Assembly, most Members were inclined to feel that it could only be a good thing. We had a pretty simple idea that it would be some sort of machine, such as an automatic washing machine. Inefficiency would be put into the machine at one end, get churned around in a recognisable and straightforward way, and emerge at the other end as pristine efficiency. Following closer examination, there are questions about how such a unit will work. The Minister knows that the Committee for Finance and Personnel considered the matter and has commented on it.

The way in which PEDU will work presents several questions. Will it be invited into Departments, as the Minister suggested on one occasion? That is questionable. Will senior officials and Ministers, who regard themselves as being in charge of Departments, invite in an outside agency, which might do upsetting things to their Departments — things over which they will have no control? That, too, is questionable.

Whether PEDU will have the authority to interfere in Departments without their consent is equally questionable. Unless there is agreement and consensus, it is hard to see how one can reach the level of co-operation required to achieve significant change — and significant change is what we are interested in.

What issues might PEDU identify? We heard some evidence, by way of comparison with the efficiency unit in the Prime Minister’s office at Westminster, that PEDU might identify the burning issues of the day. At present, it might identify *Clostridium difficile* as the big issue, and decide that that needs attention. One can imagine considerable effort going into dealing with that, probably successfully, and the headlines might be very good. However, it is open to question whether, in the end, PEDU can achieve the best allocation of resources and profoundly alter the efficiency of the broad services within which that particular element of the Health Service rests. The manner in which we achieve efficiency, and the potential contribution of PEDU, is something to which we should give a great deal more thought.

Another issue related to efficiency is procurement. In that respect, I look beyond inefficiency to abuse and corruption. I express the following in general terms, but it needs to be said. I do not have sufficient evidence on this issue to be able to walk into a police station and present a case for the police to investigate with a reasonable hope of conclusion. However, enough anecdotal evidence has come before me to convince me that, in certain areas of the public sector relating to procurement, there is significant and endemic corruption and abuse. The existing mechanisms for addressing it are not succeeding. Those close to the relevant sectors know very well that something rotten is going on, and they know what it is. As a political Assembly, in control of the public sector, we must do something about that.

As an important side point in relation to industrial derating, I quote from page (ix) of a report, which the Minister received from Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland (ERINI) in October 2007, ‘Review of Industrial Derating Policy’:

“we have been struck when talking to industry at the degree of disillusionment that exists about the willingness of government to understand the problems of business and to create a sustainable supportive regime within which it can prosper. A decision on the future of industrial derating and the first Budget of the new Executive may be an excellent opportunity to forge a new concordat between industry and government that would set out clearly what each can expect from the other in obligation and support.”

The Committee reiterated those comments and elaborated on them somewhat in the report that it gave to the Minister. However, I want to bring this to the attention of the whole Assembly, because it is such an important issue. That feature of that report remains to

be acted on, and I call on all relevant Departments, including DFP, to do so.

Mr Neeson: It will come as no surprise to the Minister that the Alliance Party has serious reservations about the Budget, for the specific reason that it does not place tackling sectarianism and segregation, rebalancing the economy, and delivering sustainable public services at the centre of Government policy and Government funding allocations.

That is based on our vision for this society, which is fundamentally different from that being advocated by the four Executive parties.

However, we will not seek to divide the House on the Bill, as we recognise that it is primarily about tidying up a financial situation that was left over from direct rule. The main discussion will come in the summer with the main Budget Bill. Our main and specific financial concern is with the amount of money that the Executive are making available to invest in public services now in order to make savings later, while maintaining a high standard of service delivery to the public.

No one minds paying for public services, provided that they are of a high standard and deliver true value for money to the people who use them. Therefore, I agree with Declan O'Loan's point on efficiencies. The first difficulty remains that the Executive are restricting the full use of the tools available to them deliver an effective Budget. There are three main areas in which improvements could be made.

First, our public services are the least efficient in the UK. Therefore, our efficiency targets should be tougher than elsewhere. Achieving that requires an immediate start to addressing the cost of division. My colleague David Ford will be writing to the Minister to set up a meeting to discuss the matter.

Secondly, the refusal of the unionist parties to countenance tax-varying powers in line with those that are enjoyed by Scotland limits our potential for movement. It is as though we are telling the outside world that we are not competent to run our finances fully. It severely limits our ability to make the case for lower corporation tax, an issue that remains a high priority for business, if not for the Executive.

Thirdly, the Executive must think of other, fair ways to raise the money that is essential for public services. For example, most western European countries fund water through charges that are based on the ability to pay and consumption. We must also consider how the Republic of Ireland was able to finance its motorway network.

The Bill fails to link issues together effectively. That is not entirely the fault of the current Executive, but there is precious little evidence that they are putting things right. The failure to invest in education, health

and infrastructure now will lead to economic difficulties later.

The Alliance Party is committed to low rates, and the Minister kindly referred to that. I thank him for reminding the public of that. However, we would keep rates low through savings on the cost of division, making full use of the financial tools that are available — and are potentially available — and by investing in the right areas now to make savings later. We would not fail to invest the money that is required for education, health and infrastructure, which are essential economic drivers, simply for the sake of covering up what is another new Labour Budget.

In conclusion, I will make some general points. I recognise that one of the main priorities in the Programme for Government is to grow the economy, and I welcome that. However, I question whether enough resources have been directed to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to achieve that. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment is committed to the development of renewable energy, and I wonder whether enough resources have been focused on that.

The Minister knows about my personal interest in maritime heritage. When I spoke in the Programme for Government debate on 28 January 2008, I said that no Department in Northern Ireland has any responsibility for the development of maritime heritage. A major maritime heritage project, which I consider to be of titanic proportions, in the Minister's constituency of East Belfast, is in real danger of being scuttled. I seek a meeting with the Minister on that project at the earliest opportunity.

11.30 am

As a former teacher, I am deeply concerned about what is going on with the education system. Although I have no deep disagreement with what the Minister of Education is trying to achieve, I am concerned that issues such as the education estate have not been fully considered. The Assembly must face up to that major problem, because the public, and teachers and pupils in particular, are deeply concerned about what is happening. We as an Assembly have a responsibility to deal with the issue as a matter of urgency, and it must be tackled in the Budget. The whole question of the future management of the schools estate must be seriously considered.

Although the Alliance Party has reservations about the Budget Bill, we will not seek to divide the House on the issue.

Mr Hamilton: I wish to pick up on some points that have been made, principally by Declan O'Loan, on the issue of efficiencies. I for one welcome the focus on efficiencies in the Budget. Focus on this important area is much needed, as it was severely lacking under direct

rule. It is a serious matter, as inefficiencies — particularly when they are on a huge scale and are easily avoidable — are tantamount to theft. It is public money that is being wasted on inefficiencies, and it could be put to better use delivering efficient public services.

I support the creation of the performance and efficiency delivery unit. Mr O'Loan raised some of his personal concerns about the unit, but it will prove to be a worthwhile creation in the long term. The unit will operate not in an ostentatious or obvious way, but in a quiet way to achieve efficiencies in the public sector.

The Prime Minister's delivery unit at Whitehall has had some notable successes in reducing waiting lists, among other things. That is an example of how such a unit can achieve real success. I am optimistic about the creation of the unit and the opportunities that it will present. It is not simply about efficiencies: it is about delivery.

The Health Service in Northern Ireland is a good example of where there have been record levels of investment and where health professionals are working flat out, yet no one will say that the performance over those years of record levels of investment has improved at the same scale and trajectory as the funding. The work of PEDU could concentrate on that area, among others, to achieve real results.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member acknowledge that there has been improvement in waiting lists in the past year, as a result of concentration on providing a more efficient service? There was an acknowledgement in the Appleby Report that some of the additional costs in Northern Ireland were due to its rurality and the spread-out nature of our population. Does the Member acknowledge that if efficiency is driven too hard, some of the outlying services may be simply cut off in efficiency savings?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his contribution. One can never be too efficient: efficiencies must be pursued at every opportunity. The example that Mr Beggs gave with regard to the improvement in waiting lists is almost justification for the type of work that PEDU will do. Concentration and clear focus on one particular issue, such as waiting lists, demonstrates how such a thing can be achieved. When I raised the issue of waiting lists —

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Wait just a second.

I raised the issue of waiting lists as an example of what has been achieved in the Prime Minister's delivery unit, but concentration should be focused on many other areas of the Health Service in Northern Ireland, such as our massive spend on prescription charges.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Member for giving way. I am cheating a little, because I wish to comment on Mr

Beggs's intervention. However, it is a valuable point of debate.

There has been an improvement in waiting lists, but Members should not blind themselves to the fact that there was a considerable cost involved in achieving that. That is probably opaque to most Members; I do not know the detail, but the improvements did come at a cost. That is another illustration of the type of situation that I mentioned. In instances in which there is cost, there is also opportunity cost. Resources invested in one area might have been used in another. Finding particular ways to remedy a particular problem is usually the most efficient way to achieve better performance in that service. On that matter, it is open to question.

Mr Hamilton: I am worried that I look like an umpire in a tennis match; it seems that Members are hitting back and forth. The Member raised a good point. Widespread considerations must be made, but I am sure that Mr O'Loan appreciates that considerable focus and determination are required in looking at matters that are not necessarily the topic of the day, but that are endemic and cause widespread problems. PEDU will be useful in that regard.

Mrs I Robinson: Although there have been improvements in the hospital waiting lists across the Province, does the Member note that patients are rushed through their procedures to ensure that deadlines are met? Furthermore, the figures that illustrate how many people have to return to hospital because they were discharged too quickly — because deadlines had to be met — make interesting reading.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for her contribution on a subject about which she knows a great deal and in which she has had a long-standing interest. There are no simple answers to those questions. Mrs Robinson is right — one can come up with solutions that are merely quick fixes, but they are not the answer. We look for long-term gains and performances that can be improved over time, and not something that, for instance, is simply to satisfy a particular media curiosity or a reaction to achieve deadlines merely for the sake of satisfying the media, for instance.

I must watch myself, because, for the second day running, I agree with a point — just one point — raised by an Alliance Party Member.

Mr Weir: Resign.

Mr Hamilton: I will be in trouble with the Whip. Mr Neeson stated that nobody minds paying for public services if they are delivered at a high standard. That is a relevant point when allied to the comments made about efficiencies. I have said this before, but it is worth repeating: people have paid over the odds, but they have not always received the service that they deserve. The Alliance Party would make the people pay even more, regardless of whether the services were efficient.

Furthermore, Mr Neeson called for the Assembly to embrace tax-varying powers. Recently, it has been clear that, were the Alliance Party to get their hands on the tax-varying powers, taxes would be varied in an upward direction, to the detriment, of Northern Ireland's householders and businesses.

One of the main priorities in the Budget is the focus on growing a vibrant and dynamic economy for Northern Ireland. That has been named as the Executive's number one priority. I have spoken about that before, and I welcome the objective. Given the Northern Ireland economy's structural weaknesses, the difficulties that we have had through the years and those that we will face if we do not achieve that priority as we move into a sometimes uncertain future, as illustrated by the current uncertainty in the global marketplace, the Assembly wholeheartedly supports the objective.

I welcome the increased funding for innovation. That can be seen in the significantly increased budgets for the Department for Employment and Learning, which has an important role to play in developing skills, and for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. A higher concentration of funding has been given to tourism — an area that has been under-exploited in Northern Ireland through the years. There is potential there, and I welcome that boost in funding.

One should not think that social issues have not received the same focus in the Budget as has the economy. It is not a trade-off; the two areas go hand in hand. The Department for Social Development received an increased allocation of resources for social and affordable housing.

Following the Finance Minister's Budget statement, there was much concentration on the extra £205 million for new social and affordable homes. However, it is worth restating that that money is on top of the amount that had already been allocated in the draft Budget.

My interest in this subject stems from first-hand constituency experience. In common with my constituency colleagues and, I am sure, colleagues throughout Northern Ireland, my workload is dominated by housing issues. In Strangford, there is a social housing crisis. Figures from the Minister for Social Development for settlements in the Strangford constituency — Newtownards, Comber, Ballygowan, Saintfield, Killinchy, Moneyreagh and Killyleagh — show that there are 3,586 applicants on the Housing Executive waiting list, 2,458 of whom are deemed to be in housing stress. Over the past three years a paltry total of 576 allocations were made — an average of fewer than 200 a year — and that is at the heart of the crisis.

It is an awful thing to say, but the harsh reality is that we are almost in the situation of waiting for people to die in order that houses become available and new people can move in. That is an awful predicament in which to be. Housing Executive officials do their best,

and it is not for want of trying on their part, but they find it difficult to place people because the houses are simply not there.

In the extremely unlikely scenario that no new applicants are added to the list, at the current rate of allocations in Strangford, it will take an astounding 19 years to clear the waiting list. That is how bad the situation has become. Nevertheless, I am sure that Strangford is not in the worst position, and I would not wish to see a constituency requiring a longer timescale to clear up its waiting list.

In Strangford, the problem is compounded by the fact that, in addition to suffering from some of the longest waiting lists, we suffer simultaneously from some of the highest house prices in Northern Ireland. A survey by the Halifax in October 2007 showed that Newtownards was deemed to be the United Kingdom's property hot spot, with average house-price rises of 65% and an average house price of £250,000. Therefore, young people who would otherwise buy a new home simply cannot afford to do so, and they present themselves to the Housing Executive in order to get on the waiting list, which places additional and perhaps unnecessary pressure on that list.

The social-and-affordable-home targets in the Programme for Government, backed up by the resources allocated in the Budget, are ambitious but absolutely necessary, and the Budget provides the Minister for Social Development with the cold, hard cash to deliver on her desire, which we all share, for more social housing.

Finally, returning to my earlier point about focusing on problems, although we all want to sort out this problem now, it is important to ensure that we do not permit ourselves to get into this sorry situation again. Some years ago, a belief developed that we needed no more, or perhaps minimal, newbuild social housing. Clearly, circumstances have shown that not to be the case, and we must maintain a newbuild social housing programme in order that people can eventually buy those houses and assume the responsibility of becoming a homeowner.

We must learn lessons from the current crisis and not repeat mistakes. I support the Budget Bill.

Mr Durkan: As other Members and the Minister have said, the Bill is about ensuring that public expenditure flows properly, and, despite the SDLP's reservations about the overall Budget, it has no intention of impeding that flow. Furthermore, given the debate and consideration that has taken place both in the Committee for Finance and Personnel and in the Chamber, the SDLP agrees with the Committee that the Bill should be granted accelerated passage.

I wish to address several of the points that have arisen during the debate. The SDLP expressed serious reservations about the way in which education was treated in

the Budget. To point out that the subject is not adequately covered in the Budget and that the proposals for education are unclear is not to have a go at the Finance Minister or the Minister of Education, it is simply to highlight that, if the Assembly is to be deemed a competent authority on the Budget, its Members must be realistic about the fact that they do not have a fully articulated picture of the serious public-expenditure implications of the education proposals.

11.45 am

Similarly, there are unknowns and assumptions about water. The Independent Water Review Panel's strand two report is out for consultation, and we have had the strand one report for some time, but there are parts of that report from which Ministers, or the Executive, appear to have resiled, or to be keeping their distance. In those circumstances, and given that the overall period of the Budget as presented previously was three years — I appreciate that the focus of the Budget Bill is slightly different — that reservation is valid and legitimate, and the SDLP is no more relaxed now than it was before.

The SDLP also raised the issue of the move away from cross-cutting and non-departmental funds. We favour those types of funds, not just because we helped to create them in the past, but because they serve to focus Departments beyond just using the money in their budgets as though it were their own private property for their own particular priorities. When we had the Executive programme funds, we were able to encourage some Departments to come together on a cross-cutting basis, and we would have been able to do even more if we had had a clear Executive substructure, or an Assembly Committee, to set priorities and commissioning criteria for possible bids. In a settled process, with a fully working Executive, that substructure would have made good some of the problems of the past.

Ministers have said that money for children, instead of going into a children's fund, is now going into Departments, but the fact is that money that goes into Departments is not always used for the purpose for which it is ring-fenced, and it is not easy to track it to see where it has been used.

People outside Departments find it difficult to have their ideas and proposals on funding heard. The children's fund was open to applications from the community and voluntary sector, and in one of the rounds we did not allocate as much money as had been earmarked for the statutory sector, because of the relatively poor quality of bids from the Departments. Instead, we put that money aside to top up what was available to the community and voluntary sector, or to take revised bids from the statutory sector, on a play-off basis.

That approach to funds is used in Whitehall and in the South, where Brian Cowen, in his very first Budget, set aside €800 million to be available for bids from six

Departments. Among the priorities that he indicated for those funds were children, families with disabilities and families in stress. At that time, when everybody thought that a lot of money was available to the Southern Exchequer, he felt that it was important to hold some in reserve to await quality proposals, instead of giving the money to Departments to use as they pleased. Those are all rational, constructive and different approaches that we can use in the Budget as framed.

In previous debates a number of comments have been made about the past Executive, and about me, that I did not have a chance to respond to at the time. Indeed, some of the Members making those comments would not allow me to answer. I will deal with a couple of them now.

During Question Time, the Minister for Regional Development said that money had been allocated by the previous Executive — and by me, as Minister of Finance and Personnel — for new trains on condition of a reduction to the core network. That is absolutely untrue. The record of the time will show that, when the expenditure for the new trains was announced, although officials said that money for new trains should be linked to a reduction in the core network, I rejected that in my role as Minister of Finance and Personnel, the Executive did not adopt that recommendation, and the House passed the Budget on the basis that there was no question of a precondition of a reduction in the core network.

Members of all parties asked about that matter during the Budget exercise because of what was said. I absolutely refute the misrepresentation by the then Minister for Regional Development. I said at the time that there would be money for new train sets because the proposals had been worked up and that I was asking for proposals for investment in the network; however, no serious proposals ever emerged.

There were some small bids, some of which, we were told at the time, would not be fully spent. That is why the Executive did not meet them. However, it was made clear that the reinvestment and reform initiative and the infrastructure fund would support significant investment in the railway network. Those means were identified; it is just a pity that significant investment in the railway network has not been expedited since.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel also referred to a meeting that he said he had had with me at which he attempted to discourage me from breaking the link between water services and the rates. That link had already been broken in the comprehensive spending review: it was partly discussed when the direct rule Minister with responsibility for finance and personnel, Paul Murphy, addressed the comprehensive spending review. That is when the idea that part of the rates should be dedicated to water charges was thrown out. Bizarrely, at the same time, the direct rule Minister

was justifying the then projected increases of 7% almost entirely on the need for water charges.

When Mr Robinson and I met — when he was Minister for Regional Development and I was Minister of Finance and Personnel — he and his permanent secretary proposed that my Department should convert the entire regional rate to a water rate. It was not an idea that I found particularly attractive, but I shared it with my Executive colleagues, as they had to be in full possession of the facts. Some Executive colleagues were not attracted to the idea because they wanted the revenue from the regional rate to be available to all Departments and not just to the Water Service and the Department for Regional Development.

More important, we saw the dangers in converting the regional rate into a water rate, as the Treasury could simply acknowledge that we had introduced water charges but that we were far short of any measure that compared with council tax. The Treasury would have come after us with full steam. That is why the Executive did not act on Mr Robinson's suggestion.

An option was specifically written into the consultation paper that was issued on a rating policy review to the effect that the link between water services and the rates would not merely be restored, but that revenue for the Water Service would be an identifiable component on people's rates bill. That option was agreed by the Executive and by the then Committee for Finance and Personnel; however, direct rule returned before we had any results from the consultation exercise.

References have also been made to the reinvestment and reform initiative and to disastrous deals. First, the transfer of all the significant sites — which are now of great value — happened as a part of that so-called disastrous deal. Secondly, the only borrowing power exercised as part of that deal by the last Executive was the borrowing of £200 million without a penny extra on the rates. That included enabling the regional cancer centre to come about. It was not coming about through the Department of Health, despite requests by me and others for the project to be prioritised.

We used the reinvestment and reform initiative, and moneys in the infrastructure fund, to make that project happen — without resort to PFI or anything else. That project was delivered and was a proud achievement, along with other projects that were funded by that package.

As for the terms for longer-term borrowing power, the Treasury said that it wanted a linkage to rates — to narrowing the gap between the household rate in Northern Ireland and that of GB. We never agreed those terms, and negotiations were never concluded on that matter. The terms for the borrowing power of the reinvestment and reform initiative were agreed by direct rule Ministers during suspension of the Assembly; they were not agreed by the Executive.

We have been told that the Executive signed up for water charges as part of the reinvestment and reform initiative. Neither water charges nor water reform were part of the reinvestment and reform initiative because the Executive did not have control over the water reform agenda. That control rested with a Minister who did not take part in the Executive. During direct rule, a decision was made to include water reform in the reinvestment and reform initiative. At that time, as deputy First Minister, I was involved in a series of meetings with direct rule Ministers about the reinvestment and reform initiative.

When those direct rule Ministers took the decision to include water reform in the initiative, I ceased to have any further meetings with them because I had advised against that and had said that I was opposed to its inclusion because it was not part of the reinvestment and reform initiative. The Official Report will confirm that. The then Minister will bear me out on that point. I am dealing with a number of issues on which there has been misrepresentation.

The debate provides an opportunity for us to look more widely at some issues of budgetary management and, particularly, at our role in an Assembly that is meant to have serious budgetary competence. Other Members have referred to the importance of the performance and efficiency delivery unit. I fully support that development. I understand that we will be warned not to rely solely on the unit — not to give it total discretion — without anyone else making any assessments or judgements. Nevertheless, the unit will be useful in advancing the wider agenda of performance and efficiency.

However, the House has a strong role to play in promoting performance and efficiency. The House rightly values the role of the Public Accounts Committee, which is able — on a cross-departmental basis — to challenge and interrogate the basis of evidence that is provided by the Audit Office. The House needs more cross-departmental Committees so that there is more real-time scrutiny of what Departments and other spenders of public money are doing. The Public Accounts Committee is able to deal with matters only after they have happened. Some real-time scrutiny would be helpful.

In the past, we have proposed that there be a Committee of the House to focus on issues such as the cost of Government, administrative spend and efficiencies, policy effectiveness and performance. Such a Committee should be able to use intelligence and information from the Audit Office — and, now, the performance and efficiency delivery unit — to examine and to challenge. That Committee should also be able to initiate some challenges and scrutiny in its own right. After all, MLAs are paid and employed as elected representatives to act as watchdogs.

More cross-cutting Committees could help us to do that job. It is easy for us to get stuck in a rut in our

departmental Committees and become cheerleaders for particular bids, rather than seriously challenge Departments about the quality of their plans and about delivery. We can learn from some of the successes of the Public Accounts Committee, and from the respect in which it is held. We can design more Committees in that mould.

The Minister, in the course of previous debates on the Budget, placed some emphasis on the issue of assets. When the House was considering the Resource Accounting and Budgeting Bill, I pointed out that, in future, the House's budgetary role should no longer simply involve authorising and making decisions on public expenditure; rather, it should also involve making conscious decisions on what should be done with assets. Decisions would have to be made as to whether they were being used properly, whether it costs us money to hold assets that are not being fully used and whether it is better to realise those assets in other ways.

12.00 noon

That was the theory, but it has not been fully realised. Although I recognise that the capital realisation task force has taken steps to address that issue, it will be all too easy for Members to see it as some black box quango that examines what happens in Departments, and then Departments brief MLAs or others against some of the proposals or whatever. As a budgetary authority, the Assembly is meant to make decisions on assets, so it should have a way of taking competent, articulate decisions in those areas, too.

Therefore, I do not suggest that we do not need a capital realisation task force, rather, I suggest that the Assembly needs an arm and an instrument of its own that enables it to address those issues properly. It should be able to generate ideas itself and pursue other enquiries about our assets base, and not simply work on the basis of what the capital realisation task force says.

For many Members, the heat has gone out of some of the more current Budget issues, so this is an opportunity for the Assembly to consider how, structurally, it can get a better handle on the budgetary arrangements along the way. As Members have said, the business of spring Supplementary Estimates and Votes on Account can appear technical and dry. Given that those are some of the key ways in which the Assembly acts as a budgetary authority, we must find ways of exercising that authority in a more relevant, telling and current manner. It would be helpful if some cross-cutting Committees could be developed to assist in that regard.

I know that in previous speeches, the Minister has said that he wants Members to help to deliver the efficiency agenda and that he will look for help from the Committee of Finance and Personnel in doing so. It will take far more

than the Committee's help to deliver the agenda, given that the Committee has big departmental issues of its own to deal with, never mind what is happening across other Departments. I welcome the challenge that the Minister has given to the Assembly, and we should create a means by which we can take up that challenge and play a full and positive part in addressing the issues.

Mr Ford: I want to add a few comments to those made by my colleague Sean Neeson earlier, and by my colleague Stephen Farry in yesterday's debate. I apologise to the Minister that I was not present to hear his opening speech, but I was called away by a higher authority — higher even than the Finance Minister.

I enjoyed much of Mr Durkan's contribution. I suspect that the debate between the current Finance Minister and the former Finance Minister will run for some time. Who knows, when Stephen Farry gets involved, perhaps the future Finance Minister will be involved as well.

Mr Durkan raised an interesting issue about the Assembly's scrutiny role. Although there is a degree of expertise in the PAC, it tends to scrutinise events only after they have happened, and the departmental Committees do not currently have the expertise to examine the full financial implications of budgets and expenditure plans as they are developed. Expertise tends to be in the areas with which the Department deals, rather than in financial management. The Assembly must consider that issue and become much more adept at scrutinising financial matters. If the Minister welcomes the Assembly's assistance in providing such scrutiny, we may be able to increase efficiencies in Government.

Of course, a key issue goes back to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, which is chaired by the Minister's colleague Mr Donaldson. We cannot claim any level of efficiency for public service as long as we maintain 11 Government Departments and 108 MLAs for a population of only 1.7 million people.

Speaking as leader of the opposition and in support of my colleague, I must point out that our party does not have the resources to develop a detailed financial model and alternative Budget. However, we do have the right to scrutinise what is being proposed. We will continue to exercise that right and to ask questions about the decisions that are being taken.

One question that has not been satisfactorily resolved at this stage relates to the overall level of the resources available. It is clear that the meetings that took place in 11 Downing Street before the restoration of devolution failed to produce any significant extra funding. The outcome of the Varney Review was also disappointing, as the Assembly is still unable to take greater responsibility for fiscal matters. We will have to wait for the outcome of Varney II, but, in the meantime, we have to consider the available resources and what priorities we have for that expenditure.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel was right to express concerns about the level of rates increases under direct rule. Increases of between 8% and 19% were completely ridiculous, totally above any level of inflation or any justification in terms of public services. However, making a statement that for three years there should be what is effectively a 2% or 2.5% cut in the regional rate is not necessarily the right measure to take, because it is not inflation-linked. I notice that Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) have expressed concerns about what is in effect a real-terms cut in rates. There is an issue as to whether we can afford to take such a cut, especially given that we are looking to invest for the future through building the economy, as has been emphasised.

Significant efficiency savings are clearly required, but have yet to be identified. There is no doubt that much of Government in Northern Ireland is less efficient than in other regions of the UK. We need to deal with that issue, and we need to be realistic about it. There will be implications as to how we can deal with public services in the future if adequate income is not generated.

The Minister would be disappointed if I did not emphasise that part of this involves considering where savings can be made regarding the cost of segregation, allowing funds to be reinvested in more productive services. I know that Sean Neeson has again repeated our offer to engage with the Minister. When a little bit more work has been completed by our limited number of extremely hard-working staff, I hope that we will be able to have a useful discussion with the Minister and contribute constructively to the addressing of that issue.

The Minister has said on many occasions that the real issue for us is not that our public sector is too large, but that our private sector is too small. We have a real challenge as to how we divert current expenditure from where it is not achieving full results to where it can assist in developing economic growth and funding the public services in matters such as education and health — particularly mental health — which have a direct contribution to make to the economy. At this stage, we have doubts that the Budget will redirect resources to enable that to happen.

We need to invest in the drivers that will develop the economy, and we need to invest in the public services that support the entrepreneurs and investors who will make those changes. We, on these Benches, are entitled to remain sceptical at the same time as saying that, in a spirit of goodwill, we accept the points that the Minister made. We will certainly engage with him to seek to improve the quality of public services and the way in which money is expended by him and his Department.

Mr P Robinson: I thank all the Members who have contributed to this debate. A number of issues that have been raised have previously been discussed in the Assembly. However, I will do my best to address as many of the points as I was able to jot down.

The Chairman of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, Mr McLaughlin, said that the technical issues involved in the Budget were meat and drink to his colleagues on the Committee. They must be very hungry and thirsty if they are satisfied with all of those technicalities. He mentioned the Committee's report, which has been forwarded to my Department. It is actively — and, indeed, carefully — being considered by departmental officials, who will report to me. We will respond to the Committee expeditiously; I hope that we will be able to do so by early March.

The Chairperson of the Committee made several comments about the performance and efficiency delivery unit, as did Mr Declan O'Loan and Mr Simon Hamilton. It might be worth my taking a moment to explain some of my thinking on that unit.

I very much take the same position as Mr Hamilton; I do not think that Departments can be too efficient. In the past, there has been a tendency for Governments and Ministers to dress up cuts as efficiencies, a practice that gave efficiencies a bad name. Of themselves, efficiencies do not reduce valuable, front-line services; rather, they seek to ensure that we get the best value for money from the services that we provide to the public. That is the role that I see for PEDU.

I think that I told the House that my views on the performance and efficiency delivery unit had developed over time and that initially, I had considered it very much as a way to create cost-efficiencies in Departments. Indeed, that remains one of PEDU's key focuses. However, over time, I have considered the importance of improving performance itself, especially of being able to achieve the key targets that have been set out in our Programme for Government and investment strategy. Therefore, performance, efficiency and delivery are all component parts of the work of PEDU.

I say to Mr O'Loan, who is a Member for North Antrim, that he is correct to say that PEDU would not get very far if it went about its business by breaking down Departments' doors and throwing its weight around. Michael Barber headed Tony Blair's Prime Minister's delivery unit, and in a conversation with him, I was struck to hear that the unit's *modus operandi* involved assisting Departments. Its team made it clear at the beginning of its work with Departments that it was not seeking any publicity or kudos and that whatever it could do to help would be to their benefit. The team also said that each Department could claim any successes that came about. That general approach won him the support of Departments and encouraged

Ministers in particular to work with him and his team in order to secure the delivery that was being sought.

Therefore, PEDU must adopt a collaborative approach. We have been spending some time putting together our team of officials, and I am in the final stages of holding meetings with individuals who I hope will be part of the panel of advisers, overseers, mentors, or whatever title we choose for them. The team will comprise people who have vast experience in the public and private sectors and who have dealt with issues such as performance, efficiency and delivery. Later in the process, I look forward to being able to give the Committee, in the first instance, and later the Assembly, further details on that issue.

My friend, colleague and wife mentioned the Enler project in Ballybeen. I agree that that community needs, and, indeed, deserves, the scheme, work on which was begun. I have been encouraged by the remarks that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety made in response to the Adjournment debate that the Member secured a few weeks ago. I can tell her that on 1 February, DFP supply directorate approved putting the project to tender, on the understanding that once the preferred bidder had been identified, the costs would be updated and the business case resubmitted for final approval.

Therefore, the matter is for the Department for Social Development and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to determine. However, DFP Supply has given the business case the green light.

12.15 pm

The Member for East Antrim Mr Beggs said that he would not use the debate to make comments about Larne and Carrickfergus, yet he did. He said that there were real Health Service requirements there. I am sure that his relationship with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is as good as, if not better than, mine, and I am sure that he will want to speak to the Minister about improving facilities there. A considerable budget is available to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and the Minister will want to see the benefits spread across the Province.

Mr Beggs also mentioned training for Members, and I assume that he meant members of the Committee for Finance and Personnel in particular. Having seen Committee members in action, I am not sure that I want them to have more training, because they already seem to be very capable. However, if the Committee wishes to receive further training, my officials will be happy to facilitate such a request. Indeed, if other MLAs wish to go into detail on items such as spring Supplementary Estimates, annually managed expenditure (AME), departmental expenditure limits, and other finance issues, my officials will be glad to assist. It is in all our interests to have a grasp of public-sector finances.

Mr O'Loan made some comments that were based on the words of Yogi Berra, the US baseball player and broadcaster, who said:

"This is like déjà vu all over again."

I prefer his other quotation:

"You should always go to other people's funerals; otherwise, they won't come to yours."

Of course, neither of those quotations has anything to do with the Budget Bill.

Mr O'Loan raised an issue about water charges that his party leader also raised. I can only make estimates and assumptions based on what I know about each Department's position. When the Budget is being introduced, no time is available in which to stand still and tie up all the loose ends. When a certain point is reached, we must make an educated guess about what will be necessary. The Executive supported some aspects of the strand-one report, and a subcommittee is making real progress on the outstanding issues in the independent panel's first report. The subcommittee is now considering the panel's second report. We have made some assumptions in the Budget. Indeed, the Minister for Regional Development has made several statements to indicate the reductions that we believe will be appropriate, because people should not be asked to pay twice for water. We must take account of the situation as it develops.

The Democratic Unionist Party readily accepted the Ulster Unionist Party amendment to the motion on the Programme for Government and the investment strategy, because Governments, by their nature, must develop and take new circumstances into account. If developments require us to make reassessments, that is what we will do. The Executive are in the business of dealing with situations as they arise and of planning as well as possible, based on the information available.

Mr O'Loan made a number of remarks about procurement, and I take those remarks very seriously. I have spoken to a wide range of people who have been involved in procurement for the Civil Service, and for the public sector generally. I know that the Member would want me to state that the people whom I have met are scrupulous and honest, and are seeking to get the best deal possible for Northern Ireland through the work that they do.

However, like in any group of people, there may be someone in the category to which the Member referred. If he has any evidence, or any strong leanings, can he please give us the details; we are happy to investigate. It is vital that people involved in the procurement process are satisfied that it is fair and that their proposals are considered objectively. It is important that a selection process results in the best price or the best job.

The Member raised the issue of industrial derating. I am glad that he supports the idea that the relationship

between Government and the business sector must be improved, and I believe that that is happening. One of the Member's leading colleagues wrote to me stating that he doubted the wisdom of holding industrial rates at 30%, and I am glad that the Member, who has a keener view on financial issues, supports that decision.

If the Member for East Antrim Mr Neeson's comments are compared with those made by his colleague the Member for North Down yesterday, they have exposed a serious split in the Alliance Party. However, he still goes on about the cost of division. I am glad that I am meeting members of the Alliance Party to discuss the issue. The Member will meet no resistance whatsoever from me if, in our present circumstances, we can make savings because of the findings of the report on the cost of division. I shall be energetic in seeking out such savings. However, that is a medium- to long-term aim, but I support making use of our improved circumstances in Northern Ireland in order to redirect funds to areas in which they can be of greatest value.

The Alliance Party gives the impression that the Executive are not interested in matters about division; of course, they are. The Executive want to deal with issues of division at levels that are other than political. If the Member examines the Programme for Government in more detail, he will find that it deals with reconciliation and sectarianism. I hope that the Alliance Party will support those proposals as the Departments develop them.

The Member referred tangentially to an Alliance Party proposal for road tolling. Roads are tolled in the Republic of Ireland, in many European countries and extensively in the United States. I am not sure what road in East Antrim the Member wants to be tolled. However, I am sure that the Minister for Regional Development would examine his proposal closely.

The Member said that the Alliance Party was committed to low rates and thanked me for producing quotes to that effect. He ignored the fact that I produced those quotes because his colleague the Member for North Down made a proposal that would have amounted to the doubling of the regional rate. Perhaps it was more convenient for the leader of the Alliance Party to be in the Chamber today to debate the Budget rather than yesterday, but the party seems to be trying to patch up the ship that was scuttled yesterday when it was exposed as a tax-and-spend party. I described it as:

"the party that wishes to get its hands into the pockets of the people of Northern Ireland". — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 27, p285, col 2*].

I am sure, therefore, that there is some embarrassment in the Alliance Party; however, that did not stop its Members from making further requests for more money. To suggest that, had we kept abreast with inflation at 2.7% in the increases in the regional rate, that would somehow pay for the Alliance Party's want-list is nonsense. In the next financial year, such an increase

might have brought us approximately £7 million. For health alone, the Alliance bill yesterday amounted to £200 million. Some maths is necessary. The Alliance Party said that it had had difficulty with resources and researchers; however, it could go a long way to find a researcher who can pay a bill of £200 million out of £7 million in additional funding from rates.

We must seriously examine those issues, and recognise that our real opportunity to direct more money to front-line services comes through efficiencies. In the relevant three-year period, that means realising efficiencies of at least £790 million. Set that beside the Alliance Party proposal to dip, once more, into the pockets of Northern Ireland's people to acquire another £7 million next year.

I point out to the Alliance Party the fact that the people of Northern Ireland have been paying substantially more in rates than they should have been paying, and that cannot be brushed aside. To have a 60% increase in the regional rate over five years is unacceptable, and for that reason I felt that rates should be frozen. If the Member wants to pillory me around the country for keeping rates down, I will even pay for the advertising space for him to do so. It would be good propaganda for us.

I am happy to meet the Member for East Antrim on the issue of maritime heritage. We might have more in common on that issue than on others.

My colleague Simon Hamilton dealt with such issues as efficiencies. I agree entirely that to throw money away through waste is tantamount to squandering, if not to theft. For that reason it is imperative that every Department does everything possible to make the best use of the money that is entrusted to us by the taxpayers and ratepayers.

Furthermore, Simon Hamilton referred to the priority of growing a vibrant and dynamic economy in Northern Ireland. The Budget, together with the targets set in the Programme for Government, helps us to reach that goal. Considerably more funding has been invested in the Departments that lead on the key drivers of the economy, skills, innovation, enterprise, and infrastructure, and we have managed to increase their budgets. On top of that, we have added the innovation fund of £90 million.

I agree with Simon Hamilton's comments on social housing. It is a priority for everyone in the Assembly to recognise that there are people in significant need of better housing accommodation. Some find themselves homeless. It is our responsibility to ensure that the capital is made available to the Minister for Social Development to meet the defined targets. I am convinced that the funding that we have made available should allow us to do more than is set down in the Programme for Government targets with regard to social and affordable housing, and I shall give the Minister every encouragement and assistance in meeting those targets.

The leader of the SDLP, Mark Durkan, again touched on the issues of education and the unforeseens. I point out to him that we must make judgements on those issues as they develop; however, the Budget cannot be held back because Ministers are not yet in a position to bring precise proposals before the Executive and the Assembly.

12.30 pm

He went back to the issue of cross-cutting funds. By their very nature, those funds were temporary. There are massive advantages in having cross-cutting funding for important issues mainstreamed, and that is what we have done. That will reduce waste and administrative duplication. Members will know from experience that, in most cases, the rolling out of the programmes and the associated spend suffered from delays. It was not an effective way of managing limited resources. There is a very strong argument for cross-cutting policies and monitoring to ensure that those programmes go ahead, but they should be sourced within the various Departments that have direct responsibility.

The Member for Foyle also touched on a number of other issues. He got into what might be described as revisionism. I think that his memory is somewhat defective. I am not sure that, had I been left to rely entirely on my memory, things would have been as clear as I will state them. However, I did not rely on my memory; I pulled out the papers. I had the Department provide me with the papers for the meeting that Mr Durkan spoke of, and I put on record at Westminster the precise chain of events at that time. We made it clear to Mr Durkan that he needed to reinstate the link, but, unfortunately, he did not do so. I have to say to the Member for Foyle — *[Interruption.]*

I am not sure whether the Member wants to go somewhere or wants me to give way.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for giving way. He now, correctly, says that he asked me to reinstate the link. Earlier, as the Hansard report will show, he said that he had asked me not to break the link. He has said several times that the link between water and the rates was broken by the last Executive, or by me; he is now accepting that it was actually broken under direct rule. He was not just asking me to reinstate the link; he was calling for the entire rate to be a water rate. He said to me:

“I will set it in future. There will be no question of your having to make unpopular rate rises, no question of a Durkan tax. It will be Robinson tax in future.”

My memory is very clear on that.

Mr P Robinson: The Member had better go back to his papers, as I have done. A decision had been taken by the direct rule Administration, but the task of putting it through was the then Minister's. I remember him coming to the Assembly trying to get a very significant

increase in the rates, and having to go away with his tail between his legs and come back seeking a much smaller increase.

Furthermore, the Member's recollection of my view that there should be a swap-over of the regional rate to cover water charging belongs not to the meeting of June 2000 but to a much later meeting, when the Executive were seeking some response to the issue of water charging. I was the only Minister to oppose it; it was advocated by the then Executive as being necessary. There is some revisionism on the part of the Member, and the record is very clear on the issue. I still have the letter that I sent, indicating my opposition to water charging — people should not have to pay twice — and advocating a way in which the Minister could have avoided the very things that happened thereafter.

The Member for South Antrim Mr Ford indicated that there should be changes that could bring real savings and efficiencies. In particular, he mentioned the wastefulness of having 11 Departments and 108 Assembly Members.

I am always glad to welcome converts. The Democratic Unionist Party published policy documents many years ago that showed the massive savings that could be made by reducing the political bureaucracy in Northern Ireland. It is an absurd situation, and there can be no justification, other than as a means of ensuring that smaller parties have places on the Executive, for having 11 Departments. Even the former Secretary of State recognised that six would be quite adequate. I agree that it should be in the order of five, six or seven rather than 11 Departments, with all of the private-office costs and additional bureaucratic spend that that number entails.

Equally — and this comment may not be too popular — I agree with the Member about the size of this Assembly. It is too large compared with England, Scotland and Wales; the Northern Ireland Assembly should probably have half the number of Members that it currently has. When we are spending public money, we should really make the best use of it. Leadership must be given by political representatives. While the issue may be difficult for some individuals in the Assembly, the political parties should recognise that they need to take steps to resolve the matter. My colleague the Member for Lagan Valley the Rt Hon Jeffrey Donaldson and his Assembly and Executive Review Committee have the task of examining and dealing with that subject, and I hope that they will.

In what I assume was an attempt to prop up the weak performance of his colleague yesterday, Mr Ford returned to the subject of increasing rates in Northern Ireland in order to meet the £200 million gap in funding. He had to think of a new way of getting that money, so he took the poor example of the Ulster Unionist Party and said that we did not get enough money from the

Treasury at the time of devolution. If he were to check the record, he would see that the DUP said that we needed a budget in the region of £1 billion for infrastructure development in Northern Ireland. That was the key element, and it is clear from the figures in the Budget and the investment strategy that there is £2 billion of additional spending as a result of that process.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister give way?

Mr P Robinson: I will give way, but I want to finish the point that I was making first.

As I said, £2 billion of additional spending is available to Northern Ireland in the form of asset disposal. Under previous regimes, the Treasury would have taken back that money. However, we were able to reach agreement with the then Chancellor that a significant portion of that money should remain in Northern Ireland. In consequent negotiations, that amount has increased further. In addition, we were able to secure and front-load end-year flexibility to our advantage during this comprehensive spending review cycle.

We were, of course, able to correct the mess that was made by the then Finance Minister and the Ulster Unionist Party with the reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI). They will know that I welcomed RRI as an instrument — and I still do — but, happily, in those negotiations, my colleagues were able to convince the Treasury to make the fundamental change in the RRI that meant that we were not required to keep ahead of any increases in GB. Previously, past Governments were forced to increase rates so much that the end result was a 19% increase, courtesy of the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party.

Mr Durkan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr P Robinson: I said that I would give way to the Member for East Antrim.

Mr Beggs: The Minister has pointed out that his £1 billion package is now £2 billion. Why, then, have independent economists estimated that the package is worth £100 million? Is the Minister in danger of recounting money that would have come to Northern Ireland in any case in order to try to achieve his figures? Does he not agree that £100 million is closer to the package that was awarded as a result of cross-party lobbying of the Prime Minister?

Mr P Robinson: Mr Beggs makes a good case for more training for some Members. I can now see why he sought for such training. I will ask my officials urgently to provide some assistance. No economist can hide away the fact that assets of around £2 billion have been identified that can be disposed of, and which, I believe, will amount to even more than that figure as the years go by. That cannot be wished away. Of course, in addition to that —

Mr Beggs: They are Northern Ireland's own assets.

Mr P Robinson: The Member says that Northern Ireland is getting its own assets. However, perhaps he is not aware that, previously, the sale of assets went back to the Treasury and Northern Ireland did not get the proceeds. Indeed, there is every advantage for Northern Ireland in ensuring that it gets the benefits of assets that have not been utilised properly and that are not of value; to ensure that those funds are used to provide Northern Ireland with infrastructure that is of benefit to its people.

I am aware that you want to wind up the debate, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank Members for their interest in the legislative Stage of the public-expenditure cycle; not only during the debate, but in the valuable contributions that they have made in Committees, correspondence and questions that they have posed in the Assembly on other occasions. Again, I want to record my thanks to the Committee for Finance and Personnel for assisting the accelerated passage of the Budget Bill and ensuring that the legislative timetable is adhered to.

The Bill brings to a close the first financial year under the governance of the current Assembly and Executive. The Executive have already cut their teeth in some difficult choices in the monitoring rounds and in the draft and revised Budget process. That will, undoubtedly, continue to be the case as we go forward in 2008-09. I look forward to the challenges that lie ahead, to commencing the first financial year of the Executive's Budget for 2008-11, and to building a better future for all of Northern Ireland's people.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question, I remind Members that because the motion is on the Budget Bill, it requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill (NIA 10/07) be agreed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: 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 12.43 pm.

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

2.00 pm

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

The Draft Disability Discrimination (Private Clubs, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr G Kelly): I beg to move

That the draft Disability Discrimination (Private Clubs, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

The regulations were laid in draft form before the Assembly on 31 December 2007. Their purpose is to ensure that private members' clubs that have 25 or more members be placed under the same duties of reasonable adjustment imposed by part III of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 in respect of providers of goods, facilities and services to the public. The regulations complete the proposals on private clubs that were set out as part of the consultation on The Disability Discrimination (NI) Order 2006. In that consultation, we proposed to make it unlawful for clubs with 25 or more members to discriminate against disabled members, prospective members, associates and — in certain circumstances — their guests. That was modelled on the provisions of The Race Relations (NI) Order 1997.

The provisions on private clubs are set out in article 13 of the 2006 Order and came into operation on 31 December 2007. Since then, private clubs have not been able to discriminate unlawfully against a disabled person by treating him or her less favourably. Unlawful discrimination also includes a failure to comply with the duty to make reasonable adjustments. However, the detail of the duty to make reasonable adjustments was not set out in the 2006 Order, which instead gave powers to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) to set out the detail of the duty in regulations.

During the 2005 consultation on the 2006 Order, a commitment was given to consult further on regulations before imposing the reasonable adjustment duties. That consultation was completed in September 2006, and the majority of responses indicated general agreement on the provisions of the regulations.

In keeping with the legislative process set out in the 1995 Act, those regulations must be made under the draft-affirmation procedure. That means that they must first be laid in draft form and considered by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and

deputy First Minister. That process is complete. The Committee is content with the regulations, and it afforded to them, and other disability regulations, a significant amount of time and consideration in late 2007.

I commend the Committee on its detailed consideration of this important legislation, which will have a significant beneficial effect on the lives of many disabled people.

What will the duty to make reasonable adjustments mean for private clubs? Many private clubs meet the requirements. Any club that provides a service to the public, such as dining facilities or hiring rooms, must meet the duties on service providers in the 1995 Act. The same duties are now being produced for private clubs.

Private clubs will have to make reasonable adjustments in three areas. First, a private club's practices, including policies and procedures, must be set out, formally or by custom. That could mean that a private club has a practice, which — perhaps unintentionally — makes it impossible, or unreasonably difficult, for disabled people to make use of its services. In such cases, private clubs must make reasonable adjustments to change the practice, policy or procedure.

An example of that would be a case whereby a private social club organises an annual dinner for its 30 members upstairs, as it has for a number of years, in a small local hotel. The problem is that the room that is being hired is not accessible to disabled members, who find it very difficult or impossible to climb stairs. There is no lift. Although the hotel has ground-floor facilities of equal quality, the organisers of the dinner prefer the privacy of the room upstairs. In that instance, the club should consider whether a change in that practice would be consistent with a reasonable adjustment to allow access for its disabled members.

The second area concerns physical features. In cases in which a physical feature makes it impossible, or unreasonably difficult, for disabled people to use any service that is offered to private club members, reasonable steps must be taken to remove, or alter, the feature so that it no longer has that effect. Alternatively, a reasonable means of avoiding the feature, or a reasonable alternative method to make the service available to disabled people, must be provided.

For example, a local private club may hold its meetings in a building that must be entered by steps, and the room in which the meetings are held has a narrow entrance door. To ensure that its meetings are accessible to disabled people, the private club should take the reasonable steps of installing a permanent ramp at the entrance to the building and widening the door into the room.

Thirdly, when required, a private club must take reasonable steps to provide auxiliary aids or services, if that would make it easier for disabled people to use

any of its services. For example, people with visual impairments could be offered the use of an auxiliary aid or information that is provided on an audio tape. An auxiliary service ensures that a member of staff is able to communicate with deaf clients who use sign language. On the other hand, an auxiliary aid or service might be the provision of a special piece of equipment, or simply extra assistance that staff give to disabled people. Given that those duties are anticipatory, private clubs must consider in advance what adjustments they might need to make.

I emphasise that clubs will be asked to do only what is reasonable in all circumstances. What would be reasonable for clubs to do to make their facilities more accessible for disabled people would depend on all the circumstances of the case and would vary according to the type of facility and activity that the club provided, the nature of the club, its size and resources, and the effect of the disability on the individual disabled person. There will, of course, be plenty of advice available for private clubs on how to meet their duties. The Equality Commission has prepared extensive advisory material for private clubs, and its advisers are available to give individuals guidance.

I commend the draft regulations to the House.

Mr Shannon: I apologise on behalf of the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, Mr Danny Kennedy and Naomi Long, for their absence today. They are attending separate meetings, so I have been asked to speak on behalf of the Committee.

On 3 October 2007, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister was briefed by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on proposals for a number of regulations that have been designed to give effect to the provisions of the Disability Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. The Disability Discrimination (Service Providers and Public Authorities Carrying Out Functions) Regulations 2005, the Disability Discrimination (Premises) Regulations 2006 and the Disability Discrimination (Questions and Replies) Order 2004 have already been considered by the Committee, and subordinate legislation has been introduced to reflect the provisions of those regulations. New guidance on the definition of disability has been laid in draft form and is due to come into effect within the next few weeks.

The Disability Discrimination (Private Clubs, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 ensure that larger private clubs — those with 25 or more members — are brought within the scope of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The introduction of the regulations will ensure that it will be unlawful for a club to discriminate by treating a disabled person less favourably, because of his or her disability — compared to a person who is not

disabled — or by failing to make a reasonable adjustment so that a disabled person can access its facilities.

The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is committed to working constructively with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that progress is made to introduce effective legislative protection for people with disabilities. Therefore, the Committee supports the motion. It will continue to work with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that people with disabilities are afforded full legislative protection.

On behalf of the Committee, I take this opportunity to urge Members to introduce, as soon as possible, subordinate legislation that reflects the Disability Discrimination (Transport Vehicles) Regulations 2005. Many disabled people have spoken to me on that subject, making it a matter that is close to my heart. Being able to avail themselves of transport is critical to the quality of life of people with disabilities. The Committee wishes to see the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister prioritising the introduction in Northern Ireland of subordinate legislation to reflect those regulations. I ask the Minister to establish a firm timetable for the introduction of such legislation for those regulations.

Returning to the substantive issue, I am happy to advise Members that, at its meeting on 23 January 2008, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, having considered the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, agreed to recommend that the draft Disability Discrimination (Private Clubs, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved by the Assembly. Therefore, on behalf of the Committee, I support the motion.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for bringing these welcome regulations to the House. They will go some way towards further cementing the rights of people with disabilities.

I understand that a private club is defined in the regulations as one with 25 members or more. That, in itself, could send out a message that discrimination is permissible in smaller clubs and organisations. I ask the Minister whether another definition of private clubs can be found. The Minister said that the Equality Commission is there to give advice to clubs. I encourage small organisations to take advantage of that advice in order to protect the rights of disabled persons in their clubs. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Moutray: The regulations are very welcome, and I wish to place on the record my endorsement of them. Without doubt such a law will help to stamp out discrimination against those in our society who are classified as disabled. Public bodies have been required to

comply with new provisions, and the same responsibilities are now being extended to private clubs.

The regulations demonstrate the Assembly's proactiveness in providing a non-discriminatory Province, particularly for those who are vulnerable. In the past, those individuals were often susceptible to discrimination. In today's society that is, quite honestly, unacceptable. Every individual, with or without a disability, deserves to live a peaceful and prosperous life, unhindered by others in society, with laws to protect his or her social well-being.

I welcome the fact that this law prohibits discrimination against disabled people by private clubs. In turn, that will ensure that no disabled person will be treated less favourably due to his or her disability than a person who is not disabled, unless justified in very limited circumstances. Furthermore, I welcome the fact that all private clubs with more than 25 members will have to make reasonable adjustments, unless justified in limited circumstances, so that disabled people can access and use clubs' facilities with ease. Regulation 6 enables such members, associates and guests to benefit and make use of facilities.

I would, however, like clarification on the regulations with regard to adjustments to historic buildings. No doubt the fact that buildings will have to be adjusted to comply with the regulations may mean altering the character of some of them. Are there special circumstances that will protect the heritage of our historical buildings, or requirements to ensure that any work that must be carried out is done sensitively and in a manner that best preserves the character of those buildings?

The introduction of the legislation has highlighted the lack of a central database of private clubs — no one knows how many exist in Northern Ireland. A system should be put in place that will address that issue.

In conclusion, I trust that the House will approve the draft Disability Discrimination (Private Clubs, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008. I, for one, am in favour of the legislation; it will benefit society as well as the individuals whom it affects. The regulations will reward individuals with a sense of dignity and respect, both of which they richly deserve.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I was called sooner than I expected. I thank Jim Shannon, who spoke on behalf of the Committee, and other Members who support this step forward. A few issues were raised, and I will deal with those.

Mr Shannon and the Committee wrote to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister about the transport regulations. The delay in implementing that provision has occurred due to an overload in implementing other disability legislation, such as the private clubs regulations, regulations for service providers and public authorities carrying out functions,

and premises regulations. Those other issues shifted the time frame somewhat.

However, OFMDFM will shortly be setting up a cross-departmental working group with the Department of the Environment and the Department for Regional Development, both of which hold policy responsibilities for transport. The group will work on the consultation on the regulations and, on completion of that process, OFMDFM will make a statutory rule to implement the legislation.

The consultation process will start shortly, and the transport regulations will then be drafted and brought before the Assembly. It is anticipated that the legislation will come into effect by the end of 2008. Officials plan to brief the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister by the end of March 2008. I hope that that answers the questions asked by Jim Shannon.

Stephen Moutray mentioned buildings of historical value — I cannot find the answer among my papers, so I will respond off the top of my head. We must be sensitive to the needs of disabled people and to the preservation of buildings of historical value. It is our intention to avoid any clash of interests — and one reason for setting up the cross-departmental working group is to ensure that one aspect does not interfere with the other. Owners of buildings of historical value have only to do what is reasonable to accommodate people with disabilities; only reasonable adjustments need be made. Where it is not reasonable to make physical alterations to a building, other venues may have to be sought. We are aware of that aspect.

We may have to examine the issue of a database of clubs and societies: it is important that the right type of information is available. I will write Mr Moutray on that matter.

2.15 pm

The Committee and Members who support the regulations recognise that they constitute another important step forward in improving the civil rights of disabled people. These regulations will close another gap covered in the provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, and will send the message to everyone that disabled people must have access to all aspects of daily life. They will allow disabled people to have more opportunities for socialising, networking and taking part in all aspects of life. Yet another barrier to equal opportunities for disabled people will have been removed.

In drafting the regulations, we have had to bear in mind that special relationships exist between clubs and their members, associates and guests. There are, therefore, some differences in the details accommodating the particular circumstances of clubs. For example, where a private club, perhaps one comprising a local interest

group, meets in a private house belonging to one of its members or associates, additional considerations apply to ensure that the person concerned is under no obligation to agree to make changes to his or her home. Those circumstances are similar to those that apply to providers of goods, services and facilities to the general public, and which already exist.

We have consulted on the policy underlying the regulations, and it is intended that they will apply from 5 March 2008. The regulations will serve as a consistent legislative framework for the providers of goods, facilities and services, and they will take account of the special relationship that clubs have with their members. They strike a fair balance between the rights of disabled people to participate fully in all that society has to offer and the rights of people to associate in private.

Michelle O'Neill asked why private clubs are defined as having 25 members or more. That threshold is used in law to define a private club in the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. It is a recognised mechanism that helps to strike a balance, by extending application of the provisions to private clubs but excluding small private gatherings, for example, those that take place in private homes.

A private club is not defined only by the number of members, it must have a constitution. That does not have to be a written constitution; as long as there are rules governing issues such as membership, those will count. The club must also run its affairs in such a way that its constitution regulates the membership. For example, it must operate a policy of membership selection that is genuinely based on personal criteria.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Disability Discrimination (Private Clubs, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008 be approved.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Amendments to Standing Orders

Mr Deputy Speaker: As the next two motions to amend Standing Orders are so similar, I propose to conduct only one debate. The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures will move the first motion. Debate will then take place on both motions. When all Members who wish to speak have done so, I shall put the Question on the first motion. The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures will then move the second motion, before putting the Question without further debate.

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Lord Morrow): I beg to move

In Standing Order 49, after paragraph (1) insert:

“(2) The Committee may exercise the power in section 44(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.”

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

In Standing Order 50, after paragraph (1) insert:

“(2) The Committee may exercise the power in section 44(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.” — [The Chairperson of the, Committee on Procedures (Lord Morrow)]

Mr Deputy Speaker, I make it clear to Members that, as you have pointed out, I speak now to the motions to amend Standing Orders 49 and 50.

Section 44(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 gives the Assembly the power to call for witnesses and documents. That enables the Assembly to require any person to attend proceedings for the purpose of giving evidence, or to produce documents relating to:

“transferred matters concerning Northern Ireland”

and:

“other matters in relation to which statutory functions are exercisable by Ministers or the Northern Ireland departments.”

Section 44(6) says:

“That power may be exercised by a committee of the Assembly only if the committee is expressly authorised to do so by standing orders.”

All Statutory Committees are required by Standing Order 46(2) to have that power. Moreover, certain Standing Committees have that power, such as the Public Accounts Committee, the Committee on Standards and Privileges, and the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. The Northern Ireland Act 1998 contains no express limitation on which Committees may be authorised to have that power. Therefore, it is up to the Assembly to decide which Committees do or do not have it.

The Committee on Procedures gave detailed consideration as to whether all Assembly Committees should have the power, and to why all Committees do not already

have it. The Business Committee, the Committee on Procedures and the Audit Committee do not have that power.

The Committee on Procedures understands that such authority is not to be used lightly, and that it is, ultimately, exercised by the Speaker, as stated in section 44(7) and section 44(8) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It is important that Members note that if that power were given to the Business Committee and the Committee on Procedures, those Committees would be subject to the exact same limitations and constraints as the Statutory Committees and the other Standing Committees. The amendment does not give those Committees any more or any less than is already available to the majority of Committees in the Assembly.

The main concern of the Committee on Procedures is that some Standing Committees would not be able to access that power, were that required at some stage in the future.

In deciding whether it should have that power, the Committee on Procedures considered whether a situation might arise in which that would be required. The answer to that was yes. In the current and the previous mandates, the Committee on Procedures has had to request that papers and persons come before it. There have never been any problems in that regard, and we hope that there will never be any such problems in the future.

That said, it is prudent to ensure that the power is in place. Closing the stable door after the horse has bolted is not the kind of management that the Assembly wants to encourage. The Committee on Procedures wrote to the Business Committee to find out whether it required that power, and the Business Committee replied in the affirmative. Therefore, it is the opinion of the Committee on Procedures that it would be sensible and practical to ensure that such power is in place for all Standing Committees. In fact, I will propose the same power for the Audit Committee in the next debate. If the two motions are agreed to, the Committee on Procedures will make the necessary changes to the numbering of the paragraphs in the two Standing Orders.

Mr O'Loan: As the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures has said, the matter has been given proper consideration by the Committee. There are no matters of concern of which the Assembly ought to be aware, and I believe that the motion should have the support of the Assembly.

Lord Morrow: I thank Mr O'Loan for his comments. I have nothing further to add.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 49, after paragraph (1) insert:

“(2) The Committee may exercise the power in section 44(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.”

Lord Morrow: I beg to move

In Standing Order 53, delete all and insert:

“(1) There shall be a Standing Committee of the Assembly to be known as the Audit Committee to exercise the functions mentioned in section 66(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. In accordance with section 66(2) of that Act, no more than one Member of the Committee shall at the same time be a Member of the Public Accounts Committee.

(2) Any motion for a resolution of the Assembly relating to the salary payable under Article 4(1) of the Audit (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 to the holder of the office of Comptroller and Auditor General shall be tabled on behalf of the Committee.

(3) The Committee may exercise the power in section 44(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

(4) The Committee shall have a membership of five and a quorum of two.”

The motion to amend has three parts. The first element deals with the removal of the need to establish the Audit Committee by resolution. As currently written, Standing Order 53 allows for the Audit Committee to be established by a resolution of the Assembly. No other Committee is required to be established by a resolution. When the Audit Committee and the Committee on Procedures explored the matter further, it became clear that there was no need for the Audit Committee to be established any differently from any other Committee. The amendment to Standing Order 53(1) will remove that requirement, allowing the Audit Committee to be treated as any other Standing Committee. The amendment is simple in that it provides consistency of approach and removes any anomaly.

Proposed Standing Order 53(2) deals with providing the Audit Committee with a new power that will enable it to table a motion for resolution by the Assembly regarding the salary of the Comptroller and Auditor General. According to the Audit (Northern Ireland) Order 1987, that must be done annually. During the Assembly's first mandate, the responsibility was undertaken by the Minister of Finance and Personnel, and, during direct rule, it was undertaken by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

The post of Comptroller and Auditor General must be independent of Departments. If the Department of Finance and Personnel were to lay a resolution on the salary for that post, it would compromise that independence. The Audit Committee, in close consultation with the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Northern Ireland Audit Office, has agreed that that responsibility would be better placed under its remit. Proposed Standing Order 53(2) deals with providing the Audit Committee with that responsibility. The Audit Committee has examined the issue in some detail, including considering alternative ways of meeting that

responsibility and the salary agreement in place for the Comptroller and Auditor General.

The motion is clear. It is the responsibility of the Audit Committee to table the resolution, but it is the Assembly's responsibility to approve the resolution.

2.30 pm

The third part of the amendment relates to new Standing Order 53(3). The House has addressed the motion on Standing Orders 49 and 50, whereby the Committee on Procedures and the Business Committee will have the powers to call for persons and papers. The third part of the amendment on proposed Standing Order 53 provides the Audit Committee with the same powers as other Standing and Statutory Committees to call for persons and papers. In deciding on that, the Committee on Procedures took the opinion of the Audit Committee, which replied that it could see foresee circumstances when it may be of use to have those powers. The same reasoning that I applied in my speech on the amendment to Standing Orders 49 and 50 applies to the Audit Committee.

Chairperson of the Audit Committee (Mr Newton):

I thank my colleague Lord Morrow, the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures, for moving the motion. As my colleague said, there are three issues to be discussed on the amendment to Standing Order 53, and the Audit Committee and the Committee on Procedures worked together closely to ensure that the amendment provides the Audit Committee with the best fit and best remit for its future work.

Proposed Standing Order 53(1) deals with why the Audit Committee is set up by resolution. I will not rehearse the arguments made by my colleague Lord Morrow, but suffice it to say that the Committee is more than content to remove the need to establish the Audit Committee by resolution.

The proposed amendment at new Standing Order 53(3) allows the Audit Committee to have the same powers as other Committees to call for persons and papers. In having those powers, the Audit Committee recognises that the same restrictions and boundaries apply. The Audit Committee regularly requests persons and papers from the Northern Ireland Audit Office — in particular — and, on occasions, from other organisations that are required to respond under section 44(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Every organisation that has been called has been more than helpful, and there have never been any problems, but it is useful to have the power. The Audit Committee does not expect to have any problems, but the amended Standing Order will ensure that the Committee is as well prepared as any other if problems arise.

The second paragraph of the proposed Standing Order deals with the resolution for the salary of the Comptroller and Auditor General. In reaching agreement on the amendment, the Audit Committee consulted closely

with the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Northern Ireland Audit Office. Both organisations are content with what the amendment seeks to do — its policy — and with the wording.

The Department of Finance and Personnel raised the matter contained in proposed Standing Order 53(2) with the Audit Committee, and it soon became apparent that that paragraph covered two issues. First, it provides the Audit Committee with the remit to table the resolution — which this amendment allows for — and, secondly, it contains the more complex issue of addressing the retrospective payment of the Comptroller and Auditor General's annual salary increase.

The governing legislation for this Standing Order is the Audit (Northern Ireland) Order 1987, and it states that the Comptroller and Auditor General will have his salary increase on 1 April each year. The salary and annual increase is tied, by agreement, to the scale for judicial rate five. The Committee has looked at that agreement, which was put in place during direct rule, and we are content with it — as are the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Comptroller and Auditor General.

During its investigations, the Audit Committee discovered that the judicial rate scale is sometimes not published in time for the salary increase to be paid on 1 April. When that happens, back pay is due from the date of the publication of the scales back to 1 April. However, the governing legislation does not allow for back pay. The Audit Committee looked at three possible ways in which retrospective pay can be handled, including the use of existing legislation.

That turned out to be a dead end. The Committee also considered the possibility of sponsoring a Bill to amend the governing legislation, and, although not the Committee's preferred route, that is still a possibility. In the end, the Committee's preferred option is to amend those Standing Orders using careful, exact and specific wording.

Assuming that the Assembly approves, those amendments will enable the Audit Committee to table a motion for the annual salary increase for the Comptroller and Auditor General on or before 31 March each year. Of course, such resolutions will be subject to the Assembly's approval.

The Committee has invested considerable work and thought in the amendments and, therefore, I am happy to recommend them to the House. I support the motion.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for his sole contribution to the debate.

It should be noted that the Audit Committee carries out a vital role on behalf of the Assembly. I must be careful with the pronunciation of my next statement because my Latin is not good; however, quis custodiet ipsos custodes? That is roughly translated as "who will guard the guards?" or "who will watch the watchmen?"

If the Northern Ireland Audit Office's role is to be the guardian of public expenditure by Departments, the Audit Committee's main role is to guard the Audit Office in order to ensure that it maintains the expected high standards. I am convinced that the amendments to the Standing Orders will work in the best interests of that role and will enable the Audit Committee to better carry out its responsibilities.

Although it is in no way detrimental to be established by resolution and nothing meaningful will be added to the Audit Committee's remit, the amendments remove the anomaly of its being established in such a way. Furthermore, the amendments will provide the Committee with the power to ensure that the independence of the Comptroller and Auditor General is not questioned in relation to his or her salary.

Finally, the amendments will provide the Committee with the power, if necessary, to call for persons and papers, which is an essential requirement if the Committee is to perform in its role of guardian.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question to amend Standing Order 50, I remind Members that this motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 50, after paragraph (1) insert:

(2) The Committee may exercise the power in section 44(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The amendment to Standing Order 53 has already been debated. Before I put the Question, I remind Members that this motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 53, delete all and insert:

(1) There shall be a Standing Committee of the Assembly to be known as the Audit Committee to exercise the functions mentioned in section 66(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. In accordance with section 66(2) of that Act, no more than one Member of the Committee shall at the same time be a Member of the Public Accounts Committee.

(2) Any motion for a resolution of the Assembly relating to the salary payable under Article 4(1) of the Audit (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 to the holder of the office of Comptroller and Auditor General shall be tabled on behalf of the Committee.

(3) The Committee may exercise the power in section 44(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

(4) The Committee shall have a membership of five and a quorum of two.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Charities Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Campbell): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 31(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 31(2) be extended to 27 June 2008, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Charities Bill (NIA Bill 9/07).

The Charities Bill passed its Second Stage on 15 January 2008 and was referred to the Committee for Social Development on 16 January. Although the Committee has already considered several pieces of primary legislation, the Charities Bill was the first piece of primary legislation to come before it for Committee Stage.

The Charities Bill is a lengthy and highly technical piece of legislation that contains 186 clauses and nine schedules. As you can imagine, there is a considerable amount of Committee scrutiny to be carried out. Some may wonder why we are asking for an extension only until 27 June, and I will come to that shortly.

The Bill will introduce an integrated system of registration and regulation, including control of charitable fundraising, as well as the supervision and support of registered charities. In particular, the Bill will provide a definition of charity and charitable purpose; establish a charity commission for Northern Ireland and a charity tribunal for Northern Ireland; create a register of charities; provide for a new form of charitable body — a charitable incorporated organisation; and deal with the regulation of charities and public charitable collections.

The Committee has received more than 40 submissions in response to its request for written evidence, and it has already heard evidence from several key organisations that will be affected by the Bill. Although the provisions of the Bill have generally been welcomed, the Committee needs to consider several issues in greater detail. I, therefore, seek an extension of the deadline to 27 June 2008 to allow the Committee sufficient time to consider views and to compile its report on the Bill.

I ask Members for their support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 31(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 31(2) be extended to 27 June 2008, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Charities Bill (NIA Bill 9/07).

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Bullying of Children and Young People with Disabilities

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

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to carry out a thematic inspection across public bodies, to establish their response to bullying experienced by children and young people with disabilities.

I thank the Business Committee for selecting the motion for debate today. I also acknowledge the work of Mencap in raising the issue, and I commend all the groups and individuals who have worked throughout the years on anti-bullying campaigns for children and young people, in particular those with difficulties.

Sinn Féin is calling for a thematic inspection across all public bodies to establish their response to the bullying that is experienced by children and young people with disabilities.

Children and young people of all ages identified bullying as the single biggest barrier to living their lives to the full. Bullying wrecks children's lives and makes them too frightened to go out. Children and young people with learning difficulties are missing out on opportunities to learn, to make friends, to socialise and to play; that leads to isolation and social exclusion throughout their lives and can make it more likely for them to be the targets of bullying and abuse as adults.

All Members will find the bullying experienced by children and young people abhorrent. Moreover, children and young people with a learning disability are more likely to be targeted by bullies because of their disability. We must all take action to ensure that bullying is eradicated.

2.45 pm

It is important to understand that bullying is a huge problem for children and young people, and particularly for those with a learning disability. Many children and young people with learning disabilities have low self-esteem. They are taunted, intimidated and abused because of their disabilities, and their sense of self-worth is damaged as a result.

Children and young people with a learning disability are among the most vulnerable people in society. Most of them do not feel safe in their communities because

of disablist bullying. Far more must be done to tackle disablist bullying in our communities. It cannot be allowed to destroy lives.

Disablist bullying is bullying based on a person's disability. It is bullying that occurs because of prejudice. Some of the key survey findings contained in Mencap's report, 'Bullying wrecks lives: the experiences of children and young people with a learning disability', reveal, for example, that eight out of 10 children and young people with a learning disability are bullied, while eight out of 10 are scared to go out because they are frightened that they might be bullied.

Six out of 10 children and young people with a learning disability have been physically hurt by bullies. Five out of 10 who have experienced bullying said that they stayed away from the places in which they had been bullied in the past. Six out of 10 said that they cried because they were bullied. Three out of 10 said that they hid away in their rooms.

Of every 10 children surveyed, four said that bullying did not stop when they told someone. Three out of 10 children were bullied for three years. Nearly half of the children surveyed had been bullied for over a year. Children and young people with a learning disability are twice as likely to be bullied as other children, but are bullied in the same way. For example, eight out of 10 children and young people with a learning disability said that they had been called names. Six out of 10 have been physically hurt, four out of 10 were left out of things, and four out of 10 had their belongings taken or stolen.

Two out of 10 children and young people with a learning disability were bullied by phone and text messaging. They have reported that they have been bullied on the street, in the park, on the bus, and in youth clubs and leisure centres. Five out of 10 children and young people have been bullied in more than one place, and eight out of 10 have been bullied at school.

Those figures make uncomfortable listening, and they are totally unacceptable. Sinn Féin has asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to establish the extent of bullying experienced by children and young people with learning disabilities across the North, and to determine what actions have been taken by public bodies, through their disability action plans, to address this serious problem. We are also asking the Minister of Education to outline what her Department has done to promote zero tolerance of disablist bullying in schools, and what plans she has to ask schools to record and monitor all instances of bullying, particularly of children with learning disabilities.

Furthermore, we will ask the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Minister for Employment and Learning to work together and direct the Education and Training Inspectorate to carry out a thematic

inspection across public bodies connected to cultural pursuits, leisure, education, further education and the arts to determine how they have responded to bullying experienced by children and young people with disabilities, and to ask them about their plans to promote positive attitudes among disabled children and young people and encourage their participation in public life.

The Commissioner for Children and Young People has produced excellent guidelines to promote the involvement of pupils in anti-bullying school policies. Those guidelines include awareness raising and strategies to encourage pupils to think about bullying, setting up a school council that could monitor and implement an anti-bullying policy, examining how peer-monitoring schemes can help anti-bullying awareness through peer-support networks, and reviewing anti-bullying policies.

We must also consider our section 75 obligations, which place responsibility on other public bodies to promote equality of opportunity for disabled people, including disabled children and young people.

Furthermore, the Disability Discrimination Order 2006 requires that public bodies produce disability action plans that outline what they are doing to promote positive attitudes and disability awareness. Sinn Féin asks that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister take the lead on that matter and carry out a thematic inspection. Members must send out a clear message that the Assembly cherishes all children equally, and that it will be prepared to do all that it can to champion the cause of some of the most vulnerable and excluded children in society. I ask the House to fully support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Shannon: I commend the Members for bringing this motion to the Chamber. Many of us feel strongly about the matter, and I look forward to the debate.

Have any Members ever spoken to a child who has been bullied? Ask any teacher or youth worker who has seen the silent tears or the quivering chin, and they will tell you how heartbreaking it is. Some people will say that children will be children; others may quote the adage about sticks and stones. However, consider a bullied child's level of confidence: words alone cannot repair the damage that has been caused simply by words.

Bullying is a worldwide phenomenon. Department of Education research shows that, in 2001, 40% of primary-school children and 30% of secondary-school children had been bullied. That is an incredibly high number and a horrible fact. However, there are some groups and individuals who are targeted more often than others; disabled children are one such group. It has been found that children who have learning disabilities are twice as likely to be bullied as those who do not. That fact underlines those shocking statistics.

I read Mencap's report, 'Bullying wrecks lives: the experiences of children and young people with a learning disability', on the bullying of disabled children. I was shocked and saddened by its findings, especially when one considers that children with disabilities are, inherently, that little bit more vulnerable; they need our understanding and protection that little bit more. Mencap found that, of 500 children with learning disabilities, eight out of 10 had been bullied. That equates to an inconceivable 280,000 children with learning disabilities being bullied in the UK.

Eight out of 10 of those children said that they were scared to leave their houses, and over 60% said that they were frightened for their physical well-being. As a result, five out of 10 children will not return to the place in which they have been bullied. Those are not isolated incidents — indeed, 50% said that they had been bullied for a period of more than one year and 27% said that they had been bullied for more than three years. When we look at the results for children with learning disabilities as a whole, we can see that over half of those children cry regularly because they are bullied, and one third hide away in their rooms and avoid social areas — some even contemplate suicide.

I have described the problem; today, we need to find the answer. How do we solve a problem such as bullying, which is often done in a sneaky manner? A large percentage of children who are bullied never tell anyone about it. The figure is even higher among children with learning disabilities, who have an even more limited scope of expression. There must be a concerted approach and strategy in all areas to tackle that problem. That must include teachers and classroom assistants, dinner ladies, school cleaners, youth-club workers, and mothers watching their children playing in the streets. There must be a dedicated effort to step in and make a difference.

I was disgusted to learn that when children told a responsible adult about their problem with bullies, four out of 10 were told that the bullying would probably not stop and that they should learn to live with it. That is totally unacceptable. It is unbelievable and unacceptable that that should be the attitude of some adults. That kind of approach to the problem must be eradicated, and a well-publicised approach to disablist bullying must be developed.

Other Members and I have been visited by parents who are worried about what is happening to their children at school. Those are heartbreaking cases that bring home the reality of what is happening to disabled children. It is for that reason that I fully support — and ask the Assembly to support — the recommendations of the Mencap report.

The Mencap report recommends, and I also suggest, that disablist bullying must be recognised and treated as seriously as other forms of bullying, such as racist and homophobic bullying. That should include the production and promotion of robust guidance as to how best to prevent and tackle disablist bullying. The Minister of Education, as the proposer of the motion rightly said, should report regularly to the Assembly on progress in tackling disablist bullying as part of her duty to report on her Department's progress on promoting equality for disabled persons.

Schools and services that are used by children should be required to record all incidences of disablist bullying. Public bodies should fulfil their public duty to promote equality for disabled persons, positive attitudes and participation in public life. The Education and Training Inspectorate should be commissioned to review progress on eliminating disablist bullying.

The bullying of any child — particularly our most vulnerable children — should never be tolerated. The Assembly must send that message to schools and youth clubs and to mothers in our streets. We can combat the problem if we work together and send out the correct signals. Let us not see another generation of vulnerable children hiding away in their rooms and not fulfilling their true potential. I support the motion.

Mr Beggs: It has been estimated that more than 22,000 children in Northern Ireland have some form of disability. Disability sets a child apart and makes them different. Sometimes, people choose to use that difference as a little excuse for picking on those vulnerable children. Unfortunately, that means that the likelihood of an individual with a disability being bullied is significantly increased. Our schools and youth clubs must take action to stop that from happening. I declare an interest as a governor of Glynn Primary School and an active Boys' Brigade officer. On occasions, I have dealt with the problem myself. There is an immediate responsibility not only to identify incidents of bullying, but to take effective action to deal with, and, if possible, prevent them.

Disabled children lead lives that are already restricted by their disability, and bullying adds to those restrictions. Quite apart from the trauma that is experienced during the bullying episodes, children are left with a residual fear of bullying that is ever-present in their minds.

Other Members have mentioned the extensive Mencap survey. The statistics are horrifying: eight out of 10 children with learning disabilities are bullied; eight out of 10 are scared to go out because they are frightened that they might be bullied; and six out of 10 have been physically hurt by bullies. Those unacceptable statistics demonstrate a clear need for action. The fact that almost three out of 10 children who were surveyed were bullied for three or more years demonstrates that

this is not a matter of isolated incidents; it is an ongoing problem.

A separate survey by the National Autistic Society found that two out of five children on the autistic spectrum have been bullied at school. Disabled children often lack the social skills to deal with that situation, let alone report it. For many children and young people, bullying can come to characterise their lives and leave them feeling depressed, isolated and withdrawn. Often, the low self-esteem that they experience as a result of bullying is carried into their adult lives, which means that, in addition to other forms of disability that they may have, they may experience significant mental suffering. Isolated children can become isolated adults.

Schools and youth clubs can implement a number of steps to reduce the occurrence of bullying of children who have disabilities. They should ensure that disabled children be treated in an inclusive way by reviewing accessibility issues. That would lessen the likelihood of differences standing out. Disability issues should be discussed with the children and young people. All staff and volunteers must be made aware of any disabilities so that they can assist when necessary. Staff should be inclusive in their approach, thus setting a good example to other children and young people. It is also important to select a variety of games and activities so that everyone can be involved in them. Support staff should allow children to display some level of independence. There is a need for dignity for all, and every child should retain a sense of self-worth.

Above all, we must do everything in our power to ensure that disabled children feel a valued part of our society. Schools can take several immediate steps: anti-bullying days inform pupils where they can get help and advice; teachers can listen to pupils' problems; befriending and peer-mentoring schemes can be set up; and a scheme could be established whereby pupils can report bullying anonymously.

Although such schemes would be particularly beneficial to disabled children, it would be good practice if all schools were to introduce them, given that they would be beneficial to all children.

3.00 pm

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People published a report on bullying entitled 'Being Part and Parcel of the School'. I commend the Commissioner and her office for their work on that. As a result of that research, guidance has been developed on how children and young people should be involved in producing, reviewing and monitoring anti-bullying policies in schools.

I support the motion, and I ask that all statutory organisations actively consider what they can do to improve the lives of disabled children.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate, and I thank the Members who tabled the motion. A definition of bullying that we should consider is that which was agreed by the Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum, which defines bullying as the:

“repeated use of power by one or more persons intentionally to harm, hurt or adversely affect the rights and needs of another or others.”

Although I am sure that all Members wish to condemn bullying in all its forms and across all groups and individuals in society, the motion refers specifically to bullying that children and young people with disabilities experience.

We cannot fail to be touched by the comments of the young people themselves. A Mencap report quotes one child as saying:

“I haven’t got any friends. At playtime I just walk round the playground on my own. I would give the other children anything if they could be my friends.”

Bullying destroys lives. It has long-lasting and far-reaching effects. The motion calls for the Executive to:

“carry out a thematic inspection across public bodies, to establish their response to bullying”.

Although it is right and proper that that action be taken, a great deal of research on the matter already exists. Recommendations have already been well articulated. Such recommendations are particularly relevant to the Department of Education, as it is at school where children and young people spend most of their time, and, unfortunately, where many of them experience ongoing bullying.

A report on children’s rights commissioned by NICCY in 2004 found that, although since 2003 each school has been required to have anti-bullying policies and to consult pupils when they are drawing up those policies, bullying remains a major concern for children and young people across Northern Ireland.

The one-size-fits-all approach does not work. Each school should be able to tailor the guidance to meet the needs of individual schoolchildren. There is also a need for innovative strategies such as peer mediation for dealing with bullying.

In general terms, it was found that although the resources to tackle the issue exist, more work needs to be carried out to educate pupils in tolerance; to train teachers and support staff to identify, monitor and address the issue; and to co-ordinate support staff for all involved.

In 2002, the Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that the Government should take measures to set up adequate mechanisms and structures to prevent bullying and other forms of violence in schools and that children should be included in the development and implementation of those strategies.

I welcome the attendance of both junior Ministers at this debate. Perhaps one of them will outline what steps they have taken to act on that 2002 recommendation and provide a timetable for the setting up of a ministerial subgroup on children. I trust that the specific needs of children and young people with disabilities will be a priority for that subgroup.

In other research, Mencap found that schools and children’s services should record incidents of bullying of disabled children, and that those children and their parents should get good-quality information about the help that they can expect from education authorities and other public bodies. The research also found that specific training for teachers to deal with bullying is also required; that finding was similar to those of the NICCY report.

When addressing this issue, Members must also be aware of how the inherent dignity and worth of each human being should be valued. Unlike some parties in the House, the SDLP has always been, and continues to be, opposed to abortion. What message do those parties send out, when in supporting the pro-choice lobbyists, they then agree to the abortion — up to 38 weeks into the gestation period — of an unborn child who has a disability? That term is almost at the point of birth.

On behalf of the SDLP, I support the motion, and I call on all in society to stand up against the bullies who are in our midst.

Mr Lunn: I apologise to the Member who moved the motion for not being present during her speech; I was unavoidably detained.

The Alliance Party supports the motion. Although we have some reservations about its wording, of course we support its broad aim. It is essential that public authorities are made aware of their responsibilities on this matter, and we recognise that that awareness goes beyond the passive practice of carrying out the odd impact assessment.

Some statistics have been quoted today, so please forgive me if I happen to repeat them. When we carry out research into matters such as these, we suddenly discover things that we did not know. For example, 82% of children in the UK who have a learning disability are bullied. That figure equates to 280,000 children. That is an absolutely staggering figure. The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People has reported that children who have a disability are twice as likely as other children to be bullied. What on earth does that unbelievable statistic say about society? It is more than 12 years since the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 was passed, yet children who have a learning disability are still frightened of being bullied.

Over half of children who have a learning disability and who have been bullied stop going to the places where their bullying occurred. What does that say about their opportunities to join in with normal community activities, given that they are afraid to go to the places where they could participate?

We have no problem with supporting the motion, although it appears to assume that all public bodies could perhaps do something about bullying. However, for a variety of reasons, people of all ages experience bullying, the responsibility for which rests primarily with the bullies. Although we offer our support, we look forward to hearing details in the winding-up speech about what is meant by the word “thematic” and to getting some examples of what a “response” might entail. I hope that it will not be suggested that we introduce yet another bureaucratic process to make it look as though we are tackling the problem, but I am sure that it will be recommended that we actually do something about the problem.

I know that we are all interested in action, and that being the case, I suggest that we go a little further. As part of the introduction of citizenship into schools and of broader youth services, the Executive could look usefully at investing in education on this matter to demonstrate that people have a responsibility not to bully others because of their prejudices against disability or, indeed, for any other reason. Although that may suggest that a great deal of bullying is either indirect or sometimes unintentional, its effect remains the same.

I pay tribute to the work of Disability Action and other organisations that have proved so good at raising awareness of issues such as this. Their broad community education and awareness-raising projects and events serve as useful reminders to us all that, as citizens, we have a role to play.

We support the motion, but we look forward to hearing the proposers put more meat on the bones in their winding-up speech.

Mrs I Robinson: This is a timely debate and one that I welcome.

I was bullied at school, not by children, but by a very small male teacher who had problems with a 13-year-old girl who was 7 inches taller than him. At every opportunity, I was picked on, bullied and humiliated. I know what that cost me in those days, and I would dread to think what a child with a disability would suffer in the same circumstances.

Research by Professor Conti-Ramsden of the University of Manchester, which was published recently in ‘Educational and Child Psychology’, raised our awareness of the bullying of children and young people who have learning disabilities. It is therefore vital that we debate this topic for the sake of all our young children.

That research showed that teenagers who have a communication disorder that stops them expressing and understanding their emotions are twice as likely as their peers to be bullied. Speech and language impairment, which is just one area of disability, is an important area to note with respect to bullying. Speech and language impairment is four times more prevalent than autism, and it affects around 520,000 children throughout the United Kingdom.

In the University of Manchester research, almost half of the 16-year-olds interviewed who had speech and language impairment recalled being teased or bullied when they were younger. Thirteen per cent of the teenagers had experienced persistent bullying over time. Dr Knox, who worked on the same research team, also noted that:

“young people who experience bullying can often become anxious and depressed in adolescence”.

That behaviour must be nipped in the bud, as it can contaminate a person’s long-term mental health, not just into adolescence but into adulthood.

Thankfully there are organisations and charities working in speech and language impairment across the United Kingdom and Ireland. They are helping to decrease the vulnerability of the young people by improving their communication skills. My office was contacted by one of those groups, which is called I CAN. In the past 20 years the group has focused solely on helping children with communication disability. The charity is asking for support to secure funding for the I CAN early-years centre at Ballynahinch Primary School, which was set up in November 2000 in response to the high prevalence rates and lack of early-intervention services available for children with speech, language and communication disability.

Previously, funding for the centre came from the Department of Education and the DHSSPS. However, it is the funding from the former that is likely to be withdrawn. The charity has been asking MLAs to write letters of support and send them to the Minister of Education, Caitríona Ruane, and I would like to state clearly that I will be asking the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to look into the I CAN project and state how his Department stands with regard to funding such an important service.

Mark Twain said:

“Kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see.”

We must reintroduce the quality of kindness so that we can equip our children with the twenty-first century life-skill of communication. We must equip them with the skills to communicate the things that matter.

A therapist at a recent training event told me that “hurt people hurt people”. We must work with all

children, including the bullies, and help to equip them with communication skills so that hurts can be prevented or healed. In that way we can stop the bullies of the playground becoming the bullies of the workplace.

I finish with I CAN's vision:

"A world where children have the communication skills to be all they can be."

That is a worthy objective.

Mrs O'Neill: My colleague Carál Ní Chuilín opened the debate by saying that bullying wrecks lives, and that is the reality. Bullying is becoming more common in communities and is damaging the lives and life-chances of some of the most vulnerable children and young people in our society.

The facts to back up those claims can be found in Mencap's study into the experiences of children and young people with learning disability. The Commissioner for Children and Young People has also identified that bullying of disabled children is of concern, following the research that her organisation commissioned into children's rights.

In bringing the motion to the House, we are challenging this Administration to confront the gravity of such bullying, and in confronting it to take up the challenge to eradicate it. In 2007, Mencap held numerous workshops with children as part of its research. It produced the report 'Bullying wrecks lives: the experiences of children and young people with a learning disability'. In all of Mencap's workshops, young people were asked to give experiences of bullying in their lives, not just in the school environment but in their leisure activities, buses and parks and in every aspect of their lives. It became apparent that children with learning disabilities are being subjected to bullying across the board. That aspect of the research was very important because a lot of the focus has been on bullying in schools. Although it does play a large part, Mencap's research has shown that children and young people with a learning disability are being bullied everywhere they go.

Children with a learning disability are more likely to be subjected to bullying because of their disability. Unfortunately, bullies see them as easy targets because they can be easily persuaded to get into trouble, or perhaps do not understand what is happening to them. As elected representatives, we have a responsibility to ensure that we protect those young people.

3.15 pm

I know parents whose children have a learning disability. They have fought battle after battle — whether for access to mainstream schools, proper age-appropriate recreational facilities or other services — with various agencies throughout their child's development. They are tired, and they need the new Administration to

stand beside them to ensure that their children are protected, supported and helped to develop to achieve their full potential. They need Members to help them to take some of the strain.

All people, including children and young people, have a right to live in a safe environment. Disabled children have a right to live their lives free from discrimination and harassment. However, this right is simply not a reality for thousands of children and young people with a learning disability. I call on the Executive to address those issues and make a start on securing the rights of disabled children and young people.

In calling for a thematic inspection across all public bodies, we are asking everyone to consider carefully the experiences of this vulnerable section of society in all sectors, with a view to the stamping out of disablist bullying becoming a Government priority.

Jim Shannon has already listed the Mencap recommendations, so I will not go over them again, but we ought to consider its suggestions. We must address the needs of children and young people with learning disabilities and support them.

Miss McIlveen: The motion proposes a positive, although preparatory, step in addressing an issue that affects a vulnerable, largely silent but significant minority of our society.

Six per cent of children in Northern Ireland are affected by disability, and 4% of those have two or more disabilities. Over 12,000 children under 16 years of age receive disability living allowance, so it is a shameful fact that Barnardo's Northern Ireland research conducted in 2002 demonstrates that bullying is so pervasive and such a major part of disabled children's lives that it could be seen as a formative experience for them. It found extensive examples of disabled children and young people being bullied — verbally and physically — not only at school but in the community. Mencap research shows that 53% of children with learning disabilities had been physically bullied, and 73% of children were frightened to go out because of bullying. Over 40% of disabled children and young people actively avoided the places where they were bullied. Therefore, bullies are dictating the places to which those children can go and when they can go; that is wrong to me, on so many levels.

Bullying at school is more likely to take place when adult supervision is absent — in the playground, at lunchtime and on school buses. At school, disabled children indicated that they found it difficult to make friends and to cope with bullying. They were particularly stressed at times of major change in their lives, such as moving to post-primary or special schools.

The research led to the Department of Education establishing an anti-bullying forum, along with some voluntary organisations. Further action was taken in

2006, with funding being made available for a regional co-ordinator to develop, implement and promote good-practice models. We look forward with interest to the results of the Department's review of schools' anti-bullying policies later in the year.

An essential tool that is funded by the Department is the dedicated anti-bullying helpline that is run by ChildLine and its online live-time advice website, www.there4me.com. However, there has been limited success, with no focus on the particular vulnerabilities of disabled children and young people.

An anti-bullying policy must also be a key tenet of school inspection, and schools should have clear proactive plans that seek to build networks of support that will help to protect disabled young people from bullying. All too often, that is a failing in schools not only for disabled young people but those able-bodied young people who suffer at the hands of bullies.

There are international examples, particularly from Canada; they have tackled bullying in a holistic manner and have built the concept of "peaceful schools" that focus on a zero-tolerance approach and develop different ranges of attitudes among all pupils and teachers. We should investigate and mirror that approach.

The social isolation of disabled children is linked to bullying. In the 2002 Barnardo's Northern Ireland study, many children indicated that they had no, or few, peer friends at school or at home. That sense of isolation from the community left them vulnerable to bullying. For many of those children, the isolation was quite extreme, resulting in their having only adult friends and carers, and no friends of their own or a similar age.

The research found that the children's social contact in their local communities tended to be restricted, and that where there was contact between a disabled child and local children, it was often a negative experience. Indeed, some children were so isolated that researchers found that they had become withdrawn and had lost interest in the outside world. That isolation was caused by ignorance and prejudice about disability; practical difficulties caused by problems of access; pervasive levels of bullying, and difficulty in creating social opportunities for disabled children.

Many children told the same, familiar story about how they could not go out on their own, and that because they went to special schools, which draw their pupils from a wide geographical area, they had no local friends. The children were relying on their parents and carers to provide opportunities for them to meet other children. When such opportunities were not readily available, the children did not have normal interaction with others of their own age.

Not surprisingly, disabled children living in deprived households are most vulnerable to social

isolation. Thirty per cent of children who live in households with a disabled child experience poverty. Everyone is responsible for assisting and promoting opportunities for disabled children to become fully involved in their communities. Public bodies also have a responsibility to ensure that they put in place the kind of support and assistance that can make a difference.

Bullying cannot be addressed by simply tackling individual incidents. Plans must be put in place to tackle the underlying causes of bullying in all public places and, by doing so, to ensure that disabled children are less isolated and, in turn, less vulnerable.

Mr G Robinson: I will begin by saying that no matter who is on the receiving end of bullying, I condemn such behaviour outright. Although the Assembly is discussing the bullying of disabled children and young people, I am aware of bullying in all its forms. At the weekend, we heard about the young man who sustained serious injuries when he jumped off a footbridge in Belfast to escape bullies. That is one of the more extreme outcomes that can result from bullying.

The bullying of disabled children and young people is particularly vicious. Bullies can be more accurately described as cowards. They simply pick on easy targets who are no match for them. They do not realise or, indeed, care that they are ruining people's lives.

It is not only the person who is attacked who suffers; the whole family can be affected. Fear that a child or sibling will be physically or mentally hurt can have devastating effects. I was appalled to read in Mencap's report about a family who had been forced to move home to ensure a child's safety, rather than having to face the continual fear that he would be harmed. The extent of such bullying in society is not known, which is partly due to the fact that victims do not report bullying for fear of reprisals.

In some cases, the problem is that victims are not taken seriously because of their disability. I was appalled to read the comment made to one child, that because he had special needs he should "get used to it". How disgraceful. Society must not accept that as a suitable state of affairs for disabled young people.

To discover what public bodies are doing to deal with the bullying epidemic that has spread through society in recent years, the depth of the problem must be established. That can be done only by engaging with the victims of those cowardly verbal and physical attacks on as many levels and in as many surroundings as possible.

We must liaise with young people where there is a bullying problem — in schools, youth clubs and day centres — to find a way to reduce such cowardly deeds to a minimum. If, over time, we solve the problem, imagine the difference that will make to young disabled

people's quality of life and how it will empower them to achieve their best. Our able-bodied children and young people are rightly encouraged to achieve. Do their disabled counterparts not deserve the same encouragement?

If we create an environment in which all our children can succeed without the fear of bullying, Northern Ireland and the Assembly will have achieved something of which to be proud.

Mr Easton: We are all aware that bullying has become a major problem in our schools and society. In many respects, that problem is a reflection of our society in general — small numbers of ill-disposed people wreak havoc on our streets by destroying property, committing acts of vandalism, and disturbing and disrupting classes in schools, with no prospect of punishment. In many cases, it seems that rehabilitation is not possible or that rehabilitation schemes do not work. Worst of all, those who do the damage are seldom required to apologise or to restore the damage that they have caused.

When parents send their children to school, they have a right to expect that they will be taught in a secure, safe and disciplined environment. Sadly, in many schools, more time is spent dealing with pupils who set out to disrupt the system than is spent on those who want an education. Persistent physical bullying, attacks, name-calling, teasing, ganging up to exclude someone from a group and mocking someone's clothes or appearance are all features of the daily experience for many children in our society. Such behaviour is particularly offensive when applied to children with disabilities, and that can have a devastating impact on the mental well-being of such children. Bullying results in great unhappiness, loneliness and, in extreme cases, can lead to mental breakdown or suicide. The perpetrators are aware of that, and yet they persist with their behaviour.

Although bullying is not a new problem, changes in attitudes to punishment and an excessive emphasis on the rights of perpetrators have created a culture in schools in which teachers experience many difficulties in protecting those who are on the receiving end of bullying that can, at times, be quite vicious.

Many schools and youth organisations have done excellent work in developing effective anti-bullying strategies in their day-to-day responses to the problems that bullies create. Those schools, the teachers and counsellors deserve enormous credit — we must benefit from their experience and skills and ensure that their knowledge is shared. However, written policies are no guarantee that the problem is being dealt with effectively. We must ensure that all children feel confident that they will receive timely and consistent support.

Bullying outside school is another area of huge concern, and we must examine in detail how to respond in community settings to the needs of young people — disabled or otherwise — who are on the receiving end of sustained pressure from bullies. We must not lose sight of the fact that the vast majority of young people are kind and considerate, and will quickly support action that is taken against bullies by adults or those in authority. It is important to remember that bullies are a minority. Work to protect young people from bullies must be a major area of endeavour for the Commissioner for Children and Young People.

Persistent bullying — physical or mental — should be treated as a criminal offence. Anyone who is prepared to commit a crime should be prepared to face the consequences. Bullying is an evil and pernicious crime, and strong retribution will ensure that we spell out our abhorrence to those who are engaged in it. Bullies know that what they are doing is wrong and the consequences that their actions can have. There must be a change in culture. The penalty should be proportional to the severity of the offence. As a priority, we must vigorously protect and defend the most vulnerable in our society.

To develop appropriate responses and policies, we must make use of the widest possible range of available information and experience. Therefore, it is necessary to undertake an inspection across all public bodies to establish their current response to the bullying that many children and young people, particularly those who are disabled, experience. I support the motion.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Paisley Jnr): I thank the Members who are present for staying for the debate — their interest is an indication of how seriously the House regards this matter. I congratulate the Member who proposed the motion on securing the debate.

The Member for East Londonderry George Robinson mentioned the timeliness of the debate, bearing in mind the headlines about a young boy who was bullied and who jumped from a bridge in Belfast, which we read with horror last weekend. That is just one of many incidents that highlight the issue of bullying.

3.30 pm

Before I deal with points that Members made, I want to stress that bullying is a huge issue for children and young people. Any efforts to raise awareness of the issue and to develop mechanisms to help to tackle the problem will be widely welcomed by everyone in the Assembly. This debate has been useful in helping to raise awareness of the issue.

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

Bullying in any form and in any setting is unacceptable, and I do not single out any particular form of bullying for special mention. Bullying is unacceptable, no matter what form it takes, and society should tackle it with vigour. The needs and welfare of all the victims of bullying should be paramount in our minds.

Today, we are considering the issue of bullying of children and young people with disabilities. The Assembly has been asked to consider a thematic inspection across public bodies to establish their response to bullying that children and young people with disabilities have experienced.

It is important to be clear about what the motion means. If we are talking about an audit of all public bodies that interface with children and young people, all that we will end up with will be a dossier of anti-bullying and disability hate-crime policies. We will have nothing that will quantify the size of the problem or make new proposals to alleviate it. However, that is not what we are debating. That is not to say that those policies are not important, because they are. Nevertheless, if we were to expend all that effort, and it would be a huge task, we could end up with a product that would not be much more valuable than the one that we currently have.

The recent Mencap report, 'Bullying wrecks lives: the experiences of children and young people with a learning disability', revealed that eight out of 10 children with a learning disability said that they have been bullied. That is not acceptable. A sizeable amount of research is now available that highlights the needs of those children and young people. We must focus on effective ways in which to enable all children and young people to cope with the situations in which they find themselves. We must get the message across that there is nothing wrong with asking for help, and it is critically important to ensure that those children know where to go to for help.

One of the six high-level outcomes in the strategy for children and young people involves living in safety and with stability. Child protection and safeguarding of all children, especially those who are vulnerable, is a key priority for us all.

Huge strides are already being taken to tackle all forms of bullying, especially in our schools and colleges. Boards of governors and principals of every grant-aided school and further education college have a legal responsibility to encourage good behaviour and discipline. The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, which was introduced in April of that year, requires all grant-aided schools to include measures to prevent all forms of bullying among pupils in their discipline policy. From that date, schools were also required to consult registered pupils and parents before amending their existing discipline policy.

I shall deal with some specific matters that Members mentioned. I was drawn to the personal account from the Member for Strangford Mrs Robinson, who referred to her personal experience of bullying. As busy MLAs, we will all have heard constituents' experiences. They bring instances of bullying to our attention. During the first mandate, a young boy in my constituency tragically took his life because he was bullied on a school bus. Events such as that really bring home the seriousness and extent of bullying across Northern Ireland.

The proposer of the motion made her points well. She called for a joined-up response from many of the Departments. The bullying of children and young people with disabilities is not an issue for OFMDFM alone, nor is it an issue for the Department of Education alone, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety alone, or the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure alone. We must all work together. The subgroup on children and young people that OFMDFM established will help to co-ordinate a joined-up response and drive the issue. It will encourage all Departments to understand their particular roles and responsibilities and to work at achieving a joined-up approach.

With regard to asking the Department of Education to monitor the situation, some matters should be put on record. The Department of Education has collated annual statistics on the reasons for suspensions and expulsions from the education and library boards since the 2002-03 school year. Some suspensions and expulsions resulted from bullying incidents. There are no plans to require schools to collect statistics on the instances of bullying. Indeed, the Department of Education has expressed concerns about adding to the bureaucratic burden on schools by requiring principals to record and provide information on each incident of bullying at their schools. However, the Department of Education is funding a pilot scheme with 16 schools via Save the Children. That work is under way, and we await its outcome, which is sure to be interesting.

Many Members quoted statistics. A recent University of Ulster research report revealed that 43% of primary schoolchildren and 29% of post-primary schoolchildren perceive that they have been bullied at least once while at school. That is a frightening statistic, given the number of children and young people who have been affected. It is important that we take opportunities, such as this debate, to repeat the statistics and let people know the extent of the problem so that they can take steps to address the concerns of many children.

It is important that we make the House aware of some of the requirements that are already in place and the work that has been done. The next issue involves the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and it indicates the joined-up nature of the response that must be made. The draft minimum care standards for children's homes that provide respite care

for disabled children are to be published by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in March 2008. Those regulations will require homes to have a strategy for the prevention of bullying. That goes to the heart of some of the issues that have been raised today. The Department of Health is drafting minimum care standards for family-based short-break overnight care for disabled children and young people, which will include a bullying and victimisation section as guidance for staff.

The draft standards for disabled children in hospitals are to be published by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in March 2008. Those standards will require hospitals to have in place an anti-bullying policy, which will refer to children who are in the wards.

Roy Beggs mentioned the activities of the Department of Education's Youth Service, and it is important to note that the Youth Service highlights the need for a rigorous approach to bullying through child-protection anti-bullying policies. As an inclusive service, young people with disabilities who attend its projects are subject to the same pastoral care as others. However, through child-protection training, staff are aware that young people with disabilities are more vulnerable to bullying, and, therefore, the level of pastoral care may be enhanced through consultation with parents, carers and the appropriate professionals and professional services to ensure that it meets the needs of each child. It is important to encourage such bullying-awareness training.

Several Members mentioned the Department of Education. Jim Shannon, Iris Robinson, Roy Beggs and a Member for Mid Ulster mentioned the Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum (NIABF). The Department of Education is a founder of, and provides funding for, the Anti-Bullying Forum and funds the co-ordinator post attached to it. The local Anti-Bullying Forum represents various statutory and voluntary bodies, including Mencap, with the aim of sharing models of best practice, disseminating information and developing and co-ordinating joint initiatives. It helps to ensure that schools and organisations that work with children and young people have appropriate strategies to deal with and to prevent bullying behaviours. The forum has also established formal links with similar bodies in England, Wales and Scotland.

Dolores Kelly's comments are timely. She asked when the ministerial subcommittee will meet. I am pleased to announce that the meeting is scheduled for 13 March 2008. The matter has already been raised at the Executive and a draft set of priorities has been drawn up for that meeting. However, I do not want to pre-empt it: we await agreement on those priorities by the people who will attend. The junior Ministers will be pressing the issue and will be making it visible so

that children and young people will be seen to be a priority for the Government.

Michelle McIlveen mentioned the task group on disablist bullying, and the role of the regional co-ordinator of the Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum. The co-ordinator, Leslie-Anne Newton, has met with Paschal McKeown of Mencap, and I am pleased to announce that NIABF will be establishing a task group to consider how the bullying children and young people with disabilities should be tackled. All key stakeholders, including children and young people themselves, will be involved in the process. I assure the House that the Ministers will take an active interest in that work and its outcomes.

NIABF is in the process of developing a website so that people around the world can share examples of good practice. The website will be launched next month, and it will be another good example of the work being done in this area. The website will draw attention to the interest, not only here but worldwide, in finding ways to stop bullying and identify good practices in that regard.

Many Members have spoken about actions that we, as an Assembly and as a Government, can take. A small number of voluntary organisations that deal with disability are receiving core-project funding from the mental health and disability policy directorate. Twenty organisations will receive a total allocation of approximately £2.5 million in the 2007-08 financial year; which indicates the seriousness with which we believe those organisations and their actions should be taken.

Many other issues were mentioned, and there was some repetition of issues. The debate is timely: it indicates that the House has a significant interest in dealing with bullying in general and, specifically, by making sure that the bullying of children and young people with disabilities is properly addressed. My office, which provides a co-ordination role, will take an active interest in ensuring that policies and best practices are put in place so that the concerns of the Member who tabled the motion are properly addressed.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend my party colleagues for securing the debate. Like the junior Minister, I thank everyone for taking part. Many useful comments and statistics emerged during the debate.

I also think it useful, a LeasCheann Comhairle, that the debate took place following the earlier debate on the disability discrimination legislation. I hope that, following these debates, we will see progress on the issues in the Committees. I thank both junior Ministers for attending and, I am sure that, as they have responsibility for children and young people, they will have found some of the issues that have been aired today to be relevant to their work.

I place on record my thanks to Mencap and the Office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People for the information that they provided to Members who took part in the debate.

It is also important, as the junior Minister said, to highlight the work of the groups from the community and voluntary sector who lobby to ensure that the rights of children and young people and adults with disabilities are central to the work of the Assembly. We must take on board the fact that those groups do that on a daily basis. Without those people, such issues might not come to light, and I commend them for the work that they do.

3.45 pm

Several Members said that, time and time again, children and young people of all ages report bullying as the single biggest barrier to living their lives to the full. I am glad that the motion was not amended and that it has received all-party support. That sends a clear message that the Assembly takes seriously the issue of bullying of children and young people.

Jim Shannon gave a number of statistics that showed that not only is bullying going on among children and young people, but that children with a learning disability are twice as likely to be bullied. The message from that is that it is wrong and that it must stop. He also called for the Assembly to support the recommendations from Mencap and to support the Children's Commissioner's anti-bullying campaign, and I agree. The information that I received from the Children's Commissioner's office has been good, and the anti-bullying posters are useful for schools, and the community and voluntary sector.

Roy Beggs mentioned the problem of bullying in schools and youth clubs, and, because of that problem, the motion calls on the Executive to carry out a thematic inspection across all public bodies. The junior Minister highlighted the fact that a number of Ministers and Departments have a role to play in challenging bullies. Rather than adopting a haphazard approach to the issue of bullying, we suggest that the Executive should take the lead. The junior Ministers, who have responsibility for children and young people, should push that through the Executive.

I agree with Dolores Kelly that none of us can fail to have been touched by the examples of children and young people who have suffered from bullying. Michelle O'Neill, in answer to a query from Trevor Lunn, said that the motion speaks for itself. We want an approach from all public bodies to tackle bullying. I do not claim that the junior Minister speaks for me, and I do not speak for him, but he explained the reason that we want a thematic approach across all public bodies.

Iris Robinson mentioned the I CAN project, and she said that she would speak to the Health Minister about it. As a member of the Health Committee, I support her in doing that. The more information that we get into

the public domain and give to children and young people, the more it will help to tackle the issues.

Michelle O'Neill said that the majority of bullying takes place in schools, but that children and young people with a disability suffer bullying everywhere. The issue is not just about tackling bullying in schools; social settings must also be considered. The junior Minister mentioned a number of programmes. He said that bullying is a huge issue, that any efforts to highlight the issue must be welcomed and that he was glad that the motion was proposed for debate.

The motion does not ask for an audit, although that would be useful. The debate has shown that an inspection of how bullying is dealt with is required. It is also important to find out what anti-bullying policies are in place. Some positive work is going on in Departments, as the junior Minister mentioned, and especially in the Education and Health Departments. That is to be welcomed, but is it enough? I have listened to the debate for the past one and a half hours, and I do not think that enough work is being done. To answer Trevor Lunn's question, that is why we want a thematic approach across all public bodies.

I appreciate the junior Minister's telling us the date of the first meeting of the ministerial subgroup on children and young people. That is useful information, which we welcome. I hope that a copy of today's Official Report can be included in the papers for that meeting, because this issue must be addressed.

I ask everyone who really wants to cherish the children of the nation equally to support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to carry out a thematic inspection across public bodies, to establish their response to bullying experienced by children and young people with disabilities.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Broadband Access in Rural Parts of West Tyrone

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member who secured the debate will have 15 minutes in which to speak. Depending on how many other Members wish to speak, they will each have approximately 10 minutes.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for his attending the debate. It is obvious that he appreciates the importance of this matter. Yesterday's Question Time exercised the minds of Members and the Minister, so that is not a bad reference point for the beginning of the debate.

Information and communication technologies have become part of our everyday lives. These days, broadband is crucial for high-speed Internet connection to emails; for research; for booking flights or concert tickets; for downloading photographs, music or videos; for interactive entertainment; for the delivery of Government services; for assisting with young people's homework; and for anyone else involved in lifelong learning. Broadband is crucial for everyone, including the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in efforts to increase the competitiveness of local businesses and to boost business productivity.

'Broadband Northern Ireland — Fully Connected' is a statement and a boast of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and it is another good reference point for this debate. The introduction to the document refers to "equitable access" to cost-effective broadband services for all, and to the consequent benefits to communities, Government and industry. Part of me wonders whether the use of the word "equitable" was carefully chosen to prevent the use of the word "equal". Perhaps that takes into account available resources, or represents a belief that rural areas may present additional problems. I would like the wording to be changed to "equal access to cost-effective, equal-cost broadband services for all".

Both the direct rule Minister Ian Pearson MP and Nigel Dodds, the locally elected Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, have made the proud boast that we are the first region in Europe to have 100% broadband availability, whether by telephone line, cable or satellite. The current Minister made that boast as recently as yesterday.

I am making the case that there is really no more than 99% broadband availability. I am highlighting the fact that satellite provision is not proving to be the answer for businesses and communities that have brought this issue to my attention. If I were to make an even stronger case, I might say that the statement about 100% broadband availability is, in effect, misleading, because it creates an expectation that the service is the same, across the board. That is not the case.

There is a problem in West Tyrone and in other rural parts of the North. I appreciate that the Department and British Telecom are attempting to address the issues.

Mr Boylan: Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: Be brief, Cathal, if you do not mind.

Mr Boylan: Thank you, comrade. Mr McElduff has mentioned Tyrone, but parts of Armagh still do not receive broadband. As far back as 2004, it was stated that broadband would be accessible in the whole of the North. Does the Member agree that four years is a long enough time in which to make broadband accessible to the whole of the North?

Mr McElduff: I continue to hear about other areas. The tabling of the Adjournment debate has created an amazing reaction. Many people have told me to make sure and mention their villages. A public meeting was held in Drumsurn on Monday, 4 February in St Peter's village hall, which was packed. The meeting was convened by the deputy mayor of Limavady, Brenda Chivers. I was pleased to read in the 'Northern Constitution' that senior officials from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Ofcom showed an interest in the issue, and I appreciate that.

I was also asked to mention that people in Ballintoy in County Antrim have problems accessing broadband. It is, therefore, not only Eskragh, Broughderg, Greencastle, Gortin, Carrickmore, Cloughfin and Dregish — where an impromptu meeting was held in the parochial hall after mass a few Sundays ago — that have problems accessing broadband. Inaccessibility to broadband is not a contrived issue; it is a real issue for many people. I know that Councillor Buchanan MLA will also appreciate the Dregish/Drumquin situation, because it is local to him.

A letter that was received by Sean Clarke, the chairman of Broughderg community association, brings me to the crux of the matter. The letter acknowledges that Mr Clarke has applied for broadband, that significant progress has been made in providing it, and that everyone has access to a broadband service. The letter also states that an engineer visited Mr Clarke's premises, but that it is not yet possible to get Mr Clark's telephone line to support asymmetric digital subscriber line (ADSL) broadband. The letter states that alternative technological solutions were being sought to address that issue, and that it could happen by broadband.

People who have access to broadband services and provision by satellite advise others not to install satellite broadband, because it is filled with problems. They say that, technologically, it is not sound, the satellite product is inferior and it provides a different service to that enjoyed by people a few miles away. The people for whom satellite broadband is identified as the solution are at a major disadvantage, because the quality of broadband service is not consistent and it costs more. There is a £70 installation fee and monthly charges of £27. Other people enjoy access to broadband at a rate of £15 a month, and there is no installation fee, although they might have to pay for a router box.

Rural people say that the assertion that there is 100% broadband availability here is misleading, because it does not tell the whole story.

I also have a letter from Alberta Pauley, from the telecoms policy unit of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I am grateful to Alberta and her team for responding to me on the specifics of a meeting in Omagh on 12 December, which aimed to get to the bottom of the problems regarding broadband access. The letter deals with 42 enquiries that emerged from that meeting.

I am aware now that similar meetings are held in other villages, towns and rural areas, and the consistent message is that broadband is not fully accessible in all communities. It is being delivered by satellite only, and there are technological problems associated with that. Furthermore, satellite broadband is more expensive than broadband through a telephone line. Why should people in rural areas pay more for the service?

4.00 pm

When I arrived at the Assembly as an elected representative for a rural community, I had faith in the assertion that all Government policies would be rural proofed. I contacted the head of the Civil Service, Nigel Hamilton, and asked to meet him in order to discuss his definition of "rural proofing". He told me that it is about considering circumstances in which a rural person might be adversely affected to a greater extent than an urban citizen.

Is there rural proofing? If so, the people in Drumsurn want to know about it, because many businesses in that area cannot operate properly without broadband, and schools are also suffering. Senior DETI officials heard that in Drumsurn, Omagh and other places. People in Drumsurn do not understand why they should have to pay for satellite connections when others can get cheaper and easier broadband Internet connections. A local person told me that satellite is not an acceptable method for connecting with the Internet.

I should be interested to hear the Minister's comments about his Department's press release in December, 'Minister welcomes broadband stimulation campaign':

"new marketing campaign to promote the importance of access to broadband ... targeting Strabane, Fermanagh, Omagh, Magherafelt and Moyle District Council Areas."

I would like to think that, in addition to being a marketing campaign, that initiative is aimed at delivering broadband to rural communities, citizens, businesses and schools.

I emphasise that this is an issue, and that I am not being mischievous for the sake of it. I am trying to address a real issue, and I call on the Minister and his Department to take whatever action is necessary in order to deliver equality in broadband provision, cost and quality for everyone, whether they live in rural or urban communities.

If this is not a real issue, why would my constituent from the townland of Inishative, Carrickmore, tell me that his wife could not take up her employer's offer of working from home? She was full of hope that that flexible option would benefit her; however, because of the slow delivery of broadband, and the cost, which was prohibitive, she has taken up a petition in Greencastle, Gortin and Broughderg. Hundreds of people in those communities are exercised by this issue.

I thank the Minister and his Department for listening to those people; they are engaging with people, but they should be aware that we will go the distance to satisfy the expectation and demand that rural communities should be equally served by proper broadband facilities and technological services, which must be delivered at a cost equal to that enjoyed by people who live in towns and cities. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for listening to the debate. I will concentrate on my constituency of West Tyrone.

Although it is often said that Northern Ireland has 100% broadband coverage, that does not mean that every homeowner is able to access that service. Rather, it means that all the telephone exchanges in Northern Ireland have broadband capability. For many people, that means that they must install satellite broadband if they wish to be connected to the Internet. Most people understand that it is virtually impossible to provide the standard broadband service to every remote dwelling in Northern Ireland. However, there are a relatively large number of people in rural areas who are unable to access broadband facilities through British Telecom or any of the other broadband providers in Northern Ireland.

Many people, when informed that they cannot be connected to standard broadband, will not enquire about other ways of receiving it and will simply go without access. When they opt for satellite broadband, it is likely to end up costing them more than the average customer. Does the Minister agree that satellite broadband is an inferior, and more expensive, product? Was the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment justified in

spending £9 million, when broadband cannot be provided through all telephone lines?

The irony is that broadband is more necessary in rural areas, because people living in places such as West Tyrone are more remote from the services that people living in Belfast take for granted. In a time when we are aware of carbon footprints, it is vital that someone living in Castlederg or Omagh can work from home on occasions instead of having to commute to Belfast, as many people have to do daily.

Speed of broadband access is important for people in areas such as West Tyrone. Rural dwellers have to pay the same amount of money as those living in cities and towns for their access, but they rarely receive broadband at the speed at which it is advertised. Broadband is advertised as being up to a certain speed, which means that many people in rural areas are not fully aware that they may be paying for broadband that is not up to the mark. Many people sign up to a service that claims to provide eight megabytes a second, but they rarely, if ever, receive data at that speed. Although people are paying for eight-megabyte broadband, they may actually receive only 400 kilobytes. The Member of Parliament for Foyle, Mr Mark Durkan, recently raised that issue in the House of Commons, and I hope that the Ofcom regulator will consider it.

I welcome the Minister's announcement that he is giving his backing to BT's campaign to promote broadband in rural areas, which will target the Strabane, Fermanagh, Omagh, Moyle and Magherafelt council areas. Delivering wider broadband access to areas such as West Tyrone is not simply about ensuring that people have access to the Internet on the same terms as everyone else; it is also a vital tool to stimulate the economy in rural areas across Northern Ireland. People in West Tyrone welcome the Executive's putting the economy as their number one priority, and better broadband service is one way in which we can help to stimulate new businesses or allow existing businesses to grow.

The Assembly has previously discussed public-sector jobs in West Tyrone, and Omagh relies heavily on them. Therefore, it is vital that the private sector also invests in those areas. In recent years, Omagh has seen the loss of Desmond and Sons Ltd, Rixel and Nestlé UK, and Strabane has lost Adria Ltd and Herdman's linen mill. Although both towns have seen investment in the retail sector, high-quality jobs are still needed in the area. An area such as West Tyrone must be able to compete for jobs in the technology sector, and, for that, it needs to have high-speed broadband infrastructure in place.

Will the Minister outline the benefits that have already been brought to Northern Ireland by investment in broadband services?

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Yesterday, when the Minister was in the

House for Question Time, I was called to ask my question, and I had to apologise, because it had already been answered. I now find myself in a similar position, a LeasCheann Comhairle, because Mr McElduff and Mr Buchanan have already covered everything, so I apologise for any repetition.

I welcome the Minister to the Chamber. At the beginning of the debate, Mr McElduff made a key point about equality of access. I have read yesterday's Official Report, and I know that Mr Dodds said that 1% of people receive broadband services through wireless systems, specifically satellite. The Official Report also states that that represents a small group that receives that service as a result of its geographical remoteness. That may be true, but given that I represent such an area, I know that people lack a certain mobility, as well as access to the technology and information that is available elsewhere. It is therefore perhaps more important for them to have broadband services. The Minister said that people experiencing difficulties in particular pockets should contact his officials, which was a very positive comment.

In their contributions, my colleagues Mr McElduff and Mr Buchanan covered practically all of West Tyrone, as well as parts of Derry, but I will mention a few instances of constituents contacting me. Mr McElduff mentioned Broughderg, and the chairperson of the community group there told me that he is keen for people in the area to have broadband access.

There is also the issue of the green broadband boxes. What is their function? Do they boost the service in some way, and can they be utilised more extensively? I hope that the Minister will comment on those points.

I was contacted by a family in Plumbridge who were keen to have a broadband service. A BT engineer visited them and installed a system with some success, but it seemed that a satellite system was the only available option for them. Mr Dodds is quoted in yesterday's Official Report as saying that the maximum cost of a broadband service is £27 a month, with a £70 installation charge. I am led to believe that a router costs £60. We may be talking about a small group of customers, and those amounts may not seem like a lot if you repeat them quickly, but it can be expensive for many people. Anything that could be done for people in those areas would be very welcome.

Some people who were talking to my constituents and who live not far from Plumbridge pay £14.99 a month for their broadband services. The difference between that amount and the quoted £27 maximum charge matters to the people who need the service.

That can apply to Greencastle and Clady, which is in the Strabane District Council area. The chairman of Strabane District Council, who is a constituent of

mine, had the satellite system installed — and I declare an interest as a councillor — but for some reason it was not much of a success. Someone from the council spent a couple of hours on it to make it work. However, it did not work, or at least, it did not work as well as expected.

He said that when one contacts BT, it will check to see whether broadband is available in an area; however, sometimes it cannot determine whether broadband is working successfully in a specific house. In that particular case, the family did receive satellite and, I suppose, that was a limited success.

4.15 pm

Mr Brolly: Will the Member agree that broadband access is essential to farmers, who are being encouraged to do their documentation online?

Mrs McGill: It is absolutely essential that the farming community has access to broadband.

I will repeat the names of the areas that have problems with broadband access: Broughderg, Greencastle, Plumbridge, Clady and Aghyaran.

I welcome the comments that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment made yesterday, and I hope that we can approach officials on the specifics of the matter. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Elliott: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for permitting me to speak on the issue. As you are aware, I arrived late in the Chamber because I had been at a Committee meeting.

I understand the position of Members from West Tyrone with regard to broadband access; I am sure that they will respect my situation in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. I have spoken to Members from West Tyrone and found that their issues on broadband access are similar to mine in that we in Fermanagh have a guarantee of 100% broadband access. I appreciate the answer that the Minister gave to the House yesterday.

However, I am concerned that even though there is an opportunity for wireless access, including satellite — which appears to be the most common type of wireless Internet access — it does not provide the coverage, speed or the availability that the landline provides. That causes a huge difficulty.

Although people say that one can get broadband in or outside Lisnaskea or between Ederney and Leck, it is, in effect, no better than a dial-up service. I am concerned that people may be paying much more for a satellite or wireless Internet service that is not nearly as effective as a landline service. Will the Minister tell the House how soon the landline service will be available to 100% of the people of Northern Ireland?

We have huge difficulties in accessing broadband services in part of the east Erne area and between Ederney and Leck.

I am told that in the village of Leck there is a dedicated line that provides the local controlled primary school with broadband access. However, no one else can get broadband access there. Is it possible to get broadband access from that point? Why is it not possible for the rest of the community in that area to get broadband access from it? Broadband access would make a huge difference to that community.

I have heard scores of stories about people having to go to Internet cafes to send work-related or study-related documents, despite having broadband access through a satellite system. That is unacceptable. It is clear that access to broadband services in that area is not effective. I appreciate the difficulties in West Tyrone that other Members have talked about, as we have the same difficulties in Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I gave the Member a wee bit of leeway because Fermanagh will probably be in the new West Tyrone.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): I do not know whether Fermanagh will be in West Tyrone or whether it will be the other way round; depending on where one lives, that might be important.

I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate, and I thank the Members who have taken part.

I commend the Member for securing a debate on this important matter. As Members have said, this issue was raised at Question Time yesterday. I reiterate that I want all of Northern Ireland to enjoy the benefits of high-quality telecommunications. Many Members have already referred to the benefits of the Internet. Indeed, good-quality broadband access is not just a benefit; it is almost a necessity for businesses, and, increasingly, for households.

I am proud of the fact that the policy adopted in Northern Ireland has resulted in our having 100% coverage. This is the first region in Europe to have such coverage — it does not exist anywhere else.

I thank Members for the way in which they have approached the debate. This area is technical and complex, but the more we discuss it, the more we understand the issues.

Several Members fleetingly mentioned 99% coverage and said that it is perhaps a wee bit misleading to talk about 100% coverage. I must put on record the fact that there is 100% geographical coverage in Northern Ireland. Everybody who wants access to broadband services can get access, whether it is the 99% who get it through telephone lines or the 1% who get it via satellite. However, it has emerged in this debate that there are issues with the speed and cost of the broadband services. I hope to deal with those issues as we proceed.

I thank Members for mentioning the way in which my officials have engaged on this matter. I want to put on record my appreciation of the work of officials; they have engaged on this matter daily and they have responded to enquiries at the public meetings that have been mentioned. That has resulted in greater clarification, and, in some cases, has resolved some issues in relation to access.

In the limited time that is available to me, I want to reiterate that the contract that the Department and BT have entered into requires that a service of at least 512 kilobytes per second is provided to any consumer at a monthly price not exceeding £27. I accept that nowadays one can get a broadband service for less than that, but that is the contract; the figure is capped at £27. It is service-based and technology-neutral. Thus far, the Government have invested £9.23 million. In my view, that is remarkable value for money in comparison with investments in other regions — not just in the UK, but in the Irish Republic as well.

The rationale for local broadband access was to create the conditions for the development of a knowledge economy. Broadband access effectively acts as a key enabler for business development, and there is a mounting volume of international evidence that supports the value of broadband as a key enabler. It is also worth pointing out that, in setting the benchmark for access at 512 kilobytes per second, DETI was seeking to deliver services comparable to any service that was commonly on offer at that time. That technology moves at a fair pace, and when that contract was entered into, that was deemed to be entirely reasonable — indeed, cutting edge.

We were largely constrained from delivering higher access speeds on the basis of Government intervention in what is a privatised and independently regulated industry. It must be borne in mind that the industry is privatised, and therefore Government intervention has to be justified on the basis of whether value for money will be achieved for the taxpayer.

It is technology-neutral, and, as has been mentioned, in practice, over 99% of existing or potential users will access their broadband services across their telephone lines, through what is known as ADSL. Of course, that is dependent on proximity to telephone exchanges. Normally, broadband services can be delivered to premises 7 to 8 kilometres from an exchange. In some instances, BT has successfully delivered the services up to 10 kilometres from an exchange.

However, in a number of rural areas, in particular, it is simply not possible to deliver a broadband service across telephone lines at the moment, and the alternative technology usually involves delivery by satellite. There has been much mention of “many” people in rural areas. We must get this matter into context. As I said at Question

Time yesterday, there are over 360,000 broadband connections in Northern Ireland. Some 320,000 are delivered by telephone lines, 40,000 are delivered via cable television services, and 680 use the satellite technology.

Although there are concentrations of satellite customers in the rural west, it is by no means unique to that region; satellite users are scattered across Northern Ireland and cover some 450 individual telephone cabinets.

I understand the argument for ensuring that every connection should be via telephone lines. However, the cost of upgrading each cabinet to enable delivery of services across telephone lines is estimated at £60,000 to £250,000 per cabinet. Assuming that we could lever the additional funding from the private sector — similar to that achieved through the contract with BT — that would require an investment of more than £25 million.

As I said, since the contract with BT was agreed, the costs of telephone delivery services have decreased to between £10 and £15 per month, which are the figures that have already been mentioned. Such decreases are to be expected in a competitive market; however, there has not been a similar reduction in the cost of satellite services.

Under the terms of the contract with BT, the monthly charge for services is capped at £27 per month and the maximum installation charge is £70. An equivalent service to households elsewhere in the UK costs £72 a month, with installation costs of £1,400. It is worth bearing that in mind when considering value for money and the advantage that people in Northern Ireland enjoy.

Issues were raised regarding the quality of the satellite product. The contract requires BT to commission an independent external review on behalf of the Department on the suitability of the satellite product. The report by Heron Consulting in January 2007 concluded that the satellite broadband service is as good as and, for some requirements, better than equivalent ADSL services, and that it is suitable for the requirements of the contract. That is worth putting on record.

When I investigated the matter, I found that many villages and towns across Scotland with populations of 10,000 to 15,000 do not have broadband access. Many western parts of the Irish Republic outside the big urban areas have no coverage at all. Even Japan — one of the most technologically advanced and pioneering countries in the world — does not have 100% broadband coverage.

I understand entirely the points that have been made. I reiterate that if Members become aware of people having problems, particularly business people or households, they should make my departmental officials aware of them, and they will seek to maintain the high standards that have already been set in trying to resolve some of those issues.

I understand that not having broadband access is seen as a disadvantage. However, the alternative is no service at all. In most other regions and countries that is the choice — they simply do not have access to broadband. In Northern Ireland, we took the decision to ensure that there would not be a digital divide in coverage.

The issues that have been raised need to be addressed. However, our broadband coverage is more advanced than that of our counterparts in the Irish Republic or in Scotland, England, Wales and elsewhere.

I assure Members that as we look to the future and to next-generation broadband, all those issues will be addressed through the private sector and with departmental officials working with our UK counterparts in an attempt to provide the best possible coverage across the Province. It should be borne in mind that this is a privatised industry and that value for money has to be considered. The importance of broadband to the economy, which several Members raised, should also be borne in mind.

The issue of stimulation was raised. The two strands to that programme are the implementation of a broadband fund to support small and medium-sized enterprises and the provision of supplier-neutral ICT advice. A significant number of small and medium-sized enterprises west of the Bann will be able to benefit from those services.

Economic appraisals that will examine the value of locating ICT centres in the west are under way.

Members referred to several meetings with representatives of, for example, Omagh District Council and Limavady Borough Council. I shall endeavour to continue such engagement with local government, business organisations, local chambers of commerce, etc. I remain interested in this matter, and I thank every Member who has taken part in the debate for his or her interest and concern. I hope that I have gone some way towards explaining and clarifying the situation, and have provided some assurance that the Department will work with local people to ensure, as far as possible, that they get the quality of service that they want.

Adjourned at 4.30 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 18 February 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Reorganisation of Health and Social Care

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that he wishes to make a statement regarding proposals for the reorganisation of the health and social care system in Northern Ireland and set out his plans for public health and the creation of a public health improvement agency for Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): This year, the National Health Service is celebrating its sixtieth birthday. It was another unionist, William Grant, the Minister of Health and Local Government, who introduced the Health Services Bill to Northern Ireland, saying:

“the time is ripe for a complete overhaul of our health services and the adoption of an ambitious and bold new design.”

I believe that the time is ripe again for a “bold new design”.

The major challenges facing health and social care warrant new thinking and new approaches. My proposals for the reorganisation of health and social care services in Northern Ireland are, therefore, a “bold new design”. On 4 February, I outlined to the Assembly my proposals for the reorganisation of health and social care: today, I am formally launching a 12-week consultation, which marks the start of a unique opportunity for the public, representatives, health and social care staff, patients, clients, carers and all other key stakeholders to have their say.

I thank all the people who work in health and social care in Northern Ireland for their day-to-day dedication. It takes special skills to work in what is often a challenging environment, and it takes a special person, with strong personal values in caring and compassion for others.

My proposals are intended to make it easier for those staff to do their work and, through their commitment,

expertise and professionalism, bring about real improvements in health for everyone in Northern Ireland.

William Grant was Minister of Health and Local Government. My proposals are intended to strengthen, renew and reinvigorate the role of local government in improving the health of the population. I am a councillor and an MLA, and I hear at first hand the concerns of my constituents and of colleagues on local councils and in the Assembly. Those concerns include healthcare infections such as MRSA and clostridium difficile, the worries of people struggling to care for elderly parents or children with disabilities, suicide rates, binge drinking, drug misuse and antisocial behaviour, and the stress of living in poor housing, with a fear of crime and, perhaps, little hope for the future.

Local government is already working with communities, helping to develop and shape services to achieve a better quality of life for people. Councillors know the importance of social and economic stability in creating vibrant, thriving, healthy communities. Most importantly, they know the needs of their populations. I want to harness the knowledge that they have gained from their communities. My proposals, therefore, reflect my desire to see local councils working closely with the new structures and playing a pivotal role in developing plans to improve public health.

What do I mean by “public health”? As William Grant said when he introduced his Health Services Bill in 1947, people:

“feel that they are sharing in a great adventure ... to serve the health and happiness of all our people.”

More than 60 years later, those words are still apt. Instead of “happiness”, we now talk about “well-being”. Public health, therefore, is what we do as a society to protect and improve the health and well-being of the population. It is much more than just treating or caring for people when they are sick. It is about working upstream, across a broad agenda, to tackle the underlying causes of ill health, improve people’s life skills and, therefore, life choices, prevent disease, and add years to life and life to years.

In 1974, only 16 of the people who died in Northern Ireland were over the age of 100, for example. By 2004, that figure had risen to 69. We have added years to life, and we now renew our efforts to add life to years. Of course, we have seen major improvements in public health. In 1900, life expectancy at birth was 47 — lower than the age of many Members here today. In 1947, when the Health Service began, life expectancy was 63 for men and 66 for women. By 2002, it had increased to 76 and 81, respectively. Deaths from TB have decreased from 932 in 1948 to seven in 2006. Infant mortality has fallen from 53 deaths per 1,000 in 1947 to five per 1,000 in 2004. That is a remarkable improvement.

The past 20 years have seen further significant improvements. Measles used to be commonplace — there were 655 cases in 1984. Now a GP is unlikely to see measles during his or her career; there were only 52 cases in 2006. The awful effects of rubella in pregnancy have been virtually eradicated. Whooping cough has almost disappeared; there were 1,244 cases in 1989 and only 28 in 2006.

However, major public-health challenges remain — some old, such as health inequalities, and some new, relating to lifestyles. Health inequalities are still rife. It is a fact that people in deprived areas, living in poor housing, who are unemployed and have lower education attainment, are more likely to suffer ill health and an early death than the rest of the population. It is simply not acceptable that in Northern Ireland today, life expectancy is determined by where you were born and where you live.

From my constituency office in Sandy Row, a walk across the constituency reveals a stark picture of the health inequalities that are endemic in many communities.

The facts speak for themselves: in the most deprived areas of South Belfast, life expectancy for men is 5% less than for the area as a whole, and, for women, the gap is over three years; the teenage birth rate is 36, compared with 11 for the area as a whole; the average suicide rate is around 24 deaths per 100,000 of population, compared with 13 in the constituency as a whole. The picture is similar in all Members' constituencies.

Therefore, the lifestyle challenges are stark. Around 20% of primary 1 children and 60% of adults are overweight. Smoking-related deaths account for around 15% of all deaths in Northern Ireland, and smoking rates among manual workers are still around 33% compared with 25% for Northern Ireland as a whole. Forty-three per cent of men and 33% of women binge drink. Northern Ireland rates of teenage pregnancy are among the highest in Europe. Suicide rates, particularly among young people, are rising.

However, it is not only our lifestyles that are damaging our health and placing heavy demands on the Health Service. There are other challenges, including the management of chronic conditions, such as heart disease and strokes, and the need to find new ways to help older people to live full, independent lives for as long as possible. I am pleased to say that we are already seeing a shift towards a more health-promoting service, with a greater emphasis on prevention and better management of long-term conditions. The quality and outcomes framework in the new contract for GPs is a clear example of that, and I congratulate the GPs and all the primary-care teams in Northern Ireland, who outperformed all other parts of the United Kingdom to achieve the highest levels of good-quality care.

Those challenges mean that we must be bold in designing our health and social care structures. I want a future where children born today in any part of Northern Ireland will have the same opportunities to survive their first year of life, play in a safe environment, make the most of their education and schooling, enjoy good mental and physical health, form supportive and positive relationships, secure satisfying and productive jobs, and live long, healthy and fulfilled lives. That is why I propose to put the public-health agenda at the heart of the health and social care system. We will use the yardsticks of improved health and well-being, and reduced health inequalities, to measure its success.

Key elements of the proposals that I announced on 4 February 2008 included a new regional health and social care board to replace the four health and social services boards; five local commissioning groups; a smaller, more sharply focused Department; a common services organisation that will provide a range of support functions for the Health Service; and strengthening the role of health and social services councils with representatives from local government.

Today, I want to talk in detail about the elements of those proposals to transform our ability to address the major public-health challenges that face Northern Ireland. The key public-health elements of my proposals are public health to be placed at the centre of policy and strategy, at ministerial and departmental level, and across Government, through the ministerial group on public health; better co-ordination and delivery of public-health services on the ground through a new multi-professional regional public health agency; a stronger role for local government in shaping health-improvement programmes and in tackling the underlying causes of ill health; robust arrangements to provide public-health support to the regional health and social care board and its local commissioning groups in developing their commissioning plans; and a continued role for health and social care trusts in developing and delivering health-improvement and health-protection programmes to meet key priorities.

The new regional public health agency will be an integral part of the health and social care system. It will drive the public-health agenda in a way that is not possible under current arrangements. It will bring together the wide range of existing public-health functions and provide a renewed and sustained focus on achieving key public-health goals.

12.15 pm

I propose three key functions for the agency, the first of which is health improvement. We need a co-ordinated and consistent approach to tackling the key public health challenges. The new agency, therefore, will build on the work of existing partnerships between health and other sectors to achieve demonstrable improvement in

priority public health measures; for example, better mental health, lower rates of suicide, lower levels of obesity, drug and alcohol misuse and, ultimately, better life chances for all.

Health improvement staff from the new agency will provide public-health support to the new regional board and its local commissioning groups as they develop their health improvement commissioning plans. The agency will be commissioned directly by me, or through the regional health and social care board, to provide public-health programmes at a regional and a local level.

The new agency will work closely with local government to assist and support councils in their role of improving the health and well-being of local communities. That enhanced support to local councils will be particularly important, as they will soon assume a lead role in community planning. To facilitate further links with local government, elected representatives will be appointed to the board of the new agency.

To deliver this health improvement agenda, the new agency will incorporate the functions of the Health Promotion Agency; the health and well-being improvement functions of the existing health boards, including community development and Investing for Health; the health action zone functions of trusts and boards; and the function of specialist improvement staff working with the trusts. However, to ensure an appropriate local presence, many health improvement staff from the new agency will be based locally, to enable them to work closely with colleagues in local commissioning groups, in the trusts and with local government.

The second function is health protection. The statutory health protection functions of the existing health and social services boards, the communicable disease surveillance centre and the healthcare-associated infection surveillance centre will transfer to a new health protection unit in the agency. Those transfers will ensure that there are clear lines of accountability for surveillance, prevention and control of infection, and for emergency planning. Above all, the new unit will improve the capacity to react quickly, and that will be vital. The recent outbreak of *clostridium difficile*, and the ongoing need to reduce all healthcare infections, reinforced the importance of being able to respond quickly and effectively. The health protection unit will provide a clear focus and strong, continued leadership in the battle against infection.

Therefore, the health protection unit will, furthermore, be an important regional resource, providing expert health-protection advice to the regional board, the trusts and the Department on prevention and control of infection, emergency planning, immunisation programmes, and other health-protection issues.

The agency's third function is in the provision of public-health support to commissioning and policy development. That is a key role of the agency, as public-health support to the board will ensure a strong, commissioning function and, therefore, the development of services that are credible to front-line staff and consistent with good practice. The consultation paper sets out a range of proposals to ensure that public-health support to commissioning is fully embedded in the work of the board. Legislation will require the board to seek public-health advice and commissioning; contracted sessional commitments from public-health staff in the new agency to the regional board and its local commissioning groups; co-location of public-health commissioning staff from the agency with staff from the regional board and local groups; and representation from the agency on the board of the regional board.

Those measures are designed to ensure that the regional board is fully able to reflect the public-health agenda and its commissioning plans, so that we achieve our goals for improved health and well-being. The establishment of the regional public health agency, therefore, provides an important new centre of public-health expertise, drawing together existing resources to create a focused, co-ordinated and sustained effort to tackle the challenges I outlined earlier: health inequalities, lifestyle choices, and the prevention and control of infection.

I have put particular emphasis on the important role that public health will play in the new arrangements for health and social care. However, I have proposed other important arrangements for the new structures, and those are described in more detail in the consultation paper. Consultation on those proposals starts today, and I encourage all those who have an interest to participate in that consultation process. I look forward to hearing as many views as possible and to implementing the important reforms that I have announced. I need the knowledge and experience of health and social care staff, patients, carers, local councillors and the many staff who work in the other sectors that contribute to the public-health agenda. That knowledge and experience will inform the consultation and contribute ultimately to my goal of establishing a world-class Health Service that is fit for the twenty-first century.

I have laid out my proposals for the future of health and social care in Northern Ireland. We now need the courage to seize the opportunity that we have been given and to dare to make changes in order that we may be radical and ambitious in our goals and can lay the foundations for a more healthy, more productive and more confident Northern Ireland. I, therefore, commend the proposals, and I look forward to the debate that will follow my announcement.

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

I welcome the Minister's statement. The Committee welcomed his original statement on 4 February that set out his proposals for the reorganisation of the health and social care system as putting an end to the uncertainty felt by staff who work in the sector. I am pleased that the Minister has moved quickly since then and that his proposals — in the form of the consultation document that was launched today — provide us with more detail.

I assure the Minister that the Health Committee will examine and scrutinise the proposals in detail, during both the consultation period and the passage through the House of any subsequent legislation. As part of the proposed reorganisation, the Minister has spelled out his plans for a new regional public-health agency that will drive forward the public-health agenda. The Minister has gone into some detail in highlighting the issues that he wants to see tackled under the new structures, particularly by the new regional public-health agency.

Many of those issues also concern the Health Committee. He mentioned anxieties about suicide rates and efforts that have been made to reduce them. He put great emphasis on the new agency's working closely with local government. At last week's meeting, the Committee had planned to hear from the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) about how local government can work with the Health Service to tackle suicide rates. Unfortunately, however, that session had to be postponed, given that the Committee discussed another pressing issue and one that the Minister has mentioned — the outbreak of *clostridium difficile*.

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

At Thursday's meeting, the Committee passed a resolution calling for the Minister to order a public inquiry into the outbreak of *clostridium difficile*. I welcome the indication that he gave in his weekend statement that he is now minded to order such an inquiry from the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA).

Tackling the public-health issues that face our society is not, of course, a task that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) can undertake on its own. That task must involve every Department and many other agencies in Northern Ireland. I ask the Minister to elaborate on how he intends to ensure that every Department takes its role in the task seriously and plays its part to the full.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, welcome the Minister's statement, and I commend him on presenting it so quickly after his original statement of 4 February.

I welcome the detail that the Minister has given on the public-health agency. As he said, that agency will take on — among other things — the role of the Health Promotion Agency, community development, work on the Investing for Health strategy, and the trusts' and boards' health action zone functions.

On 4 February, I asked the Minister about the role of the Investing for Health strategy in what will now be known as the regional public-health agency. I am glad to see that the Investing for Health strategy is one of the key functions of the new agency. Will the Minister confirm that the current good work that Investing for Health partnerships and health action zones carry out can only be harnessed, rather than eroded, under the remit of the proposed new public-health agency? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McGimpsey: First, I am grateful to Mrs Robinson for her expressions of support. I understand the need for cross-departmental working and support that fully. There is a ministerial group, which I chair, that promotes health. The key strategy within that is Investing for Health. I see that group continuing to play a vital role, because, as I said, cold, damp houses, poor educational attainment, unemployment, and so on all equal ill health. That is a matter that affects all Departments; no single Department can tackle the challenge on its own.

On Mrs O'Neill's point about Investing for Health and the health action zones, those are key partnerships and instruments for the future of public health. I should point out that the health action zones are managed by Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. There is a health action zone for north and west Belfast, and there is an argument to be made for having one for south and east Belfast. Disparity in provision exists, and one of the key ways forward through the new agency is a regional application of policy, with equity across the Province. Health action zones and the Healthy Cities initiative play an important part in that; however, local government will have a key role as well. Local councillors know their areas best.

As I have said repeatedly, Departments are very good at making policies and writing plans, but when it comes to delivery and implementation, the people on the ground do it best. Therefore, I see a big role for local government and an important role for local communities.

Mrs Hanna: I welcome the Minister's statement, and I hope that he will ensure that there is high degree of participation, particularly from front-line staff. They must be best informed, especially the nurses on the wards, the people who work in the community with the elderly, with children at risk and with those who have mental-health illness. I look forward to more detail on the functions of the new regional — I am trying to

remember the name of it — public-health agency and the role of the Health Promotion Agency and other bodies within it.

With regard to the control of the outbreak of *clostridium difficile* in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area and the action plan for hospitals, those measures demonstrate to the public that there is a new culture that enforces hand washing and educates people about what they must do. That is probably the best statement of the new regime.

Mr McGimpsey: I am grateful for Mrs Hanna's remarks. The multi-agency, partnership approach is one of the key areas in the proposals. The new agency's central drive will be to implement strategies on health improvement, health protection and support for commissioning. Health promotion is also very important.

I have initiated an immediate investigation into the *clostridium difficile* outbreak. We need answers quickly. I have also announced packages to tackle the outbreak, and I anticipate that people will notice a difference on the ground. They need to see the improvements rather than simply being told that they have been made.

Mr McCarthy: It will take some time for Members and the general public to get their heads round all those new names — Carmel Hanna struggled this morning, and I am sure that I will, too.

12.30 pm

Up until now, organisations such as healthy living centres and the Health Promotion Agency have excelled in providing leadership in health in local areas, and I would be grateful if the Minister could assure the House that they will continue to receive the support of his Department. The consultation document states that there will be:

“a stronger voice for local government in shaping health improvement programmes, and in tackling the underlying causes of ill-health”.

It is easy to say that, but can the Minister give more detail on how it will be delivered and achieved?

Mr McGimpsey: The new agency will subsume the Health Promotion Agency, the healthy living centres and the health improvement staff in boards and trusts, including health promotion, Investing for Health, community development and health action zones. The health protection staff in boards that work in the communicable disease surveillance centre and the healthcare-associated infection centre and the public health commissioning staff on boards will also be brought together as part of the new agency. Lots of good practice currently takes place, but it is being practised by a number of bodies. The new agency is the best way to ensure a critical mass and joined-in thinking.

Local government will play an important role throughout the structures. As I announced last week, the regional health and care board will have five local

commissioning groups, one roughly coterminous with each trust. Local government representatives will be on that board, and those groups will be there to commission for the health needs of their own area.

The original proposal that came from direct rule was that the four patient and client councils should be abolished and replaced by one. That would be a missed opportunity; I want their role to be much wider. I have set out two options in the consultation document: either one body with five local patient and client councils, or just five of the councils. There is a need for a regional as well as a local voice. However, local government and local councillors will also play an important role on those groups. I also see local councils or local government representatives being on the board of the Health Promotion Agency to influence the work of the agency. I also see the agency having a strong influence through representation into the board that includes commissioning. Local government will be properly harnessed in considering and having a vital role in planning and delivery. The expertise and knowledge of their communities and areas that local elected representatives can bring will no longer be ignored.

Mr Buchanan: I welcome the Minister's statement, and I commend him on moving so quickly into consultation. I hope that the opportunity will be opened up for front-line nursing staff to have a good input into the consultation. The Minister outlined the vital role that local government will have, and that is a good development. What estimates has the Minister made of the efficiency costs that will result from a new regional health body, and how many staff does he anticipate that the body will require?

Mr McGimpsey: Between 250 and 350 staff will be needed. Those are not new jobs; people will come from existing agencies, councils and trusts, and they will be brigaded together under the new agency. That does not mean that they have to move under one roof; they do not. They will work together under a new organisation, and that will be the complement. As they will not be new staff, the efficiencies that were initially set out of reducing 1,700 administrative jobs, saving £53 million, remain the same and will be achieved.

My proposals represent real value for money, which is one of the key issues. The public-health agenda focuses on the demands placed on our Health Service due to the ill health of the population. We can reduce those demands through protection, prevention, and so on. That is the best value for money that we can plan for.

There is a staff complement for the agency, but no new jobs will be created; therefore, the efficiencies will remain the same. I do not envisage any extra costs for the creation of the agency.

Mr Easton: I too welcome the Minister's announcement, and I look forward to putting more meat on the

bones when the issue comes before the Committee. Is the Minister creating another level of bureaucracy with the creation of the regional public health agency? If he is not creating another level of bureaucracy, how will the creation of such an agency reduce bureaucracy?

Mr McGimpsey: The original proposal under direct rule was for the creation of a large authority of around 2,000 staff. A few weeks ago, I announced a proposal of 350 to 400 staff. I am examining the public-health agenda and the complements in the public-health sector, and I am simply bringing them together under one agency. Those 250 to 350 members of staff will achieve better outcomes by working together cohesively.

The creation of the regional public health agency will not add another level of bureaucracy. Those people are already there doing their jobs in the trusts, boards and so on — I am merely bringing them together to work as one. That does not mean geographically bringing them together, but bringing them together in one board to give it the cohesion, drive and prominence that public health deserves. The agency will have an influence by statute on the new board's commissioning plans.

I am seeking to reduce bureaucracy, not increase it. The new body will be part of the delivery mechanism. In no way, shape or form will it create another level of bureaucracy.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his positive statement, which goes some way to further colouring in the outline that he gave us a couple of weeks ago. How will the new agency, by virtue of having people rightly embedded in the work of the regional care board and in the work of the different commissioning groups, not be embedded in such a way that it becomes disparately enmeshed in the bureaucracy in those different agencies? How will we ensure that its advocacy, challenging and championing role in health promotion and health protection is distinctive? The Minister and the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety will always be able to find out the agency's recommendations and arguments in the various decision-making processes, because if there is transparency, openness and accountability, the agency really will make a difference in influencing, informing and inspiring our health performance in the future.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank Mr Durkan for his comments. Openness, transparency and accountability are vital. The Health Service belongs to the people of Northern Ireland. They pay for it, and they have a right for clarity, transparency, openness and accountability. I keep that very much in mind. The agency will have a board, which will be appointed properly through the Minister and the Department. It will be answerable to the Minister and, therefore, to the Executive, to the Committee and to the Assembly.

The board will have an advocacy role in which it will champion the agency's cause. Furthermore, a statute will ensure that the board's views are taken into account when the local commissioning groups are commissioning the health needs of their communities and during the consideration of the recommendations contained in the public-health agenda.

Mr Shannon: The Minister's clear statement on the way forward is welcome. Many people feel that powers relating to health should be devolved to councils. Such a move would mean maximum accountability, and local knowledge, needs and interests could be catered for. Furthermore, councils could respond directly to the communities that they look after. I know that the Minister commented on that earlier, but has he — or will he — consider that point of view?

Mr McGimpsey: I have considered that option. I have been involved in local government for many years — as Mr Shannon knows, and as he has been — and I understand the importance of the local government function. I want to enhance that function. Throughout my political career, I have seen examples during direct rule of areas in which local government should have been involved properly, but were not. That shortfall has been particularly pertinent in the implementation and delivery of health services, and in instances where the local communities should have been involved in the tackling of such issues as health inequalities. For instance, it is unacceptable that a person's lifespan can be influenced by where he or she was born. Such issues are important, and that is why I see local government embedded firmly in the structures.

I have also democratised the layers; that is important, and it is different from the previous proposals. Many of the measures that I have introduced are different from the previous direct rule proposals, but one of the most radical differences is that direct rule Ministers refused to consult with the people. However, I have introduced a 12-week consultation process that will allow everyone to bring forward their views. That is also important.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the statement and congratulate the Minister on his vision. During the Budget debates, it became obvious how critical it is that the population engages positively with their health. Therefore I agree with the Minister's comments about the importance of local councils being involved in the delivery and implementation of the new policy. How will the Minister manage his new policy in the new council model? Is there a risk that his proposals are moving ahead and that other Departments are holding him back?

Mr McGimpsey: The engagement of the local population in their health is part of the over-arching strategy. I referred to the report by Dererk Wanless

who was commissioned many years ago by the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, to ascertain whether the country could afford a Health Service that offered free healthcare “from cradle to grave”, as envisaged by Aneurin Bevan. The Wanless Report concluded that the country could afford such a Health Service, but that it would depend on three factors. First, investment would have to be made in staff and training and in modern premises and modern equipment rather than in the maintenance of old equipment and old premises. Secondly, there had to be efficiencies in the service with no more duplication or waste. Thirdly — and most importantly — the Wanless Report stated that the local population had to be engaged in a responsibility for their own health. That is covered in my public-health agenda, which is the key part of the proposals that I made this morning.

I am following that general outline, because — in common with Members — I believe that a Health Service as envisaged by Bevan is one of the keys to citizenship and one of the most important attributes of citizenship to this country. That is the pathway that I am following.

12.45 pm

Concerning the review of public administration (RPA), it would be beneficial if I knew how many councils there will be. Currently, there are 26 councils and, under direct rule, it was proposed that there would be seven, which is an arbitrary figure set by the Secretary of State. It is fair to say that there will not be seven or 26, but some figure in the middle. I sit on the subgroup responsible for the review of public administration, and I am no wiser about those plans. However, the necessity to reach a decision is becoming critical. That lack of agreement is beginning to, and will increasingly, hamstring health proposals and, consequently, affect the population’s health and well-being. Having said that, regardless of whether the final number is 11 or 15, the Health Service will easily adapt to the agreed number of councils. However, it is important that such a decision is made, not least in relation to commissioning and today’s subject of the public-health agenda.

Mr Gallagher: I give the Minister’s statement a guarded welcome. With respect to the Minister, for people outside, this is an entirely different matter. Such proposals are likely to be perceived as an added layer of bureaucracy. Therefore, it is important that the new body’s role is clarified at an early stage, and that it proves that it has the teeth to tackle crucial health issues, such as health inequalities.

Such bodies are often considered, particularly by people on the margins, to be evidence of greater centralisation. When many people who work in health action zones or healthy-living centres hear today’s news,

they will feel that it threatens their funding and roles. Much of their power developed at ground level, and they will be concerned that that power will be taken from them and given to the centre. I would like to hear the Minister’s views on that.

In addition, considering the development of cross-border initiatives, particularly those being advanced under the Cooperation and Working Together (CAWT) umbrella, what role in the new structures does the Minister envisage for such organisations?

Mr McGimpsey: The Member is concerned that people will consider the proposals to be another layer of bureaucracy, which they are not. I will rely on people such as Mr Gallagher to be advocates for the new body. As the proposals work their way through the Committee and consultation processes, Mr Gallagher will begin to appreciate their merits, and that will be a way to reassure the population and those who work in the various relevant bodies.

These proposals will allow the job to be done better. There are some shining examples of public-health services working well; however, there are also examples in which they are less effective. One must only consider the list of health inequalities, such as life expectancy for populations in areas of disadvantage, in order to appreciate that our successes have been, to put it mildly, patchy. Therefore, something must be done. We must make progress in certain areas.

Many years ago, the Department produced the Investing for Health strategy, which was described as the best public-health strategy document in Europe, and, ever since, it has been producing successful results. The smoking cessation strategy, which was launched just over a year ago, is a shining example. There are many other such examples; however, the results are patchy and we must improve and up our game, not least because, if we want to keep a Health Service such as that which we have now, we will have to consider demand, and that will be about helping the population to take better care of themselves. Consultation will play a key role in all of that.

We have a cross-border food safety body, as well as other initiatives, which I am examining. My approach is simple: my responsibility is to the people of Northern Ireland. Where I see benefits to the people of Northern Ireland, I will support them. Cooperation and Working Together is one of those mechanisms: my counterpart, the Minister for Health and Children in the Irish Republic, Mary Harney, uses a similar approach.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

UK Energy Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provision of the Energy Bill dealing with gas storage which is contained in clause 35 of, and paragraph 5 of Schedule 1 to, that Bill as introduced in the House of Commons.

This legislative consent motion is solely concerned with the one transferred issue in the Energy Bill from Northern Ireland's perspective: that is, the restriction of the extent of the Gas (Northern Ireland) Order 1996. It is a somewhat complicated matter, so I will take a few minutes to explain it further.

The United Kingdom Government can legislate at Westminster for gas and carbon dioxide storage in Northern Ireland waters, even without a legislative consent motion, because the seabed is a reserved matter. Even though energy policy is transferred, the clear legal advice is that that reservation on the seabed gives Westminster enough reason to legislate.

If the UK Minister of State for Energy, Malcolm Wicks, legislates for gas storage in Northern Ireland territorial waters, the 1996 Order is effectively repealed; as lawyers would say, impliedly repealed. Of course, in order to achieve clarity, it is important that we include the provision in the UK Energy Bill, which is the purpose of this legislative consent motion.

It is undesirable to simply have two pieces of legislation that appear to conflict with each other. It is better that the position is clarified with a small amendment to the 1996 Order. The amendment to the Energy Bill amends the definition of gas storage facility in article 3 of the 1996 Order, to ensure that it is clear that offshore gas storage facilities in Northern Ireland territorial waters are excluded. That makes it clear that there is no conflict between the two regimes. Having a legislative consent motion is, therefore, necessary, because Northern Ireland legislation is being amended. It also respects the position of the Assembly.

The UK Government could legislate without a legislative consent motion, but in my view, that would be the wrong thing to do. They have agreed that the legislative consent motion is required. Assenting to a legislative consent motion gives Northern Ireland its place. If we do not agree to it, the UK Government will legislate anyway, without the amendment to the 1996 Order. In those circumstances it would be less clear which regime would apply, resulting in mixed signals to the industry. Nevertheless, the advice is clear about the actual legal position.

No meaningful powers will be sacrificed. The Gas (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 was never designed to deal with the offshore environment in any case. There is a case to be made that the UK Government may already have powers to license gas storage under our waters under the Petroleum Act 1998. It is also unlikely that there would ever be more than one or two such facilities in Northern Ireland waters, so the exercise of those powers by the UK Department for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) would only happen extremely infrequently.

My aim throughout the entire process has been to consider what is best for Northern Ireland. I believe that there are practical advantages for Northern Ireland in joining the United Kingdom-wide regime for offshore gas storage and unloading and carbon capture in storage. It is a tried and tested regime, which works well for oil and gas production. It makes full use of BERR's expertise in those areas. It gives Northern Ireland value for money by not having to replicate a regime that exists elsewhere. As I said a moment ago, it does not materially dilute or constrain our powers.

The Northern Ireland dimension will be well represented in the decision-making process on any project within our waters. I have secured from the Energy Minister a commitment to a memorandum of understanding that will set out how the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform will work with relevant Northern Ireland authorities in the event of any proposal for a gas storage or unloading facility in Northern Ireland territorial waters. We have ensured that the Northern Ireland perspective will be taken into account.

In conclusion, I believe that that outcome is the best available outcome for Northern Ireland. The best way to respect the devolved settlement would be for the Assembly to assert its devolved position and actively consent to the restriction on the Gas (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 via the legislative consent motion. I therefore ask honourable Members to assent to the legislative consent motion. I beg to move.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr P Maskey): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will outline the Committee's response on this matter, after which I will say a few words from a personal point of view.

On 13 December 2007, the Committee considered a paper, and received a briefing, from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) energy division on the UK Energy Bill. The Committee was invited to note the various elements of the Bill and their implications for the North, and to agree that a legislative consent motion should be sought to respect the devolution settlement and make a limited restriction

to the extent of the Gas (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 offshore. The Committee agreed with that recommendation, following which DETI secured the Executive's agreement to the legislative consent motion.

Further to that, the Minister wrote to the Committee to inform it of the introduction of the Energy Bill and to set out the terms of the legislative consent motion. On 14 February, the Committee approved the terms of the legislative consent motion. On behalf of the Committee, I want to emphasize that the motion is restricted to that sole transferred provision, which makes a limited restriction on the extent of the Gas (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 offshore. It is one very little window that deals with the singular issue of offshore gas storage and does not deal with the detail and wide range of the UK Energy Bill.

In particular, the nuclear power issue has been raised in different quarters, and I again emphasise that the legislative consent motion is in no way connected to the nuclear provisions of the UK Energy Bill. Agreeing to the motion does not imply agreement or assent to the other elements of the Bill.

It is important to note that refusal to assent to the legislative consent motion will not change the position in respect of nuclear power in the North — those clauses will come into operation if Parliament agrees them.

I will now make some personal comments. Recently, the nuclear energy issue has been, for want of a better phrase, blown up in some of the press coverage.
[Interruption.]

Mr S Wilson: There would be some fallout when that happened.

Mr P Maskey: Another fall-out, Sammy. That is right.

I take this opportunity to call on the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister and the Environment Minister to adopt an approach similar to that of John Gormley, the Minister with responsibility for nuclear energy in the South.

Mr S Wilson: And for putting his waste over the border.

Mr P Maskey: The all-island approach could, and should, be taken, because the issue is too important for us not to take it seriously. Alex Salmond made it very clear that there is no chance of more nuclear power stations being built in Scotland. That is a very welcome statement, and, as a close neighbour of Scotland, we can feel safe. The DOE has responsibility for planning, and Minister Dodds has the responsibility for energy solutions. I hope that the Ministers in the Executive can take the same approach as has been taken in other areas on these islands.

Just to clear up any confusion: I believe that investment in renewable energy is the best way forward. However,

more research and work must go into that sector, because it is of the utmost importance that we make those decisions properly and make them well. It has been mentioned that nuclear power plants could be handed over to the private sector. Again, I want to put on record Sinn Féin's concern that profit could be put ahead of health and safety issues. We are all too aware of the disasters that nuclear energy has created on these islands in the past.

I thank the Minister for his statement today.

Mr S Wilson: I welcome the motion that the Minister has brought to the House. It is nice to see that even Sinn Féin is quite happy to integrate with the United Kingdom on this issue.

When it comes to wider energy issues, it is clear that despite Sinn Féin's separatist claims and aims, it recognises that the fortunes of Northern Ireland are inextricably linked in many ways to the rest of the United Kingdom.

1.00 pm

It is important to ensure that Northern Ireland does not get caught out by fluctuations in the energy market. As Northern Ireland is dependent on gas, oil and coal, a way must be found to ensure that there is some means of storing fuel in order that, in the event of short-term fluctuations in supply, the power stations can continue to operate. I have a particular interest in the issue, because one site that may be considered for storing gas is off the East Antrim coast.

Will the Minister detail what powers the Assembly, his Department and other Departments will have in relation to the planning applications for such sites? Will the applications be handled outwith Northern Ireland? Will it be his Department, or a Department located in another part of the United Kingdom, that deals with any safety concerns that people may express? People are concerned that if it is the latter, they may not have the same opportunities for direct representation. Perhaps the Minister will spell out to the Assembly the implications for planning, health and safety and other associated works.

Mr Durkan: I welcome the points made by the Member, and I am glad that he is sensitive to the fact that people may have health and safety concerns about storing gas under the seabed. I wish that he would also accept that people have legitimate health-and-safety concerns about the proposals — which he supports — to introduce nuclear power.

Mr S Wilson: There is a difference between the two subjects: any proposals to generate nuclear power in Northern Ireland will, of course, be subject to the scrutiny of the Department of the Environment and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I was simply asking whether there would be some local input.

Let us talk about nuclear power. I am the sole Member of the Assembly to have received a prestigious award from the Green Party — at least, I think that it is prestigious, but perhaps it is not — in recognition of the views that I have expressed on the subject. I digress a little, but then the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee was allowed to talk about the nuclear power element of the UK Energy Bill.

It strikes me as odd that those who jump up and down about nuclear energy are the same people who jump up and down about CO₂ emissions — I see that the Member for North Down Brian Wilson is nodding in agreement — and about wind farms, because they spoil the environment, and about the tidal generation of power, because it disturbs marine life. People who object to nuclear power cannot have it every way. They do not want fossil fuels, renewable energy or nuclear power. Do they want people to live in the dark? That seems to be their only alternative.

Dr McDonnell: Does the Member accept that the emissions from nuclear fission are slightly more toxic than carbon dioxide?

Mr S Wilson: I do not know what science journals the Member opposite reads. Maybe he gets his information from ‘The Beano’ and ‘The Dandy’. Wherever it comes from, it is certainly not the view of the experts.

A proper debate about this issue is required. Members want economic growth and better standards of living for people. To achieve that, more energy will have to be consumed, whether we like it or not. If the Green Party does not want that energy to come from fossil fuels or renewable fuels —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That is not the subject of this debate, Mr Wilson. If you wish to table a motion about that issue, please do so. In the meantime, please return to the motion that is under debate.

Mr S Wilson: I apologise. I was waylaid by the remarks of the Members opposite. Maybe I have gone down a cul-de-sac. Perhaps we will debate that issue in the future.

The Minister’s proposals will ensure that we are able to have storage facilities for the kind of fuels that we currently use. Members need to be made aware of what planning and health and safety safeguards there will be. Subject to that, I welcome the motion.

Dr McDonnell: I notice that my learned friend opposite did not answer the question about the nuclear particles.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Dr McDonnell, you are straying off the subject. Please stick to the motion in hand.

Dr McDonnell: I recognise that the Minister has indicated that the motion is a mere technicality. For

reassurance, particularly for members of the public who may not always read between the lines, will the Minister state whether his proposal weakens the control of offshore gas storage? Will there be any difference in the regulation — have we conceded all control of offshore gas storage to become part of a uniform UK package, leaving us responsible only for onshore storage? Does this affect the gas interconnector, and will it affect the building of another gas interconnector? Will the gas that flows across the Irish Sea be affected?

Without straying too far off the subject, I ask the Minister to agree to a review of general energy supplies. Energy-supply companies have used instability and the rising prices of energy to rip off the public.

The issue of nuclear energy and renewable energy needs to be considered seriously. Motions on that issue may be tabled in the future, but it would be useful if there were also a clear steer coming from the Department.

Mr Neeson: I support the motion. This is an important issue, of significance to East Antrim. As Sammy Wilson said, plans are already being made to identify sites in that area.

It is important that greater security of supply be confirmed. That is really what the motion is about. Prior to the suspension of the Assembly, the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment was the driving force behind the extension of natural gas supplies, not only to the north-west, but to all other parts of Northern Ireland. The South/North natural gas pipeline provides facilities to develop the network throughout Northern Ireland.

Times have certainly changed. I remember ploughing a lonely furrow in the 1982 Assembly when I supported the linking of the Kinsale natural gas pipeline to Northern Ireland. At that time, I was lambasted by members of the DUP. I welcome the changing times.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his statement.

The Energy Bill could affect the fishing industry, and some fishing organisations have put their concerns to me. The Minister said that the gas-storage facility will extend to 12 nautical miles from the shore. If that is so, fishing organisations need to know how, or whether, that will affect them. As we all know — and those who do not know should know — Northern Ireland’s fishing industry is under pressure due to job losses, restriction on the number of days on which boats can go to sea, smaller quotas and over-policing by the Royal Navy and the fisheries division of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). The fishing industry is concerned that it will be directly affected by the Energy Bill and that the bureaucracy from it could, in theory, and perhaps reality, destroy the industry.

Mr Dodds: I thank the Members who participated in the short, but interesting, debate, which managed to encompass some major issues in the short time allocated to it

I reiterate what the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mr Paul Maskey, and other Members said — the legislative consent motion refers to only a specific part of the Gas (Northern Ireland) Order 1996. The Department is clarifying and asserting the devolved position of the Assembly. Agreeing to the legislative consent motion does not mean agreeing with the policy content of the reserved matters in the Energy Bill, the most prominent of which are the nuclear decommissioning clauses.

Similarly, agreeing with the legislative consent motion does not mean that Northern Ireland is being lined up for nuclear power. In the debate, there was a brief exchange about nuclear power, and although it is an important issue that many people are concerned about, it is not relevant to this debate. Interestingly, when the Department of Trade and Industry carried out its consultation on nuclear power, attendances at the meetings were not very high. In that sense, the public did not seem concerned about nuclear power; although some may feel that there is no prospect of it happening anyway.

The Assembly can rest assured that, as Mr Sammy Wilson stated, two key consents are required for nuclear power in Northern Ireland. Although nuclear power is an excepted matter and will never be devolved to Northern Ireland, any proposal to build a nuclear power station in Northern Ireland would require consent for planning permission and permission for electricity generation. Responsibility for those rests with the Minister of the Environment and me, respectively. Without our consent, no nuclear power station could be built here.

To clarify, the Energy Bill is making it clear that operators are fully responsible for the costs of the decommissioning of any new nuclear power station as well as waste management and disposal in the lifetime of the station. No one will disagree that, in those circumstances, the burden of cost should lie with the operators of the station instead of the taxpayer.

1.15 pm

The provision relating to nuclear energy in the UK Energy Bill is sensible, but it is not the main issue before the House. However, since the matter has been raised, I hope that what I have said has allayed concerns. I welcome the constructive approach being taken by Members.

I will deal briefly with several points that have been raised. I agree that the focus should be on renewable energy. That is the main focus for Northern Ireland in

relation to energy generation, and it is what the recently announced grid study is concerned with.

Mr Sammy Wilson referred to the situation offshore at East Antrim. The most likely location will be in inland waters, and the Energy Bill will not cover that. My Department intends to legislate separately for inland waters, with full consultation with the Assembly, which should take care of those concerns. Planning considerations do not apply offshore. Therefore, the memorandum of understanding, which I referred to, will ensure that all projects are subject to full consultation with Northern Ireland authorities and should include health and safety issues.

Dr McDonnell raised several issues, including renewable sources of energy. As I said in my opening remarks, there are practical advantages for Northern Ireland in joining the UK regime for offshore gas and storage, primarily because it has the expertise. We would have to set up infrastructure and backup systems for situations that might never happen, or only happen once in a blue moon. It would not make sense not to make full use of BERR's expertise in those areas. It is a value-for-money issue — we would not be replicating a regime that exists elsewhere.

The focus should be on renewable sources of energy. It is imperative for Northern Ireland, not only to comply with EU directives, including the recent proposal for a directive on renewable energy and other measures aimed at tackling climate change, but to reduce its dependency on imports of finite fossil fuels. There is an imperative to do that, and we are committed to mainstreaming renewable energy sources as part of the future energy mix of Northern Ireland. We must recognise that there will be an energy mix. Northern Ireland is deriving electricity as a result of nuclear generation. Therefore, it is a case of finding the appropriate mix. It is imperative, because of EU directives and other reasons, to do more on renewable energy, while recognising that it is a matter of balance.

Dr McDonnell mentioned the electricity interconnector. However, that has no impact on the Energy Bill. Mr Neeson referred to gas pipelines and the interconnector. My principle, and that of my DUP colleagues, has always been that we should co-operate with the Irish Republic on matters of mutual best interest. If it is in our mutual best interest to do so, and if they will benefit us economically, and in other ways, then we should support such projects. We have no difficulty with that.

The DUP takes issue with Mr Neeson and some of his colleagues over the drive towards North/South co-operation for purely political reasons. My party will not support that. The North/South electricity connector and other energy connections provide greater security of supply, reduce costs, and link into the greater UK/

Irish Republic/European energy market. Therefore, those are very much east-west issues as well as value-for-money issues, and they are in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland. For that reason, the DUP will support the interconnector.

I listened carefully to what Mr Shannon said about the impact on fishing. A memorandum of understanding will be drawn up, and I welcome suggestions on what that should contain. I will be happy to liaise further with him on that matter.

I hope that I have provided reassurance on the various issues that have been raised. It is important that Northern Ireland shows that it is open for business on key energy security of supply infrastructure.

The Energy Bill gives clear signals to industry on investment; it is about encouraging and supporting long-term investment in a wide range of energy infrastructure. Assenting to the motion will make it clear which regime will apply in Northern Ireland's waters. Nothing discourages investment faster than a lack of clarity. I took the view that it was important for Northern Ireland to be in on this Bill. Every Government is likely to be concerned about the security of their energy supplies over the coming decades. The Energy Bill is one step towards ensuring that Northern Ireland will be able to keep the lights on.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provision of the Energy Bill dealing with gas storage which is contained in clause 35 of, and paragraph 5 of Schedule 1 to, that Bill as introduced in the House of Commons.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I understand that media outlets are confirming that junior Minister Ian Paisley has tendered his resignation. Given that the post of junior Minister is an appointment of the Assembly, will you confirm whether and when there will be a ministerial statement from the First Minister, or a personal statement from Mr Paisley Jnr, informing the House of today's important developments?

Mr Deputy Speaker: At this very moment, the Speaker is considering the issue, and I have no doubt that he will report to the House later.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Roads Maintenance Funding

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes for a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes for a winding-up speech.

Mr Cobain: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Regional Development to review roads maintenance funding and to ensure that sufficient funding will be made available in line with the Roads Service structural maintenance funding plan.

This is, perhaps, a more boring subject than the last one. However, the motion is important and significant for a variety of reasons. Roads maintenance is not an optional extra or an unnecessary add-on. It is intrinsic to the operation of a modern highway system that is fit for purpose and delivers the sort of basic infrastructure that this Province needs in order to attract inward investment and create jobs and wealth for our people.

There are provable links between infrastructure development and economic expansion. Forty years ago, France had the worst roads in Europe. The French tackled the problem and created a roads system that is the envy of many countries. The French attribute the growth of their economy, in part, to the development of their country's infrastructure. The quality of road-building and road-finishing in France is far in advance of that in this country.

The French system is so well developed that it provides alternative routes for heavy traffic, especially in urban locations, and that has worked wonders for the economy and in easing traffic congestion in towns. The French roads network is designed on a grid system, which has been the driving force behind a regional distribution of industry that is far healthier than that in this Province.

The point is that roads design and maintenance are critical to economic success. That is why one can see so much highway development in the newly emergent countries of eastern Europe. For example, Bulgaria is constructing a new superhighway into Romania, which involves some major engineering works and bridge construction. That country has not missed the point about the link between the development and maintenance of good roads and economic development.

The Irish Republic has also developed its roads infrastructure by leaps and bounds. The quality of

roads in the South is commonly contrasted with the state of those in Northern Ireland. That is a reversal of the situation of 40 years ago.

Maintaining roads is as important as building them. We need to learn what will happen if we do not maintain our infrastructure properly. Underinvestment in the railways has taught us that lesson already. Such underinvestment leads to deterioration, which in turn creates the need for massive investment at a later stage. After 30 years of neglect under direct rule, one would have thought that we would have recognised the consequences of underinvestment. Planned expenditure on structural roads maintenance for this year — 2007-08 — stands at only £3,800 a mile. That is only 70% of what the figure was four years ago. This year, it is planned that £59 million will be spent on roads maintenance overall, compared with the £82 million that was spent in 2003-04. That represents a 28% cut.

The story of that decline can be traced, year-on-year, back to 2003. In that year, the Department for Regional Development spent £82 million on structural roads maintenance; by 2004, the figure had declined to £73 million; in 2005, it had declined further to £70 million; in 2006, it fell to £65 million; and in 2007, it declined, yet again, to £59 million.

Worse than that, the amount that is currently spent on structural roads maintenance is a small fraction of what is spent elsewhere in the United Kingdom. In England, £13,000 a kilometre is spent, which equals £20,000 a mile; in Wales, spend is £7,600 a kilometre, or £12,000 a mile. Those figures compare with the £3,800 that is spent on each mile in Northern Ireland. Therefore, Northern Ireland spends just 18% of what is spent in England and 31% of what is spent in Wales. Those figures mean that, by English standards, Northern Ireland should be spending £331 million a year on roads maintenance, instead of the £59 million that we propose to spend in this financial year.

Ring-fencing a roads budget of £110 million a year for three years would enable us to spend in three years what the English spend in one. By any standards, that is a pitiful figure.

An explanation for that is required from the Minister. By "explanation", I do not want him to say that he does not have the money, which is the usual mantra that many Ministers recite. I ask the Minister where the money is spent and how exactly he arrived at the current set of priorities for the Department, which has pushed structural roads maintenance so far down the pecking order of necessary works. We are all concerned at the apparent complacencies of the Department on the issue. A first-rate roads infrastructure is a critical factor in attracting inward investment and jobs. It is bad enough that Northern Ireland cannot compete on a level playing field with the Irish Republic on

corporation tax; it is even worse when the amount that the Minister spends to maintain the Province's roads is only 18% of what is spent on each mile in England.

One has to wonder at the Department's priorities. The lack of proper investment will have immediate consequences. In 2006, the Department for Regional Development (DRD) spent over £100,000 in settling claims, and a further 136 claims were still outstanding. In 2007, it spent £73,000 on claims. Since 2005, the Department for Regional Development has paid out almost £333,333 in personal injury and vehicle claims. We hope that the Department has not made the appalling calculation that, in order to justify its inaction over structural roads maintenance, an acceptable amount of public money can be paid in damage claims.

That is why I proposed the motion. Unless a ring-fenced, dedicated budget is applied to structural roads maintenance, the Province will soon resemble a Third World country. How will that resonate with the investment conference that is to be held here in May?

Mr Dallat: I beg to move the following amendment:
Insert at end:

"; and further calls for an urgent review of end of year management of funds to ensure that a more strategic approach is applied to the way in which maintenance schemes are undertaken immediately before the end of the financial year."

I thank Mr Cobain and his colleagues for bringing this timely motion before the Assembly. I hope that the SDLP's amendment is accepted.

1.30 pm

The lack of roads maintenance and the failure to operate early intervention are two of the more frequent issues that elected representatives must deal with daily. A lack of funding to tackle serious roads maintenance is costing millions of pounds every year because damage that is left unattended leads to costly repairs, if they are eventually carried out. Indeed, recently, the Department gave a presentation to my local council that illustrated the seriousness of the problem. It has got to the stage where the Department would dearly love to abandon many of the roads that are under its control.

Of course, a price cannot be put on the cost in road deaths and serious injuries. It is not possible to measure in monetary terms the grief, the physical and emotional pain, the days lost from work, the pressures on the emergency services, the horrendous cost to hospitals, and, of course, as Mr Cobain mentioned, the high cost of insurance. It cannot be said for certain how much of that is attributable to the less-than-satisfactory roads maintenance programme. However, I doubt whether anyone will take exception to the argument that the risk of road-traffic incidents is significantly higher when roads have lost most of their adhesive properties as a direct result of neglect, damage by exceptional hot

or cold weather and the haphazard approach in which money is spent on their repair.

The SDLP put forward its amendment because it is particularly concerned about the mad scramble at the end of the financial year to spend money with a less-than-satisfactory approach as to how that is done. How can any industry cope with the demands of a customer, which is the Department for Regional Development in this case, when its purchasing strategy is reduced to impulse buying if a windfall of money becomes available at the end of the financial year?

Not only are lives and money on the line; so, too, are jobs in the roads industry. The under-usage of plant and machinery costs millions of pounds. They are used little because of the stop/start approach to road maintenance, particularly at the end of the financial year. The road maintenance programme is also the victim of lack of co-operation between utilities, which adds greatly to the cost of roads maintenance, the horrendous damage to roads and, dare I say it, to death and serious injury. The Minister will be aware of several Public Accounts Committee reports on the seriousness of the damage that is caused to roads as a direct result of failure to enforce that utilities stick to their undertakings to reinstate roads.

The Minister must look seriously at end-of-year management of funds. Given that all Departments operate resource accounting, surely it is possible to carry forward unspent money into a new financial year when there are good arguments for doing so and it is short term. I hope that the Assembly has moved beyond the old receipts-and-payments method of controlling finances; that it has progressed from Mr Micawber's financial philosophy of measuring income and expenditure.

The SDLP supports the motion and hopes that the amendment is accepted by the Ulster Unionist Party. My party believes that, for all of the reasons that I have explained, there is an urgent need to take a strategic approach to how money is spent on road maintenance, not only for the sake of the people who use roads but for the contracting firms that employ many hundreds of people to carry out that work. Bad practices must be left behind and progress made towards a more strategic and intelligent approach.

Mr Bresland: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. There is a serious need to invest in improvement of the roads infrastructure, especially in the west of the Province. The Programme for Government sets out a clear commitment to improve the roads infrastructure. Roads remain a major issue in my constituency.

I welcome the considerable investment that has been made in upgrading the A5, which links Ballygawley and Omagh and carries on to Strabane and Londonderry.

That will provide a considerable opportunity for my constituency of West Tyrone, alongside further investment and the recently commenced improvement of the road from Dungannon to Ballygawley.

In 1965, the west lost its rail network, and the commitment was given to improve the roads infrastructure there. It has taken more than 40 years to honour that commitment.

Although I welcome the investment in the A5, I am concerned about lack of investment in road and bridge maintenance. That lack of investment will have a serious negative impact on a number of areas in West Tyrone, such as Newtownstewart, which is a historic town at the very heart of my constituency. The town has three main entrances from the recently constructed A5 bypass, and two have been converted into single-lane carriageways due to structural problems with the Abercorn Bridge and Moyle Road. The Minister for Regional Development advised me that improvements were five years away and would cost £1.3 million. The single carriageways have created an extremely negative impact for Newtownstewart, especially in the business community.

It is intolerable that the Department for Regional Development cannot find £1.3 million to solve those problems. Newtownstewart, like many towns in West Tyrone, is struggling to attract investment and faces major challenges from larger towns such as Omagh, Strabane, Enniskillen and Londonderry.

I urge the Minister to find the necessary funding to address the problems facing Newtownstewart and the many other issues relating to roads infrastructure and road maintenance in West Tyrone.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Members for bringing the motion to the Chamber. I welcome the opportunity to speak on funding for road resurfacing across the North. I have every confidence that my party colleague Conor Murphy is determined to use his ministerial position to address the failures of successive direct rule Administrations.

Mr Wells: Did the Minister write that for you?

Mr W Clarke: What was that, Jim?

As I said, direct rule Ministers failed to invest properly in our roads network.

I am from South Down, which is mainly a rural constituency. The workforce commutes daily to Belfast and other large urban centres such as Newry and Lisburn. I realise that our inadequate roads network is a significant factor that is stifling local economic growth.

The Mourne is an area of outstanding natural beauty, and there is a massive potential for tourism in South Down. However, that can be achieved only

through a joined-up approach to spatial development. There needs to be significant investment in the roads infrastructure to ensure that visitors across the island can make the journey to the north-east coast without having to endure a bad roads infrastructure.

It is important that the Department for Regional Development, with the Assembly's support, takes the necessary progressive and innovative steps in planning for the future. That means implementing policies that make use of cross-border initiatives which can have significant benefits for our economy. I welcome, for example, the recent announcement of almost €400,000 for a feasibility study for a bridge at Narrow Water in Warrenpoint, a signature project, which Sinn Féin has been to the fore in lobbying for. Were it to be realised, the project would have major benefits for South Down and for the east border region.

We also need to secure capital funding for a relief road around the southern side of Newry — I just thought I would get that in — to ensure the continuing expansion of a city that has grown significantly in the past 10 years.

The Department's priority must be to maintain existing services and the underlying structure of roads and footways that is essential for the social and economic well-being of the North. I welcome that this is a high priority for the Minister who has proven his commitment to that goal by his willingness to address a number of local issues in my constituency — I thought that I would get that in as well.

However, clearly all of the Department's programmes are under-resourced, and there is no ideal or painless solution to be found to meet the improvements that are necessary to our less-than-adequate roads network.

I commend the Minister for putting in place measures that should ensure an equitable distribution of road maintenance funding across the North. DRD must be more proactive in its approach to highlighting the importance of networking to other Ministers, the business community and, of course, the general public. Furthermore, the road construction industry must have certainty in workflow and factual budgets in order to ensure the delivery of quality work programmes. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCarthy: I support both the motion and the amendment, and congratulate John McCallister on giving us the chance to debate this important subject. I thank the Minister for being in the Chamber.

In my constituency, road maintenance is the number one complaint, after health. The Minister was due to visit my locality a few weeks ago. Unfortunately, for health — *[Interruption.]*

Pardon?

Mrs I Robinson: Our locality.

Mr McCarthy: Yes.

The Minister was due to visit our locality a few weeks ago. Unfortunately, the Minister, for health reasons, was unable to fulfil that important engagement. However, he has assured me that he will visit my constituency —

Mr Elliott: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCarthy: I have only started, but I will give way.

Mr Elliott: I am just looking for clarification. Was it the Health Minister who could not attend your constituency because of roads issues, or the roads Minister because of health issues?

Mr McCarthy: It was the Minister who is in our presence at the moment. I hope that he is now back to full health, because I want to see him in my constituency as soon as possible.

The starting point is that the roads in Strangford, and particularly the Ards Peninsula, were built many years ago — for horses and carts. Because of the lack of even minimal maintenance over those years, that is all they are good for now. We are crying out for immediate help to get the roads back up to a reasonable standard.

As has already been said, Roads Service is paying out a huge amount of cash in compensation claims. Surely that money would be better spent, in the first instance, on providing the rate- and taxpayer with the improved road surface, to which we are all entitled? The Minister and his Department must know that bad roads create the danger of road accidents. God knows that Northern Ireland has had far too many road deaths and serious injuries. Maintenance could help to prevent further fatalities on many roads.

The A20 is the main road from Portaferry to Newtownards. That is the only road on which we can travel to get to work. The A2 runs from Portaferry to Donaghadee via the Irish Sea coast. I am going to mention a few names, and I have three minutes in which to do it. These are the roads in my constituency that are crying out for help. *[Interruption.]*

Yes. Rubane Road; Gransha Road; Lisbane Road; Loughdoo Road; Cloughey Road; Portaferry Road, Cloughey; Abbacy Road; Ardminnan Road; Deer Park Road — if anyone in the Chamber feels that these roads are not ready for maintenance, please interrupt me. Drumardan Road; Dunevly Road; Inishargy Road; Manse Road; Glastry Road; Parsonage Road; Tullycross Road; Bar Hall Road; Kearney Road; Lough Shore Road; Tullymally Road; Tubber Road — I have a picture of Tubber Road, although I am sure that the Minister cannot see it. It is an absolute disgrace, with water three-quarters of the way across. My colleagues will know exactly what I am talking about. I will give

the Minister this picture before I leave. It is unbelievable, and it is continuously like that.

Ballygalget Road; Ballyblack Road; Ballyrussley Road; Ballyhemlin Road; Ballyegan Road; Ballygelagh Road; Blackstaff Road; Ballyeasborough Road; Upper Ballygelagh Road. I have run out of roads. I can assure the Minister that almost every road in my constituency needs a lot of maintenance.

1.45 pm

Mr Shannon: The Member left out two roads: the Mountain Road and the Tullynagardy Road, which are equally as bad as the roads that he mentioned.

Mr McCarthy: I apologise to the Member and to any constituents whose areas have not been included on my list. I assure the Minister that the vast majority of roads not only on the Ards Peninsula but in the Strangford constituency as a whole need much maintenance. I appeal to the Minister to make every effort to ensure that our roads are suitable for modern-day traffic rather than the horse and cart.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the Member's friends are delighted that he does not have "one for the road".

Mrs I Robinson: Kieran McCarthy, once again, thinks that the world begins and ends in the lower Ards Peninsula. We represent a vast constituency, but the Member mentions only Kircubbin and the lower Ards Peninsula. However, I like to battle for the entire Strangford constituency.

I welcome the opportunity to address the Assembly on one of the most commonly raised matters in my constituency office — the condition of the roads network across Northern Ireland. Given the overwhelming rural nature of Northern Ireland and the lack of a comprehensive rail network, our roads are the veins and arteries that facilitate day-to-day life. There is, therefore, a greater emphasis and importance placed on the quality and condition of our roads compared with some other regions of the United Kingdom. Our roads network facilitates the maintenance and growth of our local economy as produce and services are taken to, and brought from, every corner of Northern Ireland.

The majority of complaints that I receive, however, are from local residents who express frustration that they pay their taxes in return for roads whose maintenance is either inadequate or non-existent. I understand that it would be fantastic for Government to have bottomless pockets of funding to complete all the work that Members would like to see done. However, I appreciate that, as for any Department, the Department for Regional Development and Roads Service must prioritise their work, given the finite budgets that they are allocated. There is also a focus on Belfast and its main arterial network; that is unders-

tandable, given the city's central role in the administration and economy of the entire country. It is crucial, however, that roads maintenance receives due attention in order to ensure the ongoing quality of the entire roads network. Given the place that tourism is to play in the future of our economy, road quality in rural areas is essential.

Another factor that must be taken into account is the increased prevalence of heavy rainfall and the impact of flooding on our roads. No one can legislate for the weather nor for that heavy rainfall.

Mr McCarthy: It is incomprehensible that there should be flooding on the A20, which runs parallel to Strangford Lough. Does the Member agree that that should not happen?

Mrs I Robinson: As the Member knows, I travel the A20 frequently and am aware of the flooding. I agree that it is crucial that that pocket of flooding is dealt with expeditiously because it can result in tailbacks from the lower Ards Peninsula.

On the whole, the roads network and associated drainage provision cope fairly successfully with the demands made on them. However, there are certain locations that seem to flood persistently and could present a danger to road users.

In the Ards Peninsula, we are only too familiar with the problems of flooding along stretches of road, not least on the road from Portaferry to Newtownards, which is a major problem. I am also concerned about the amount of flooding at the roundabouts at the Ards shopping centre and at the bottom of Frederick Street. Those are two of the busiest roundabouts in the district; they cater for almost all the traffic that travels through Newtownards, yet, on a number of recent occasions, they experienced considerable flooding. It is important that measures are taken to ensure that adequate drainage provision is in place, especially on the busy roads right across the peninsula and in Newtownards.

Furthermore, tourism will be crucial to Strangford. I boast honestly that Strangford is one of the most beautiful scenic areas of Northern Ireland and, if we are to attract tourism, the coastal roads infrastructure must be addressed. We have Mount Stewart; we have Portaferry; and we have scenery right through to Killyleagh along Strangford Lough; but the road is only potholes and a bit of tarmac. If we are to do anything of benefit to tourism, particularly for Strangford, we must see improvements to our coastal roads. The tourism that is attracted will bring much-needed economic benefits.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá. At the outset, poverty is a legacy of past administrations and, under direct rule, the roads were left to get into bad

condition. Members mentioned the roads in Belfast; however, rural roads also lack maintenance. As a member of the Committee for Regional Development, I am aware — as are all of the Committee members — of the need for further funding for road maintenance. However, where do we get that money? Do we take it from some other project? Surely that decision lies at the door of the Minister of Finance and Personnel. The Committee has noted that, whatever its budget, the Department for Regional Development has always made road maintenance a significant priority. It is expected that, over the next three years, funding for structural maintenance will be in the region of £200 million. Bearing in mind that budget allocations over the last three years totalled £165 million, that increase is welcome; however, it is still below the recommended level for the budget period. I am sure that all Ministers would like unlimited resources; unfortunately, such is political life.

The funding allocation for road services is done by district councils and on a district council basis. As a former councillor, I am aware that — regardless of perception — that is done on an equal footing.

I cannot go beyond this point without being parochial and mentioning the areas of Newry and Armagh that I represent. They contain a vast, rural road network. Resources are allocated on a basis of need. Resurfacing and maintenance are, of course, an important aspect of road safety; therefore, priority is given to issues of that nature.

The Department for Regional Development's budget has to cover many other issues, and other key priorities are challenged. When everything is taken into account and analysed, it is disappointing that more funding is not available; however, the amount set aside for road maintenance from the available budget is quite generous. Moreover, £15 million was secured in the December monitoring round, and I am sure that, where possible, the Minister will seek further funding in any future monitoring rounds.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Irwin: The issue of road maintenance in such rural areas as my constituency of Newry and Armagh is something of concern to those who live and travel throughout that region. The majority of roads are classed as minor roads, and are, therefore, not subject to the continuous maintenance that is received by other routes. However, it is apparent that the quality of minor roads in my constituency has lessened over the years. Many of them are a patchwork of quick repairs, and I can show Members others that, in years, have seen no reasonable maintenance. They urgently need resurfacing, and, in some cases, are likely to damage vehicles or are a danger to drivers.

The supply of funding available to the Department is not unlimited, and I understand that there is a lengthy list of priorities in respect of the roads network. Several priority schemes have been planned for Newry and Armagh; those are welcome, and will assist with the flow of traffic on our busy roads. However, minor roads still receive much less attention. Although it could be argued that those roads are used much less than are main roads, they are nevertheless the only routes available to those who live in the countryside.

It is vital that our minor roads receive more maintenance. The longer that those routes are neglected, the worse the situation will become, and more money will then be required to address the problems properly.

Winter gritting is another issue that is of great concern. The daily threshold for gritting is currently set at 1,500 or more vehicles on a road, and, although that may seem reasonable, it disadvantages rural dwellers who use roads that carry fewer vehicles.

There is an argument that it is impossible to grit every single thoroughfare in the Province, and I accept that that would be extremely difficult to do. However, improvements could be made by lowering the vehicle threshold and by giving special consideration to the more dangerous minor routes. Indeed, one such route could be taken by a school bus. Conditions on some of the minor roads that I have travelled in the past few weeks have been treacherous. Those poor conditions must be addressed.

Our vast network of rural roads must receive the maintenance that is necessary to ensure that rural dwellers have a good-quality and safe road network.

I support the motion.

Mr Elliott: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. If we are not maintaining the asset that is our roads infrastructure, we are devaluing it. Although the Government are attempting to maintain parts of the asset, their contribution is less than one fifth of 1% of its overall value. The Budget allocation for road maintenance over the next three years is £200 million. However, that is totally inadequate, given that it adds £125 million to the already immense shortfall in the road maintenance spend, which is some £450 million.

Before I rose to speak, I thought of Mr McCarthy, who read out the list of roads in his constituency. I was thinking of doing the same, but I realised that five minutes would not have been long enough for me to get through my list. If those are the only roads in Strangford that badly need repairing, they are in a much better state than those in Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

I am sure that most Members will not mind me talking about the problems with the roads in my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. I was pleased that the Minister was in my constituency last week for the

cutting of the first sod of the new A4 dual carriageway between Dungannon and Ballygawley. That road will make a huge difference to the area.

However, although 9% of the roads in the entire network are in County Fermanagh, the county receives only 6% of the maintenance budget. Given that, and given the lack of a good public transport system, a rail network, and the fact that people in the county lack the same choices as others in the Province, 6% of the budget is clearly nowhere near enough.

Although I agree with the sentiments of the SDLP amendment, I am concerned about the call for a “strategic approach” to the end-of-year financing for roads. There is a difficulty with that approach. If we take into account the overall end-of-year allocations, I assume that money can be spent on roads quite quickly. It is sometimes difficult in the last six weeks of the financial year to build in such a strategic approach perfectly, or in as exact a manner as one would like. I appreciate and accept where the SDLP is coming from, but we should not throw the baby out with the bath water by making the funding so strategic that our roads receive no allocation at the end of the year.

Mr Boylan and Mr Willie Clarke commented on the allocations. Perhaps when he is on his feet, the Minister can tell the House whether he was happy with the allocations that he received over three years for road maintenance under the comprehensive spending review. I know that I was not happy when I examined the figures, and, indeed, I raised that issue in the Chamber when we debated the Budget.

That overall financial package was certainly not high enough or strong enough. The majority of the communities in my constituency suffer from poor access to services, and that is, of course, highlighted by the poor and inadequate road infrastructure.

2.00 pm

Mr Boylan: Surely the Member must recognise that we are fighting an uphill battle from the start. The roads have been neglected for years, and we have to deal now with that legacy. Will the Member not agree with that?

Mr Elliott: I have no difficulty agreeing with the assertion that the roads have been neglected for years. However, does that mean that we carry on with that process and continue to neglect them? I am afraid that with the current allocations that is exactly what will happen — the neglect will continue.

To return to the point that I was making, the increased number of people travelling throughout Fermanagh and South Tyrone are, because of its rurality, totally dependent on the roads infrastructure. There is no other means of getting goods in and out, and it costs the community and businesses a significant amount of

money, more so than is the case in the east of the Province or in GB. That is the difficulty; we are so reliant on the export market. We export many products, particularly from rural areas, and that adds to the expense.

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

Mr P J Bradley: I welcome the motion and also the amendment, which, in my view, complements the motion. I ask Mr Elliott to read it carefully, as it is a good amendment.

I want to speak briefly about the complete breakdown in the rural infrastructure, both seen and unseen. I welcome the fact that I address a local Minister, who unlike the previous direct rule Ministers, at least knows and understands the problems that are out there. That should be helpful to all of us.

I referred to the problems that exist, both seen and unseen. Anyone driving along a minor or unclassified road will see and often experience at first hand the collapsed verges, the blocked gullies, the potholes — some with a little yellow mark around them, noting that they will be attended to one day — the flooding and damage caused by flooding, and the overhanging hedges. The problems faced by rural road users, whether in a vehicle, on a bicycle or on foot, are endless and deserving of better attention.

Unseen dangers also exist out of sight of the public view but present nevertheless a threat to rural road users. I refer to the ditches and banks that were originally put in place to retain the roads. Many of those have now collapsed, and only if they are identified will the danger be indicated by being marked, until repaired, with coloured ribbons.

Unlike Kieran McCarthy, I do not have my canvassing list with me, but I want to draw attention to one road in my area — Derryleckagh Road — as an example. That road is used by more than 1,000 motorists a day, and I doubt if many of them are aware of the dangers lurking over long tracts of it. Many ditches have collapsed into the adjoining fields, and there is nothing but a small hedge or little soil bank between the motorist and a 10- to 12-foot drop into the field. Many under-road culverts and small bridges are also in disrepair. The longer they await attention, the more expensive it will be to repair or replace them.

I know that it is the role of the Minister to listen to the debate and to take away some of the recommendations for consideration by him and his Department. With that in mind, I have only two recommendations to make, but I make them with all the confidence of a rural dweller and a regular road user.

First, I remember the era of the roadman, when an individual was responsible for a defined mileage of road. That was his patch, his pride and joy. Hedges were neatly trimmed, all roadside verges were kept

neatly lined and blocked gullies were cleared regularly. Then along came modernisation, and the machine and the office computer took over. That has led to the unacceptable conditions that we must endure today. Perhaps the return of the roadman would be the key to the upkeep of our minor and unclassified roads.

Secondly, I wish the Minister to consider introducing two-year hedge-cutting and roadside-trimming programmes, rather than the half measures contained in the annual trims that the roads receive now. A full and proper job carried out every two years would achieve greater results and offer rural road users some level of equality with their urban counterparts, who know nothing of the rural problems.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I speak in support of the motion, and I also pay tribute to Roads Service personnel in the area with which I am most familiar, the western division and west Tyrone, in particular Omagh and Strabane districts.

Roads Service does the best with the limited amount of funding that tends to be available. I would be a rich man if I had £5 for every time that I was told by a senior Roads Service official that every project competes on a priority basis for a limited pool of funding. When drawing the attention of senior road engineers to the needs of an area, it is frustrating that the stock answer tends to be that they need a greater budget, because I could say the same about countless numbers of roads in the west Tyrone area. I pay tribute to the Roads Service personnel because they do the best that they can with the limited amount of resources that are available to them, and I support the call for greater funding for roads maintenance.

Recently, in my area, we have been lobbying for an upgrade of the A5/N2 route, which is a strategic corridor. Only last week, the Minister was at the sod-turning for major road improvements on the A4. All of those major, strategic-corridor type of works are important. However, the voice of the rural citizen beyond the A-class roads must be heard.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I do not know how you spent Valentine's evening, but I was summoned to a public meeting in Altamuskin Community Centre. At that meeting, 50 people were present at 8.00 pm, when you might think that they would be otherwise engaged in going out for meals. It was a very animated community meeting. Such a crowd had never before shown up in the local community centre in Altamuskin, which is between Sixmilecross and Ballygawley.

The subject under discussion was the state of the Altamuskin Road, which is an important route but it has a series of dangerous bends and it is in poor surface condition. A number of local businesses, including quarries, use the road but it does not qualify

for inclusion on the winter gritting schedule. Recently, I wrote to the divisional roads manager and I was told that a recent traffic count showed that the volume of traffic using the Altamuskin Road is below the threshold of 1,500 vehicles a day that is required for inclusion in the winter gritting schedule.

I call on the Minister to visit the Altamuskin Road and the nearby Whitebridge Road, which runs from Carrickmore to Ballygawley. I deliberately prioritise those roads; I could mention the Omagh-to-Fintona road and the Omagh-to-Drumquinn road. I know that the Minister is aware of the concerns of local communities about the condition of those roads, and I specifically invite him to come to the Altamuskin Road, to meet people at Altamuskin Community Centre and to drive on the road for five or six miles to view its current condition.

Mrs M Bradley: I would like Barry to include the road from Omagh to Derry in his list.

Mr McElduff: I am happy to include the road from Omagh to Derry. Of course, Mary Bradley often travels on that road, and she is aware of the difficulties that arise on the Omagh-to-Derry road.

I will put forward an idea that I previously put forward, and which has not been taken up. I understand that Roads Service is content for gritting to reach 80% of the traffic by covering 20% of the roads. If that rule is applied, it leaves out the rural community and the isolated rural community.

I would like the Minister for Regional Development to engage in discussions with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to explore further the viability of deploying local farmers who have much of the machinery to assist, on occasion, with gritting the rural roads network.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Had I known about the meeting in Altamuskin, I would have saved myself the cost of dinner.

Mr G Robinson: It will be no surprise to the Minister that I am contributing to this debate, as I am a member of the Committee for Regional Development. I hope that he appreciates that I also have a genuine interest in seeing that the roads maintenance budget is spent in as useful and meaningful a way as possible. My concern is to ensure that the main traffic corridors in Northern Ireland are kept at a standard that is worthy of the twenty-first century, especially as we try to develop a new, strong economic future. To successfully achieve that future, potential investors must view the roads infrastructure as an asset rather than a liability.

Our main roads are often referred to as arterial routes, and there is a simple reason for that. As the arteries carry the blood around the body, the roads

carry the vast majority of Northern Ireland's financial lifeblood, be it tourists, construction materials, commuters or the food on our supermarket shelves. Just as we are advised to stay healthy and to maintain our body's blood circulation, we must maintain the routes that carry our economy.

Many arterial routes in the Province need funding — from counties Fermanagh to Londonderry. To aid that funding, the Minister of Finance and Personnel allocated an additional £15 million in the December monitoring round, which represents a substantial increase. No amount of money to maintain the roads network would ever be enough; such is the demand for funding due to many years of underinvestment. Therefore, it is essential to prioritise projects, especially for the maintenance and upgrading of our main traffic thoroughfares. However, we cannot forget that, in order to reach those main routes, many miles of other roads will require a slice of the financial cake. It is a no-brainer — a minimum fund should be put in place to ensure that projects can be assured of funding in the short to medium term.

Members will be able to identify projects in need of funding all over Northern Ireland, but the Minister will not be surprised if I mention the A26 and A37 again. I use those roads as examples of where ring-fenced funding over a minimum of three years could improve the condition of roads, while projects that I have raised with him on so many occasions are kept on the long finger.

I support the motion in so many ways, but I must sound a note of caution: I do not want worthy projects, such as the road improvement works in Dungannon and those on the Larne to Belfast corridor, to suffer. Northern Ireland does not have a bottomless pit of money. There are no rainbows with pots of gold hiding underneath the Finance Minister's desk. We must take a long-term view of how we wish to invest the money available to us to ensure that not only the main traffic corridors are maintained and upgraded, but the rest of the road network — especially in rural areas — receives its fair share of funding.

The 'Belfast Telegraph' reported that there were gaps of 104 years between resurfacing of rural roads, but that should not be tolerated. That is unacceptable in any area. Ring-fenced funding would enable work to be planned on a medium- to long-term basis. However, our arterial traffic corridor must be upgraded so that investment is not restricted by poor road conditions. I support the motion, but I hope that my notes of caution will be taken on board.

Mr Wells: I support the motion and the amendment — as much as it grieves me to do so — in the name of the honourable Member for East Londonderry Mr Dallat. It is an interesting indication of how far Northern Ireland has moved on.

2.15 pm

The motion deals with Northern Ireland's biggest publicly-owned asset. The valuation on the entire roads network in Northern Ireland is £30 billion — a hugely important aspect of our economy. As Mr Elliott stated, we are spending one fifth of 1% of the value of that asset in maintaining it. There can be few situations in western Europe where the maintenance of an asset is less than one fifth of 1% of its total value. That will show Members how far behind we have fallen with regard to roads maintenance.

In Northern Ireland, £2,800 per kilometre is spent on roads maintenance, and the equivalent figure in England is £12,000. However, in Wales — a more relevant comparator due to its many rural roads — the spend is £7,500 per kilometre. We, therefore, spend less than one third of an equivalent area in the rest of the United Kingdom, and that is a matter for real concern. Over the next three years, we have set aside £200 million for roads maintenance, and that will add over £100 million to the present shortfall of at least £450 million. Northern Ireland, therefore, is in a serious situation.

I accept that much of the underinvestment is due to the mismanagement under direct rule, and we must be reasonable and accept that it is a huge tanker for the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Minister for Regional Development to turn in a short time. One must accept that these issues are part of the problems that we faced for many years.

It is worth quoting from the Roads Service's 2006-07 annual report in which its chief executive stated that:

"An area of risk about which I am concerned is that I believe the level of funding made available to Roads Service for structural maintenance is insufficient to maintain the road network in a satisfactory condition".

He continued:

"on the non trunk road network we continue to 'paper over the cracks' on too many occasions. The relatively low level of funding means that the good practice resurfacing frequency of once in 25 or 30 years is not achieved."

The frequency of resurfacing is often only once every 68 years. There is a chance that some Members will see their local C-class road resurfaced only once in a lifetime. If anyone does see that, take a picture, because it is unlikely that it will happen again.

The chief executive also stated that the infrequent resurfacing will mean that:

"significant lengths of the non-trunk road network will be of irregular profile and/or below the desirable skid resistance level".

That cannot be allowed to continue. Similarly, we cannot continue to fund the resurfacing and maintenance of our rural roads on the basis of occasional good luck through the monitoring round. The Depart-

ment for Regional Development does well on the monitoring rounds, because it is usual for it to have projects that are ready to take up money that is returned from other Departments every quarter. However, that is no way to run and maintain a £30 billion infrastructure.

Neither is it an appropriate way to treat one of Northern Ireland's most important industries — the quarrying and aggregates industry. It is important to remember that that industry employs 5,000 people in Northern Ireland and has an annual turnover of £750 million. In many rural areas, the quarrying and aggregates industry is the only form of non-agricultural steady employment.

Other Members have been parochial, so I will be and give a few examples from my constituency of South Down. The most important local industry in such areas as Mayobridge, Cranfield and Atticall — which are not bustling industrial centres — is quarrying and aggregates. However, they are bound by a system of stop-go. They do not know where they stand, because they do not know what money will come through in the monitoring round. They have to have contracts ready to run, but it is difficult to plan ahead, buy equipment and maintain staffing levels when they do not know where they stand from one quarter to the next.

The Department for Regional Development, therefore, must be weaned off its dependence on the monitoring rounds. Our spending must be planned more effectively, so that — at the start of the year — Roads Service is given the equivalent of what it receives in the monitoring rounds, so that they associated industries know exactly where they stand, and are able to plan ahead. The lack of an assured long-term, guaranteed pot of money for the resurfacing and maintenance of roads is the most fundamental of Roads Service's problems.

Mr Shannon: I support the amendment tabled by Members from the SDLP.

The Minister for Regional Development is well aware of Strangford's needs, and Members will be glad to hear that I do not intend to deliver a road-by-road list. However, I can say that all roads in my constituency require attention and, every day of the week, someone from my office is in touch with the Minister's Department's offices in Jubilee Road, Newtownards, in relation to such matters. Some of the girls in my office phone simply to have a wee chat with the admirable staff in the Minister's office. Nonetheless, every week another problem with the roads in Strangford is highlighted; another car is ruined by a pothole; another claim is made by someone who falls; and another accident is caused by slippery roads.

Strangford is not alone in having problems with roads. Throughout the Province, roads are suffering from varying degrees of decay, which, as my colleague said, is little wonder if one considers the amount of money

that we spend compared to England or Wales. It is no surprise to discover that we have the worst roads in the United Kingdom — you get what you pay for.

DRD must come to terms with the fact that, in the long term, the outlay of the required spend will actually save it money, and that is not new information to the Minister. In 2007, the acting chief executive of the Roads Service said that the cost of reconstructing a road compared to maintaining it can be up to four times greater. Surely that fact alone would behove setting aside money for works maintenance, rather than holding off until maintenance cannot make a difference and work must be started again from scratch. That is what has happened throughout the Province.

The Roads Service acting chief executive's annual report informs us that road resurfacing should happen once every 25 to 30 years, yet there are some roads in my constituency — and others will reiterate this point — which have not been resurfaced for 68 years. Cosmetic tar and loose-stone spreading is said to seal a road; however, before doing that the Roads Service would do better by filling in the potholes. The figures for cars ruined by uneven roads and accidents caused by slippery surfaces are easier to understand if one realises that our roads must last for twice as long as they were built to.

Terrorism attacks are over; tourism increases month by month and, considering that more people are moving to, and living in, the Province, our roads are under more pressure than ever. Nevertheless, the Department is not investing enough money in maintenance. Money is not the issue. In response to my written question, at the beginning of February, the Minister replied that, in 2004-05, the Department spent £272,500,000 on roads maintenance, and, in 2005-06, £269,300,000. In 2006-07, that figure rose to £302,400,000. Those figures are self-explanatory and illustrate the Minister's commitment; however, I urge the Minister to support the amendment and answer the questions that it raises. I believe that £110 million could be ring-fenced for such purposes, and such a policy should be urgently implemented.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that the Department seems to spend more money on yellow paint to go around holes than it does on actually filling the holes?

Mr Shannon: I cannot comment on the cost of yellow paint, but I am sure someone could. I believe that the cost might be considerably less than the cost of repairing a road. I might comment on the cost of red, white and blue paint, but that would be moving away from the issue. *[Laughter.]*

Concerning road surfaces, 43% of the trunk-road network is below the skid-resistance standard for national roads, and, in the areas that I represent in the

Ards Peninsula — Newtownards, Ballygowan, Comber and towards Carryduff and Killyleagh — the roads are not up to the required standard. Will the Minister also consider that matter? The Minister is also well aware of the issues concerning the Mountstewart Road, which I previously brought to his attention.

It is a pity that the statistics for major road accidents reflect only those in which there were injuries. The Minister should consider having all road accidents recorded, which would provide him with better information about the dangers present on the roads in my constituency.

I urge Members to support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Questions to the First Minister and deputy First Minister will take place at 2.30 pm, I propose that Members take their ease.

Mr Burnside: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Since the House met in plenary session this morning at 12.00 noon, there has been an announcement of a resignation from the junior Minister the Member for North Antrim from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Can you confirm whether the junior Minister requested to come to the House and make a statement on the reasons for his resignation? Has there been any contact from that junior Minister? In my experience, it is normal parliamentary procedure for a resigning Minister to show respect to the House by making a statement on the Floor.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The point was made earlier by your colleague Mr Kennedy, and I shall give the same response that I gave to him. The Speaker is considering the matter and will report later today or tomorrow.

I ask Members to take their ease until 2.30 pm. The debate will resume at 4.00 pm. The final contributors will be Mr Brian Wilson, to be followed by the Minister for Regional Development and the proposers of the amendment and the original motion, who will make their winding-up speeches.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Undocumented Irish

1. **Mr W Clarke** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm whether the issue of the undocumented Irish was raised in any of the meetings held by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, during the recent visit to the United States of America. (AQO 2078/08)

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): I had a meeting with the Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform in New York on 4 December 2007, during which it outlined its proposal for a reciprocal visa programme, similar to that which exists between Australia and the United States of America. I raised the issue subsequently during a meeting with Steve Hadley, the US National Security Advisor, and during our meeting with President Bush on 7 December 2007.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the deputy First Minister for his response. Will he give a further guarantee that he will raise the issue in his meetings in Washington during his St Patrick's Day visit?

The deputy First Minister: The issue is close to my heart, and I will raise it at every appropriate opportunity while I am in the United States.

Mr Gallagher: On 3 January, in a written reply to my colleague PJ Bradley, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) stated that the matter of the undocumented Irish was raised during the meeting with President Bush in Washington. In view of all the ongoing suffering of so many Irish people and the unfairness of their situation, I again ask whether the US Government gave a commitment on the issue.

The deputy First Minister: No specific commitments were given, but Steve Hadley and President Bush listened very intently to what we had to say. It was quite clear from the way in which they received what was said that the issue is being considered.

Obviously, immigration reform is a highly vexed issue in the United States, and many competing agendas are involved. There is a huge Hispanic

community in the United States. The situation is very complex and difficult, as is clear from the debates in the United States Congress, and the fact that the immigration Bill was not passed because of the division that existed between members. The view in the United States appears to be that the issue will not be resolved this side of the next presidential election. That said, the Member has rightly pointed out the hardships that are being experienced, so we still have a duty to lobby on behalf of citizens here — from every section of the community — who may be affected by the difficult circumstances in which they are forced to live.

United States of America: Recession

2. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what impact the present recession in the United States of America is having on efforts to attract inward investment from American companies. (AQO 1968/08)

The deputy First Minister: Economists have conflicting views about the inevitability of a recession in the United States in 2008. There is no doubt that the American economy has been affected adversely by the collapse of the sub-prime housing market. However, the falling value of the dollar is increasing exports and slowing imports, thus helping the American economy.

Given the complexity of the US economy, it is too early to predict whether a recession is inevitable. Notwithstanding that, the turbulence in the financial services market could provide opportunities for our economy. For example, in the mid-term to longer-term, those multinationals will be looking for cost advantages in a near-shore location that is close to their customers and a talented labour pool that is close to their customer base. Cost competitiveness is our valued proposition to those businesses.

I also want to use this opportunity to promote the investment conference that will take place in May, which will be important in underscoring to American investors the fact that we offer one of the best business opportunities in western Europe. The event has the direct and unwavering support of the US Government. The two-day conference will bring together a number of chief executives of major US companies, who will have the opportunity to see our business opportunities at first hand.

Mr Gardiner: Will the First Minister and deputy First Minister consider offering the Ulster Unionist Party their congratulations on the great election of Carol Black in the recent by-election in Dromore?

If the investment climate in the United States is unfavourable because of the current market difficulties, do the Executive have a back-up strategy in place — dare I call it plan B? — for developing the economy?

Should more emphasis be placed on developing new home-grown businesses based on patents held in Northern Ireland's two universities?

The deputy First Minister: I was pleased that more than 80% of people who voted in the recent by-election voted for pro-agreement parties that support the Assembly as an institution.

From the perspective of inward investment, concerns about a recession may delay, rather than put an end to, decisions by US companies to invest overseas. However, the turbulence in the financial services market could provide mid- to long-term opportunities as multinational corporations seek to find cost advantages in near-shore locations that are close to their customers and culturally compatible.

I am a strong supporter of encouraging local entrepreneurs. I agree with the well-made point contained in Mr Gardiner's final question. People who are prepared to invest in the community, and have a stake in it, create the greatest stability. Over the years, local businesspeople have provided employment opportunities for many people in towns, villages and cities throughout the North. Local entrepreneurs should be, and are, continually encouraged by Invest NI and other agencies under the auspices of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment because they have made an important and valuable contribution to the economy.

Mr Durkan: I thank the deputy First Minister for his reply. I agree with him that uncertainty about the global economy should not distract Members from putting all their efforts into the opportunity afforded by the US/NI investment conference. Perhaps local businesses could prepare show-and-tell packages to demonstrate the investment opportunities that they can offer and the attractive locations available.

Will the deputy First Minister tell the Assembly how he and other Ministers hope to ensure that the benefits of the investment conference, albeit that it is being held over a limited two-day period, are felt not only in Belfast, where the main events will be held, but more widely in the region? How will they ensure that the wider business community is able to engage in the conference?

The deputy First Minister: Representatives and businesspeople throughout the North share Mark Durkan's concern. Last week, I spoke to senior officials of the Chamber of Commerce in Derry. They said that they wanted an opportunity to have an input into the conference, which they accepted was being held for a short period of two days. People on local councils are extremely interested in the conference and want to be included.

The First Minister, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I have met regularly to ensure that

we are consistently fine-tuning our approach to the investment conference. I assure Mark Durkan that we include wider involvement in our deliberations and take that extremely seriously. Given that potential investors will be here for only 36 to 48 hours and that the conference must be concentrated in the Belfast area, it is important that people in other parts of the North feel that they, too, have ownership of it.

The challenge is to find a way to ensure that locally elected representatives — such as mayors — chief executives of councils and the heads of different Chambers of Commerce consider that they have had an opportunity to network.

Mr Simpson: I apologise for my late arrival in the Chamber during Question Time. It is difficult to instruct companies to invest in specific locations. However, does the deputy First Minister agree that it is imperative that areas of deprivation, or areas in which there have been substantial job losses, must be highlighted during the investment conference?

The deputy First Minister: The issue of equality is an important aspect of the economic investment conference. All of us have a duty and responsibility to address the problems that areas of deprivation face. Hopefully, some of those problems can be addressed through the outcomes of the economic investment conference.

The huge job losses in Limavady are a case in point. We are conscious of the need to encourage foreign direct investment into the areas that have suffered social deprivation and huge employment losses. However, we cannot order people to invest in certain areas; investors will, obviously, make their own decisions.

Interface Areas/Violence

3. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the steps it is taking to support (i) the work on interface areas; and (ii) initiatives that will divert and challenge the potential for interface violence. (AQO 2087/08)

The deputy First Minister: The First Minister and I remain fully committed to addressing the divisions in society. Our priority is to build relationships that will be the basis for sustaining the developing peace that people living in those areas are entitled to expect. Our Department is giving ongoing support by providing funding of £5 million to the Community Relations Council and to district councils through the locally based community relations programmes.

The Department has also provided funding of £400,000 to the Department of Education for the provision of summer intervention programmes, special

intervention programmes and summer diversionary youth intervention schemes that are conducted by the education and library boards. Those programmes are targeted at supporting work in interface areas and initiatives to challenge the behaviours that are associated with interface violence.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the First Minister and deputy First Minister use their influence to ensure that those programmes that have been mentioned are made available to the communities at the earliest opportunity, rather than at the eleventh hour? It is practically impossible to build, develop and foster good relationships when groups have to wait until the eleventh hour to receive the funding.

The deputy First Minister: We are conscious of that. It goes without saying that we value the work that has been undertaken — often in difficult circumstances — in interface areas by those who are involved in initiatives aimed at challenging and changing the behaviours associated with interface violence.

We are committed fully to addressing the divisions in society, and to achieving measurable reductions in sectarianism and intolerance. That is why, in the coming comprehensive spending review period, we are making additional resources available to target those issues and to support the dedicated people upon whom that work depends.

Mr Cobain: Will the deputy First Minister update Members on what is happening at the Girdwood site and inform us whether anyone from the private sector has shown any interest in that site?

The deputy First Minister: Principally, that is a matter for the Department for Social Development (DSD); it is not an issue that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is involved with. However, we will get an answer for the Member from DSD.

Mr Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Victims' Groups: Funding

5. **Mr Storey** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide a breakdown of the amount of funding allocated to victims' groups, broken down by those from (i) an army background; (ii) a police background; (iii) a prison officer background; (iv) an ex-prisoner background; and (v) a civilian background; in each of the past three years.

(AQO 1963/08)

The deputy First Minister: In the past three years, OFMDFM has allocated some £15 million to address the needs of victims and survivors. Over the next three years, we are providing £36 million towards those issues,

which is an increase of some 140%. Some of that funding will support the victims' commissioners designate.

All groups that access funding in that area must demonstrate that their work is designed to support individuals who have been affected by the conflict that we have all experienced over the past four decades.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

2.45 pm

Mr Storey: I am glad that the Ulster Unionist Party Members have such confidence in the supplementary question that I am going to ask. *[Laughter.]* I would have appreciated — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Storey: I remind the Ulster Unionist Party Members that one swallow does not make a summer.

I am disappointed that the deputy First Minister did not answer my question. I asked for a breakdown of the funding that was allocated to victims' groups from an army background, a police background, a prison-officer background, an ex-prisoner background and a civilian background, instead of two headline figures of £15 million and £36 million. What steps does he plan to take to adjust the levels of funding so that innocent victims of terrorism are prioritised and so that members of terrorist organisations who heaped sectarian violence on the Province for decades are not rewarded?

The deputy First Minister: It is our duty to ensure that funding is directed to those who are most in need. The Department intends to bring forward a strategy, which will have the requirements of victims and survivors at its core. We want to ensure that no one is forgotten and that a more comprehensive and co-ordinated system is implemented.

The Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 defines a victim as:

- “(a) someone who is or has been physically or psychologically injured as a result of or in consequence of a conflict-related incident;
- (b) someone who provides a substantial amount of care on a regular basis for an individual mentioned in paragraph (a); or
- (c) someone who has been bereaved as a result of or in consequence of a conflict-related incident.”

The Member expressed disappointment with my answer, but the Department does not have the information in the format that he asked for.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the deputy First Minister assure the House that the determining factors for the funding of victims' and survivors groups will be transparent and equality proofed to ensure that there is no hierarchy of victims?

The deputy First Minister: Funding for victims' and survivors groups will be based on assessed need,

and the processes involved will be transparent and equality proofed.

Dr Farry: How does OFMDFM intend to avoid balkanising the issue of victims? Does the deputy First Minister feel that the manner in which the victims' commissioners designate were appointed has contributed to the perception that the issue has been balkanised? Has the approach of the Executive helped or hindered the eventual devolution of policing and justice?

The deputy First Minister: The Member has rolled a number of questions into one. The devolution of policing and justice is a work in process. I reject the Member's first point outright because we are not interested in balkanising the issue of victims.

Mr Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Civic Forum

7. **Mr Bradley** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide (i) an update on the review of the Civic Forum; and (ii) a date for its completion. (AQO 1989/08)

The deputy First Minister: The First Minister and I are considering how to improve arrangements for consulting civil society. As Members will be aware, in October 2007, the Executive agreed the terms of reference and methodology for the review. Since then, considerable preparatory work has been undertaken, and it must be completed before the review can begin. We hope to move into the next phase of the review process over the next few weeks. It is not possible to be definite about the timetable, but the review will be progressed as quickly as possible commensurate with doing a thorough job.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for that answer. How will OFMDFM advance the all-Ireland consultative forum?

The deputy First Minister: As I and the First Minister have previously stated, the first exercise must be the review of the Civic Forum. The all-island consultative forum has been raised in British-Irish Council meetings, but we must first complete the review of the Civic Forum.

As the First Minister has said on several occasions, there have been many changes since the first Civic Forum was set up. Many newcomers have come to our shores; therefore, we want to move forward inclusively and allow everyone to have a voice.

Mr Hamilton: Will OFMDFM ensure that an assessment of the cost of the resurrection of a Civic Forum is carried out, and that that exercise is done in tandem with an assessment of the output — or lack of output — from the previous incarnation of a Civic Forum?

The deputy First Minister: A review is ongoing, and it would be a mistake to prejudge how the issue will be dealt with, or to make any commitments at this time on the work in progress. We must await the outcomes. OFMDFM is interested only in ensuring that there is a comprehensive review. A lot of work is being done, and we hope to progress that work soon. The cost of the review will be met from the existing civic forum budget. Further decisions relating to the finances required will be taken following the review.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat. Will OFMDFM detail its opinion on NICVA's (Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action) proposals for a Civic Forum, and can it identify why version one failed?

The deputy First Minister: Although NICVA strongly supports a social partnership body, it has consistently made two main points in correspondence with OFMDFM since restoration. Those are that the original forum was flawed in its structure and operation — particularly in its chairing and accountability arrangements — and that a review of the forum should be completed to address those issues, rather than reconvene the forum in its original form.

It is in response to NICVA's concerns, among other things, that we have commissioned the current review of the Civic Forum. As part of its remit, the review will assess the effectiveness and appropriateness, or otherwise, of the original forum. However, the main purpose of the review is to learn from the experiences of the first forum to arrive at improved arrangements for consulting civil society.

Inter-ministerial Subcommittee on Suicide Prevention

8. **Ms J McCann** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail its role in the inter-ministerial subcommittee on suicide prevention. (AQO 2060/08)

The deputy First Minister: Suicide is a devastating event for all involved. It is clear that prevention requires intervention that goes beyond the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. It needs an innovative, comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach right across the public service. The inter-ministerial subcommittee, which has met on three occasions, is chaired by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Ministerial membership includes the Minister of Education and the junior Ministers. The junior Ministers have particular responsibility for children and young people, a group often affected by suicide, and it is important that those Ministers are part of the subcommittee. Like all members of the subcommittee, the role of the junior Ministers is to enhance cross-departmental co-ordination.

Ms J McCann: Will the Minister join with me in extending our sympathies to the community of Bridgend in Wales? Recent experiences there illustrate the impact that suicide can have on a local community. Will the Minister say what role the inter-ministerial subcommittee will have in overseeing the targets for reducing suicide that have been incorporated in the Programme for Government?

The deputy First Minister: I saw the recent news report, although I am not sure whether it was on Channel 4 or BBC Two. It was a shocking and very sad story. Recently, around 16 young people in Bridgend in Wales have lost their lives.

One of the functions of the inter-ministerial subcommittee is to identify and agree a draft action plan for the suicide prevention strategy. The draft action plan will contribute to the achievement of two of the high-level outcomes in the 10-year strategy for children and young people around health, living in safety and with stability.

Mr T Clarke: Does the deputy First Minister accept that, because of the role of his party's military wing and other paramilitary organisations, many people have turned to suicide in Northern Ireland?

The deputy First Minister: No, I do not accept that.

Mrs Hanna: Will the deputy First Minister detail any sharing of best practice with neighbouring jurisdictions on suicide prevention?

The deputy First Minister: The First Minister raised the issue of suicide at the recent British-Irish Council meeting in Dublin. I have no doubt that that issue exercises all Administrations, not only those in the North and South, but those in Wales, Scotland, England, the Isle of Man, Guernsey and Jersey. We are all conscious of the need to share best practice when we can. We are anxious to see whether, through collaboration, the unacceptable levels of suicide can be reduced.

Mr Speaker: Question 9 has been withdrawn.

Some Members: Shame.

Mr Speaker: Order, order.

As Mrs Kelly, Mr Simpson, Ms McGill and Mr Adams are not in the Chamber, questions 10, 11, 12 and 13 fall.

Understanding between the Travelling and Settled Communities

14. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the programmes that it will deliver to enhance understanding between the Travelling and settled communities. (AQO 2081/08)

The deputy First Minister: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is intent on promoting good relations, including good race relations. In that context, we are committed to enhancing understanding between all people here.

As part of its funding scheme for minority ethnic groups, since 2005, the Department has provided funding of almost £400,000 to organisations representing Travellers here. That figure constitutes almost 20% of the funding scheme's overall budget. That funding provides a range of activities to enhance understanding between Travellers and settled people, including the development of an integrated children's club, support for Travellers in further education and training, the provision of equality and diversity training for settled people, and the development of an advocacy project to help Travellers to speak on behalf of their community. An Munia Tober in Belfast continues to provide a resource for individuals and groups who wish to explore the culture and heritage of Irish Travellers.

Under the programme of cohesion and integration for a shared and better future, we will examine ways in which to promote good relations between Irish Travellers and settled people further.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the deputy First Minister for stating that his Department is prepared to examine new ways to improve relations between the settled and Travelling communities. He will be aware of recent publicity surrounding events in the Craigavon area, some of which was inaccurate and unfair. Does he agree that if relations between the settled community and Travellers are to move forward, they must do so on a basis of mutual respect?

The deputy First Minister: If we are to live in an inclusive society, in which people are treated equally, we must all have respect for one another. That has been an age-old sore in society, not only in the North, but in the South. There is no doubt that our approach has been patchy. However, as we move forward, we have a duty and responsibility — particularly given the responsibility of the new Assembly — to face up to all those issues in society that require to be addressed. The relationship between Travellers and the settled community must be taken seriously.

Mr Speaker: As Mr Bresland is not in the Chamber, question 15 falls.

Programme for Government/Investment Strategy

16. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the action that it is taking in relation to the process of revision of the Programme for Government and the investment

strategy, as agreed by resolution in the Assembly on 28 January 2008. (AQO 1952/08)

The deputy First Minister: The Executive will consider carefully how best to manage the review of the Programme for Government and the investment strategy, as agreed on 28 January 2008. Although the Programme for Government sets a framework for the next three years, and the investment strategy sets a 10-year framework, the annual review will provide an opportunity to make whatever amendments prove necessary as we move through the first year of their implementation.

In reviewing the Programme for Government and the investment strategy, we must strike the right balance between maintaining our overall direction and responding effectively to changing circumstances and learning from our experiences. That will ensure that the Programme for Government and the investment strategy remain up to date and relevant.

Mr Kennedy: I remind the deputy First Minister that the resolution that was passed by the Assembly made it clear that the Programme for Government would be subject to ongoing review and necessary revision.

Will he undertake to report on that matter to the Assembly regularly and to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister?

Mr Speaker: The Minister may answer if he is brief.

The deputy First Minister: I will undertake to do so.
3.00 pm

ENVIRONMENT

Social Housing Planning Applications

1. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of applications for planning permission, received from the Department for Social Development, in relation to social housing, broken down by divisional planning office. (AQO 2059/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): The Department for Social Development does not make planning applications for social housing. Individual housing associations apply for planning permission for schemes that are on the social housing development programme, which is managed by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. That programme is subject to regular review and the number of social housing applications in the planning system is subject to regular change, depending on the programme date of the scheme in question. In this financial year, 2007-08, there were 245 schemes, including schemes

for single dwellings, of which 137 were in the Belfast division, 12 in Craigavon, 25 in Northern, 23 in Omagh, 45 in Downpatrick, and three in Ballymena.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given the urgent need for social housing, will she instruct the Planning Service to deal with any such applications as quickly as possible?

Mrs Foster: Planning Service will give priority to social housing schemes and, through regular liaison with the Housing Executive, issues and potential problems are identified as early as possible, and that will continue. I will continue to have discussions with the Minister for Social Development on this important issue.

Mr Burnside: The Minister is well aware of the target in the Semple Report that 5,250 social homes should be built over the next three years — it looks as though there will be a shortfall of 750 homes in trying to meet that target. Can the Minister give any incentives to private developers, who face much more difficult market conditions? Can anything be done to help them to meet the Semple target?

Mrs Foster: The Member knows that that is primarily a matter for the Minister for Social Development. However, we have held several discussions in relation to planning policy statement (PPS) 12 and how article 40 agreements can be used to maximum effect in social housing applications, and those discussions will continue.

With respect to private developers, the Minister for Social Development plans to meet private developers, and has done so, to encourage them to bring more social housing into their plans.

Mr Gallagher: Will the Minister tell us whether applications for social and affordable housing will be on her Department's website, so that all interested parties will have access to information about that process fairly quickly? Will she also assure the House that the website is secure as regards information in relation to applications?

Mrs Foster: I assure the House that the website is secure. What happened a couple of weeks ago showed that the security system works. As soon as difficulties in the wider Civil Service network were detected, the Planning Service website shut down immediately. As regards social housing on the website, I will write to the Member this week.

Mr Speaker: Question No 2 has been withdrawn.

Buildings of Historic and Architectural Significance

3. **Mr McCausland** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline her plans to (i) review the criteria

under which buildings of historic and architectural significance are listed; and (ii) take account of the criteria used in other parts of the United Kingdom, as part of this review. (AQO 2074/08)

Mrs Foster: I have asked the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) to review the criteria under which buildings of special architectural and/or historic interest are listed. I recognise that the well-established criteria used in Northern Ireland are in accord with those used throughout Great Britain, as is the legislation under which buildings are listed. Therefore, the review will take full account of criteria used in other parts of the kingdom.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Minister for her answer. I am sure that she will agree that buildings of historic and architectural significance are a part of the cultural wealth of Northern Ireland and can contribute to our cultural tourism product. We have lost several of those buildings: for example, a house associated with Seamus Heaney in south Belfast and, more recently, another historic house in north Belfast.

Can the review pay special attention to those buildings that are of historic importance because of the people who have lived in them? That importance might not necessarily be reflected in the building's fabric, which was the key issue in the second case.

Mrs Foster: Legislation on those matters is the same throughout the United Kingdom. However, with specific regard to the review, I have suggested that more clarity be provided. In Scotland, listing criteria includes a building's close and well-documented associations to nationally important people or events. A building's physical fabric must also be of some quality and interest. That is what happens in Northern Ireland, although it is perhaps not set out as clearly as it should be. The Department will examine listing criteria in order to determine whether it could be clearer so that the wider public understand why buildings are listed and, indeed, why they are not.

Mr P Maskey: I have written to the Minister with regard to the Thomas Caffery brewery on the Glen Road. It is of the utmost importance that that building is listed and protected. The Minister's reply directed me to Belfast City Council. However, when I wrote to the council, it responded by saying that it has no responsibility whatever for the listing of buildings because that is done by EHS. I therefore ask the Minister to reconsider the matter. That building is of the utmost importance, given that thousands of people were employed there over many years. It is part of west Belfast's history and is a building of significant interest. Therefore, it is important that it is retained.

Mrs Foster: I am happy to revisit that matter. In respect of Belfast City Council, I was probably referring to its blue plaque scheme. I hope that under

the review of public administration, which will be discussed later during Question Time, local authorities will have the power to draw up local lists. Therefore, if a building is of significance to a local area or, indeed, a city, that will be taken into account. We look forward to that's being part of the review of public administration (RPA).

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: In September 2007, the Minister told the Assembly that she had been able to remove 32 historic properties from the at-risk register and that she aimed to save 200 buildings by 2016. Can she update the Assembly further, particularly on the situation as regards the stables and gate lodge at Chairndhu in Ballygally, Ballynacree gate lodge, and the former national school at Bushmills?

Mrs Foster: I am happy to write to the Member about those buildings. I am sure that he will appreciate that I do not have that local information with me, but officials will take a note of his point.

The Department is pushing ahead to take buildings off the at-risk register. The Member will be aware that the Department has been set a challenging target in the Programme for Government. However, I want to take up that challenge and to make progress. As far as I am concerned, all of us can take pleasure in the built heritage. That being the case, I want to push ahead with the matter vehemently.

Conservation Schemes: Red Squirrels

4. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on her plans to develop conservation schemes for endangered species, and, in particular, on her plans to protect red squirrels.

(AQO 1948/08)

Mrs Foster: My Department has published 23 individual Northern Ireland species action plans and four Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland plans. By the end of March 2008, my Department intends to publish a further 11 Northern Ireland plans and three Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland plans, one of which is for red squirrels. The production of further action plans is envisaged during the next few years, following the recommendations of the Northern Ireland Biodiversity Group.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for that positive reply. As she is aware, North Down Borough Council is trying to reintroduce red squirrels into Castle Park. That process has been ongoing for the past three years. The problem is that North Down Borough Council is finding it hard to obtain a licence that will allow it to work with red squirrels in order to relocate them. Can she assure me that her Department will contact the council and work with it so that it can obtain that licence? Will her Department also examine the problem at

Glenl Lyon Park in Holywood, where the red squirrel population is under threat from grey squirrels?

Mrs Foster: I am happy to tell the Member that departmental officials will renew contact with North Down Borough Council on that matter as soon as possible.

However, the following requirements must be met before such a translocation exercise can take place: first, North Down Borough Council must locate a donor population of red squirrels in Northern Ireland or in the Republic of Ireland — the Member is saying that there is a donor population in Glen Lyon Park, so that should not prove difficult for the council; secondly, Environment and Heritage Service and the landowner must agree to the transfer's taking place; thirdly, North Down Borough Council must acquire the necessary expertise to carry out the trapping, transfer and release of the red squirrels before a license for the trapping of red squirrels for translocation can be issued.

My officials do not have any knowledge of the situation in Glen Lyon Park, but when they go back to the council I will be quite happy for them to talk about that also.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister may not be aware that the Environment Committee visited Teal Lough and Lough Fea. Although it was very cold, we saw the great work that the conservation group, farmers, the Ulster Wildlife Trust and EHS are doing to preserve the habitats there. What financial implications are there for areas of special scientific interest (ASSIs) and conservation as regards implementing EU regulations?

Mrs Foster: The Department is very aware of EU regulations. They are always to the forefront of my mind when I come to the Environment Committee, and they will be to the forefront of the Department's consideration of ASSIs. I will be coming to the Environment Committee very soon to discuss some issues regarding ASSI designation. We must take into consideration the fact that EU directives have to be complied with and may impact on our ASSI designations. As the Member knows, our resources are finite.

Mr Kennedy: Does the Minister agree that endangered species now include successful DUP candidates in local government by-elections? Will she provide a full list of endangered species in Northern Ireland, in addition to red squirrels?

Mrs I Robinson: That is your party.

Mr Kennedy: We are very much alive.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs Foster: Is it not a great thing when one has to rely on transfers from the Traditional Unionist Voice to get elected in a by-election? Neither group has a vision for Northern Ireland; perhaps that is why they have

come together on that point. I also think that it is a bit rich for the Member to trumpet a by-election success when his party's vote has gone down from 31% in 2005 to 24.1% last week. Apparently, that constitutes a success for the Ulster Unionist Party — in this country, everything is relative.

Review of Public Administration

5. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on the time frame for the implementation of the review of public administration.

(AQO 2005/08)

Mrs Foster: As I indicated when I opened the take-note debate on the emerging findings of the review of local government aspects of the RPA on 13 November 2007, we wish to implement an agreed reform and modernisation package as quickly as possible to remove uncertainty for those who work in local government.

At this stage, our aim is to implement the package by 2011, although I recognise that to do so will require the sustained effort and engagement of all the key stakeholders in the process. However, the Executive have not reached agreement on the way forward, and if agreement cannot be achieved by the end of the month, and we cannot begin the implementation process immediately, I must rule out any possibility of implementing the agreed package by 2011.

We would then have no option but to run elections to the 26 councils in 2009, for the full four-year term of office. Were that to happen, 2013 would become the next target date for implementation. In such circumstances, I could not justify putting in place a severance scheme for councillors prior to the 2009 council elections.

3.15 pm

Mr Storey: The Ulster Unionist Party should take note, because there is a European election in 2009, and that party will not be chirping as much as it is today, because it will be beaten.

Can the Minister assure me that the uncertainty surrounding local government, particularly in respect of all who are employed by the councils, will be allayed quickly so that we can move forward in a process that will provide the relevant powers and the structure that is necessary for strong local government in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: Following the publication of the emerging findings of the review of the local-government elements of the RPA, the written responses from stakeholders, the views collated from the focused process of engagement, the views expressed by Members of this House during the take-note debate, and the views of the Environment Committee were all

shared with relevant Executive colleagues in an Executive subcommittee in November and December. Since then, we have been working very closely to consider those responses and agree a way forward. Those discussions continue.

Although I recognise that it is important that decisions be announced as quickly as possible — and I hope that the Member realises from the tone of my answer to his initial question that I recognise the time frame in which we are operating — it is also important that the Executive take their time and get those decisions right. It is my intention to report to the Executive, and to announce decisions to this House, as quickly as I possibly can.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister provide detail of the guarantees on power-sharing and partnership, including checks and balances on decision-making by councils, which must be at the heart of the proposals on local government reform? What is the current status of work on those important provisions?

Mrs Foster: The Member will know, because of his work as Chairman of the Environment Committee, that that issue has always been at the forefront of the proposals. My colleagues on the Executive subcommittee and I are committed to the development of a statutory system of safeguards. The development and design of the proposals on that aspect of the structural reform of local government will be taken forward under the auspices of the strategic leadership board of the local government task force.

I must take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of the strategic leadership board. The leadership that it is showing at local government level, and through its engagement with the Department of the Environment, has been tremendous, and I hope that the partnership that we have developed will continue.

Mr McCarthy: The review of public administration seems to be going on for ever, with no end in sight. Has the Minister discussed with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment giving the new councils a more definite leading role in economic development and ensuring prosperity for Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: The short answer is yes. I have had meetings with many, if not all, of my ministerial colleagues in respect of the review of public administration, and my friend Nigel Dodds has been one of them. We held a very productive meeting, and that is reflected in the fact that Northern Ireland Local Government Association has also held a meeting with Minister Dodds. That is a work in progress.

Mr Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Blue Bin Facility

7. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to extend the blue bin facility to encourage commercial recycling. (AQO 2071/08)

Mrs Foster: I have no plans to extend that facility in the way that the Member suggests. District councils are the statutory authorities that are responsible for providing suitable receptacles and for collecting controlled waste in their districts. They may collect waste from commercial premises if asked to do so by particular businesses. However, all councils operate within the overall waste management strategy for Northern Ireland, which aims to increase resource efficiency by promoting the recycling and recovery of waste. To that end, district councils are encouraged to accept commercial and industrial waste at a minimum of one civic amenity site per council area, so as to encourage recycling on the part of small and medium-sized enterprises.

Mr Molloy: Does the Minister agree that the bulk of the recyclable waste — cardboard, and so on — comes from commercial premises? Many councils do not have a mechanism for disposing of that. Would there be an advantage in the Minister's publicising the fact that local businesses can call on manufacturers and producers to take that material back? That may encourage the shopkeepers to recycle such material for use by the original businesses.

Mrs Foster: I hear what the Member is saying, and he is right that manufacturers should take back waste. As a member of the strategic waste board, he knows that the Department is considering those matters. He will be aware of the waste and resources action programme (WRAP), which works in partnership to encourage and enable businesses and consumers to be more efficient in the use of materials and to recycle more often. WRAP has been investing in the recycling sector in Northern Ireland since 2003, and my Department works closely with it. I hope that the waste management strategy takes a role in tackling commercial waste and that the important work with WRAP continues.

Mr Ross: What efforts is the Minister making to increase recycling figures to ensure long-term sustainability?

Mrs Foster: I spoke about WRAP in my previous answer, which demonstrates my commitment to meeting the recycling targets in the waste management strategy. Funding from WRAP's core market development programme, as well as the recycling and organics technical advisory team programme, which provides hands-on advice for local authorities on their collection programmes, means that we are well on our way to helping commercial businesses to deal with the targets that are set out in the Northern Ireland waste

management strategy. I wish to put those targets on record: 60% of commercial and industrial waste must be recycled by 2020; 75% of construction, demolition and excavation waste is to be recycled or reused by 2020; recycling and composting of household waste should be at 35% by 2010, 40% by 2015 and 45% by 2020.

Communication is important in relation to recyclables and waste. I have been saying that at the strategic waste board, and I will continue to say so. We must get the message out about our commitment under European legislation on the landfill directive and what is right for the environment. The strategic waste board agrees with me about communication, and it is taking the issue seriously.

Mr Dallat: Given that the Government are possibly one of the worst polluters, can the Minister tell us when we will have a genuinely independent environmental protection agency?

Mrs Foster: The Member will know that I am considering the position of an environmental protection agency, in the light of a report that was presented to me in June 2007. I am also considering the Criminal Justice Inspection's report and its comments about the Environment and Heritage Service and wildlife crime, people — most notably, Northern Ireland Water — polluting our water systems and illegal waste, which is a huge issue on which the EHS is making progress. I am aware of all those issues, on which I intend to come to the House before the summer.

Review of Public Administration

8. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of the Environment to give a time frame within which she will make a decision on the number of local councils under the review of public administration.

(AQO 1967/08)

11. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of the Environment what progress has been made in finalising the number of councils that will result from the review of public administration. (AQO 1988/08)

Mrs Foster: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 8 and 11 together.

After the publication of the emerging findings of the local government elements of the review of public administration on 19 October 2007, the written responses that were received from stakeholders, the views that were collated from the focused process of engagement and the views that were expressed by Members of the House and members of the Committee for the Environment were all shared with relevant Executive colleagues and the Executive subcommittee in November and December 2007. Since then, I have been working closely with my ministerial colleagues to consider

those responses and agree a way forward; those discussions continue.

Although I recognise that it is important that the review process is concluded and decisions are announced as quickly as possible, it is also important that the Executive take the time to get those decisions right. I intend to report to the Executive and announce the decisions to the House as soon as possible.

Mr Gardiner: The Minister will be aware that the number of local councils impacts on decisions such as the number of planning authorities. If, for example, there were to be 15 councils, how will she handle the number of subregional planning authorities? Will there be groups of five or three, or five groups of three?

Mrs Foster: The Member will be aware that, in the debate in this House on emerging findings, it was indicated that Planning Service and many of its functions would pass to local councils. How those services will be distributed among councils has not been finalised; however, I assure the Member that those shared services will be able to work effectively. It is exciting when we can say to local government that there have been enough complaints about planning decisions, and that it is about time that councils took responsibility. They should look forward to making planning decisions in 2011.

Mr P J Bradley: Under the review of public administration, what Government functions has the Minister secured for transfer to local government from her colleagues in the Executive, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure? Is she entirely satisfied that the functions that they have offered to transfer have her support in the new vision for local government?

Mrs Foster: My colleagues encourage me to say that the whole of the Department for Social Development will be transferred, but I shall not be so bold.

The initial proposals in my paper on emerging findings, published on 19 October 2007, drew much adverse comment, particularly from local government and from this House. I listened carefully to those views and reflected upon them. Since then, I have worked closely with ministerial colleagues on developing recommendations on the future shape of local government, and I hope that those will live up to the vision that everyone shared. When we came to the review, the one non-contentious issue was the vision of a strong, local government partner. That is how I want local government to be seen in future — as a partner, working in tandem with the regional administration in the Assembly.

Mr Weir: With regard to the time frame, what does the Minister see as a window of opportunity for the decisions? What are the implications if decisions are delayed by more than a few weeks?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for that question. This is where it gets serious. If agreement cannot be reached by the end of February and the implementation process begun immediately, I must rule out any possibility of implementing the agreed package by 2011. There will then be no option but to run elections through all existing 26 councils in 2009 for a full four-year term of office. If that happens, 2013 becomes the next target date for implementation. As I have said before, in such circumstances I could not possibly justify putting a severance scheme for councillors in place prior to the 2009 council elections.

Mr Speaker: Questions 9 and 10 have been withdrawn.

Draft Planning Policy Statement 14

12. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of the Environment, further to her Assembly statement on 25 October 2007, to confirm that draft Planning Policy Statement 14 will be published within the given timescale. (AQO 2037/08)

Mrs Foster: I am delighted to get to double figures: there is a first time for everything. Good progress has been made in the matter, and we are on target to deliver a revised draft by the end of April, as indicated in my statement.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister should share her expertise in answering questions quickly with the Minister of Education. At the moment, she has not got as far as the medals.

The proposal to increase the amount of social housing permitted in rural settlements is to be welcomed, and I congratulate the Minister for Social Development in securing that important concession. However, is the Minister of the Environment not concerned that her proposals are still overtly restrictive with regard to allowing country people, who are not necessarily connected to farms, to exercise a basic right to live in the countryside?

Mrs Foster: I could give a short answer; however, I shall flesh it out a bit. It remains the case that there is a need to protect the countryside from unnecessary development. We do not propose a return to a pre-PPS 14 situation, and there was a consensus on that.

3.30 pm

The Member said that a concession on social housing was made to the Minister for Social Development. That was not a concession; it was something that was agreed. There was sufficiently broad consensus on the dispersed rural communities to allow for the development of appropriately sited small groups of houses. That should be seen as a positive

move forward and a way in which we are trying to address creatively the issues with which the Minister for Social Development has to deal.

Mr Speaker: Order. Time is up for questions to the Minister of the Environment.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Tax-varying Powers

1. **Mr McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what further consideration he has given to seeking tax-varying powers for the Assembly in order to address the shortfall in funding for front-line services. (AQO 2026/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): The Assembly debated the issue of tax-varying powers on 16 October 2007. I recall warning Members that seeking additional fiscal powers represented a double-edged sword. Increasing the tax take in Northern Ireland would generate additional public expenditure, but it might also harm regional competitiveness. Furthermore, if HM Treasury were to agree to grant a tax-varying power to Northern Ireland and we decided to reduce the level of taxation, the implication of the Azores ruling would be that the Northern Ireland block would have to cover the loss of receipts. That would result in fewer resources for front-line services.

Mr McLaughlin: There is obviously a divergence of opinion on the matter. However, does the Minister agree that there is a significant deficit in the settlement under Barnett in that it cannot provide the financial resources to enable the Executive and the parties therein to deliver the type of front-line services and economic competitiveness that they desire? In those circumstances, does the Minister agree that it is important to keep all options open and available to the Executive?

Mr P Robinson: I agree that as the years go on, the Barnett squeeze will increase. However, if we seek to deal with that squeeze through tax-varying powers, the total additional revenues would come directly from the pockets of the people of Northern Ireland, rather than the burden being spread by dealing with it on a UK-wide basis. I am sure that the Member has read about the Prime Minister's appearance on the 'Politics Show' on Sunday, although I hope that he was at church rather than watching television. In case the Member did not see the programme, speaking directly about Scotland — and there is some resonance for Northern Ireland in his words — the Prime Minister said:

"There is an issue about the financial responsibility of an executive or an administration that has £30bn to spend but doesn't have any responsibility for raising it."

He went on to say:

"In any other devolved administration in the world, there is usually a financial responsibility that requires not only the spending of money by the administration but also its responsibility to take seriously how it raises money."

He continued by saying that the Government are considering the issue. That seems to suggest that, for Scotland at least, the Government intend to consider how revenue is raised. If that happens for Scotland, it is pretty likely that there will be a read across for Northern Ireland.

Mr Burnside: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Given that I do not want you to rule me out of order, I will not refer to the Ulster Unionist victory at Dromore.

I ask the Finance Minister — perhaps soon to be leader of his great party — to give the commitment that, for as long as he is Finance Minister or even leader of his great party, that no additional tax-raising powers will be used during this Assembly. The experience in devolved Assemblies has been that if they are given those powers, they will tax more, thus placing a greater burden on the electorate and the taxpayers. In Northern Ireland, those people are already suffering as a result of the increased taxation that has come about through, for instance, rates and water charges.

Mr P Robinson: The Member's conclusion is basically what I said to the Member for South Antrim. I have neither any plans to seek tax-raising powers nor to open the Barnett formula. I am pretty sure that opening that formula could be damaging for Northern Ireland. I do not mind getting Barnett plus, but there are some dangers in us opening up the formula.

As far as the by-election is concerned, I will not respond by indicating that it was a disastrous election for the Ulster Unionist Party, which fell from polling 60% of the vote before 2005 down to 31%. It has now gone down to 24%, having lost 60% of its vote in the area. The big difference is that the DUP learns lessons from its election results, and the party will address the issues that are of concern to the people of Northern Ireland, as any democratic party should.

Mr O'Loan: Does the Minister support the recent initiative by the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Ireland to pursue the 12.5% corporation tax rate? Does he welcome the fact that the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee at Westminster is also looking into the matter? Will he confirm that he is still personally committed to achieving that reduction and say what practical steps he is taking to bring that about?

Mr P Robinson: Yes, I am committed to it. The differences that exist between Northern Ireland and

any other part of the United Kingdom — in that we are a country that is coming out of decades of division, violence and conflict — distinguish us from the rest of the UK. We were held back from so much of the growth that other areas enjoyed. Furthermore, we are the only part of the United Kingdom that has a land frontier with another part of the European Union that has a much more competitive tax regime. For those reasons, Northern Ireland deserves to be treated in a better way than other parts of the UK with regard to corporation tax. Therefore my commitment remains.

I indicated after the Varney Review was completed that the issue may have been determined for that time but that it would not go away and people would continue to campaign for it. I enjoy that there is support from the Committee and from those outside the Committee, who believe that the issue must be dealt with. Whether it is from the present or a future Administration at Westminster, I believe that the time must come when we get that dispensation to give us a fiscal instrument that allows us to be on a level playing field with those closest to us and who are competing against us.

Mr Speaker: Questions 2 and 3 have been withdrawn.

Workplace 2010

4. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on the Workplace 2010 project. (AQO 1977/08)

10. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on Workplace 2010. (AQO 2007/08)

Mr P Robinson: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 4 and 10 together.

I can confirm that the two bidders who are still in the competition have been invited to submit their best and final offers for the Workplace 2010 contract. When those bids are received, they will be subject to a three-month evaluation, after which the Department will wish to appoint a preferred bidder in the early autumn, with a view to finalising the contract early in 2009. I have, however, given assurances that we will engage fully with the Finance Committee and with the Executive before moving to what are, effectively, the final stages of the procurement.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for the clarification. Will he indicate what progress has been made with the associated review of the location of public-sector jobs?

Mr P Robinson: I indicated to the House that I wanted to conduct the review of public-sector jobs and their dispersal in parallel with the Workplace 2010

bidding process. As Members will be aware, the team chaired by Professor Sir George Bain was established just before Christmas 2007. I met him towards the end of last year and made it clear that I was not a Minister who was going to interfere and seek to get a particular result from the group considering the matter. It is an independent review, so I am not privy to the details of the project and how it is advancing.

I can tell the Member that, to date, Sir George has given evidence to the Committee for Finance and Personnel and hosted an informal media briefing. The group is currently gathering its own evidence, and I understand that it has set itself the aim:

“to recommend the distribution of public sector jobs that best enhances the sustainable economic and social development of Northern Ireland.”

The group is due to report in summer 2008, which will allow us time to consider its findings on job location in the context of Workplace 2010.

Dr Farry: At the outset, I welcome the Minister’s decision to allow the Workplace 2010 contract to proceed on the basis that Rathgael House in Bangor will remain, with the Department of Education located there.

Will the Minister clarify whether that decision has been endorsed by the entire Executive, including the Minister of Education and Ministers whose Departments are located in similar buildings elsewhere? While respecting the contract process, can he give some indication of the timescale in which buildings such as Rathgael House will be replaced? I am conscious that people are keen that new buildings be put in place across the Civil Service estate to replace those with existing problems.

Mr P Robinson: I am fully aware that a number of civil servants operate in conditions that are totally unsuitable. Part of the rationale behind Workplace 2010 is to ensure that modern accommodation is available to facilitate improvements and reform in the Civil Service by having better working conditions.

The intention is that the Department of Education will remain at Rathgael House. That will probably require a modest extension to the newest part of the building. It is also intended that the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) staff will return to the Stormont estate. The Executive have agreed that we will examine the detail before anything is signed, rather than just agreeing the broad principles of Workplace 2010. Not only will everything be subject to the support and approval of the Executive, but we have undertaken to consult the Committee for Finance and Personnel, of which Dr Farry is a member.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister touched on the issue of the relocation of Civil Service jobs. Can he detail any

steps that he is prepared to take to ensure that any contracts concerning Workplace 2010 will not put any barriers in the way of the future relocation of Civil Service jobs?

Mr P Robinson: The Member is right to raise the issue, and I also raised it with my officials. There would have been little point in taking those two processes in parallel if we had already taken decisions that would not have allowed the flexibility to act on the conclusions that will be agreed as a result of Sir George's review. My officials have assured me that there is sufficient flexibility in the contract to deal with any of the issues that arise out of the review process. If that were not so, I suspect that it would not be signed off by the Executive.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As a result of Workplace 2010 and other modernisation processes, including the review that is being undertaken by Sir George Bain, and bearing in mind the desire to decentralise administration, can the Minister give any indication of how many Civil Service jobs are anticipated to be decentralised out of greater Belfast by 2010-11?

Mr P Robinson: It would be entirely wrong to set up a review with a respected individual in the chair and a panel to consider those matters, and then to give him a remit that allows him to consider all the factors that are at play but to have a fixed view on what the outcome would be.

The group will consider more than Civil Service jobs. Sometimes, questions on this subject seem not to distinguish between Civil Service jobs and the wider public sector. The wider public sector must be considered, although the panel will undoubtedly consider the categorisation of Civil Service jobs. We must take into account — and I suspect that the panel will — that Belfast is our capital city. There will be a requirement for the headquarters of some organisations to be in Belfast. It is not a case of spreading everything evenly across the Province; it does not work that way. We must recognise that the bulk of the population is in the greater Belfast area, and that, for administrative reasons, it is appropriate for the headquarters to be there.

Peace III Funding

5. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm whether there has been a delay in the schedule to deliver Peace III funding; and to outline the plans he has to assist those projects that were previously assisted through Peace II funding and which may be eligible under Peace III. (AQO 1980/08)

9. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the action he is taking to ensure that Peace III funds will be delivered to groups within the

voluntary and community sector as soon as possible. (AQO 2047/08)

3.45 pm

Mr P Robinson: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 5 and 9 together.

There has been no delay in the overall schedule to deliver the Peace III programme. It was agreed in November 2007, and applications are already being signed under two of its themes — creating shared public spaces and the regional element of building positive relations. Local councils took three months longer than expected to form clusters in the local element of the building positive relations theme. The local peace and reconciliation action plans are due in March 2008. If that deadline is met, funding should flow by summer 2008.

Peace III is a new programme with new objectives and activities. Peace II projects that are eligible for Peace III funding can apply and receive advice from the Special EU Programmes Body. The voluntary and community sector are expected to benefit from all parts of the programme, but the building positive relations theme is particularly relevant.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Minister for his reply. Given that the unionist community has been traditionally slow to avail of or to receive EU funds, will special emphasis be placed on encouraging unionist groups, particularly those that represent victims, to apply for Peace III funding? Will he assure the House that gap funding will be available for such victims' groups should any delays result in the administration of Peace III funding?

Mr P Robinson: I will deal with the latter question first. I do not envisage a gap. There is no reason why we cannot move ahead of the deadline and start processing the applications, providing that the council clusters bring together the action plans.

Mr Kennedy rightly drew attention to what I believe is more than a perception that Unionists have not received the per capita allocations that Nationalists have received. The Minister for Social Development and I attended the North/South meeting that dealt with the Special EU Programmes Body. We raised the issue with its chief executive and highlighted the importance of ensuring that every effort is made to attract bids from the unionist community. The Special EU Programmes Body will do whatever it can to assist in that effort. We have a job to do to make our constituents and groups in our constituencies aware of the availability of such funds and to give them assistance to apply for them. However, the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) will give them whatever assistance is needed.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am encouraged to hear that Peace III

funding will be available by summer 2008. Although gap funding will be avoided, will the Minister concur that everyone — but particularly him and his Executive colleagues — must bring to bear pressure to ensure that a gap is not created and that there are good diversionary programmes to build positive relationships. In the past, the gaps have been more like chasms than small gaps.

Mr P Robinson: To avoid any misunderstanding, I should say that although Peace III follows Peace II, there is no continuous programme. Some of the objectives in Peace II and Peace III are the same, but others are very different. Therefore, it does not automatically follow that if an organisation has received funding under the Peace II programme, they will receive it under Peace III. Applicants cannot automatically move from one programme to the other. They will have to compete for Peace III funding in the same way as anyone else. Otherwise, it would be unfair to the new applicants.

There is not a direct line from Peace II entitlement to Peace III entitlement, because the two programmes have different objectives. However, some Peace II organisations have a criterion that is in common with Peace III, and that will allow them to make an application, but it will have to be assessed under the criteria that are set down.

Mr Ross: Peace III funding is important for many groups in Northern Ireland. I will meet a group from Carrickfergus this week about Peace III funding. What is the closing date in Northern Ireland for receipt of action plans? Will the Minister outline what process follows the SEUPB's receipt of an application?

Mr P Robinson: The deadline is 31 March 2008, but, as I said previously, SEUPB will be happy to receive earlier applications. Following receipt of the applications, SEUPB will conduct an independent economic appraisal on each of the action plans and assess them for eligibility and value for money. Each plan will be passed on to the steering committee to be scored against selection criteria, and it will receive formal approval. Departmental approval — as well as steering committee approval — may also be required, and the first meeting of the steering committee has been scheduled for mid April.

Mr Durkan: I welcome the Minister's comments about the timelines, although I understand the health warning about people falsely assuming that eligibility for Peace II automatically qualifies them for Peace III.

Will the Minister take steps to ensure that the groups understand the difference of focus between Peace II and Peace III and the differing quanta that are available? Will he take steps to ensure that all Departments understand the difficulties of the community and voluntary sector in coping with the

uncertainties around neighbourhood renewal, uncertainties arising from the review of public administration — and the changes that that could make to some of their service level agreements — and the uncertainty in EU funding? Will the Minister work with the Departments to ensure that people in the community and voluntary sector have a better sense of what is coming and how best they can make a contribution and a bid?

Mr P Robinson: I am sure that the evening news will not make this their main story tonight, but I would be wise to heed the Member's advice and ensure that the appropriate information is passed to all organisations — although I am sure that many of them will be aware of the criteria. He is right to state that the numbers in Peace III are different to those of Peace II. We are dealing with a smaller quantum in Peace III. Therefore, if groups are not aware of the timescales involved or if they have to refine their applications because of the change in criteria, they might lose valuable time and lose out.

Water Reform/Rates Reform

6. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of occasions that he has held bilateral meetings with the Minister for Regional Development to discuss water reform and rates reform.

(AQO 1986/08)

Mr P Robinson: The Executive have established a subcommittee to take forward the review of water and sewerage services. That was formed under the chairmanship of the Minister for Regional Development who has direct responsibility for those matters. The subcommittee comprises the Minister for Social Development, the Minister for Employment and Learning and myself, and it has met on five occasions since its inception.

In my capacity as the Minister of Finance and Personnel, I had a number of informal meetings with the Minister for Regional Development before the summer, at which discussions were held on how we propose to take forward our respective reviews on rating and water reform.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he consider it fair that after all the choreography, he has announced a series of concessions in rates while the Minister for Regional Development is left to announce hefty new water charges in which there is no room for manoeuvre?

Mr P Robinson: There is something about departmental responsibility, and I am sure the Member is not suggesting that I should have taken over any of

the Minister for Regional Development's authority and made announcements on his behalf.

The Minister for Regional Development is attempting to reach agreement with all his Executive colleagues, and any agreements thus far have been between all Executive members. Even if additional time is required, it is important that consensus is reached in the Executive. Therefore, by forming a subcommittee in order to consider those matters in detail, I believe that the Minister is taking the right steps, and I am sure that everybody recognises that, if there is to be agreement in the Executive, a subcommittee can be a good mechanism to use.

Mr Weir: Will the Minister confirm, or offer a guarantee, that no householder will pay more as a result of devolution than he or she would have under direct rule proposals?

Mr P Robinson: I have already indicated to the House that if one projects the intended direct rule figures, every household in Northern Ireland will be £1,000 better off by the time the Assembly moves into its electoral mode. That is a distinct advantage; however, that figure is an average for all households. Concerning individual households, in the subgroup, I have been at pains to ensure that that is the case. I can only guarantee my own intentions; however, there must be all-party agreement. If other parties agree with my intention that no one should be worse off as a result of devolution, then that will undoubtedly be the outcome. Nevertheless, that is certainly my objective.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister advise Members whether he has discussed the proposed charging mechanism in the EU Water Framework Directive with the Minister for Regional Development, particularly in light of the fact that the proposed method for charging water rates in relation to house values would not encourage water conservation? Consequently, has the Minister directly contacted the European Commission in order to ascertain whether the proposal will breach the EU directive?

Mr P Robinson: Without divulging too much about internal Executive business, I can tell the Member that not only have I made that comment to the Minister but I have also submitted it to him in writing. My party has a manifesto commitment that water metering should be available at least voluntarily, and, although not everybody in the House agrees with that, the DUP will stand by that commitment. At least, I hope to find allies in the UUP Ministers.

2011 Northern Ireland Census

7. **Mr McCausland** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has in relation to the 2011 Northern Ireland Census. (AQO 1974/08)

Mr P Robinson: The next census is planned to take place in 2011. There has already been formal consultation on the topic content, and users are being kept informed about current thinking. For example, the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency's website lists information-day events.

Census offices are evaluating a census test that was conducted in 2007, and final consultative proposals for the 2011 census will be published later this year, which will be followed by a census Order and, in 2010, census regulations. That will provide an opportunity for full legislative scrutiny.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he anticipate the census forms being available in languages other than English?

Mr P Robinson: I indicated that there will be a full consultation process concerning that issue. In 2001, census forms were available in English only, and it is anticipated that that will also be the case in 2011. Final proposals for the approach to be adopted in 2011 will be published later this year. However, Members should note that, in 2001, a range of supporting material was produced in several other languages — including Irish and Ulster Scots. That material included a translation of the questionnaire in order to assist those people who wished to read the census questions in their own language or language of choice. It is anticipated that a similar approach will be adopted in 2011, no doubt involving not only Irish and Ulster Scots, but perhaps Polish, Portuguese, Cantonese and who knows what else.

4.00 pm

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Please forgive me if my voice is not particularly strong. I wish to raise a matter under Standing Order 19(11), with regard to question 9 to the First Minister and deputy First Minister submitted by Mr Stephen Mouray the Member for Upper Bann, which was either withdrawn or not put. That question is particularly topical at this time and is about a matter that we would have liked to discuss. There may or not be reasons why the question was not put, but it means that there is a problem with the procedures in the House, in that we cannot select a question to ask.

If questions of a topical nature were to be withdrawn repeatedly just before they are to be put, one could begin to consider whether, under Standing Order 60(1)(b), there was wilful obstruction of the business of the Assembly. It is a matter that must be resolved.

Mr Speaker: I hear what the Member is saying. All Members know that they can come to the Table and withdraw a question. That facility is used quite often by many Members from all sides of the House. Indeed, they can go further. If a Member fears that a question will not be answered, it can be withdrawn and put on another day. That facility has always been available to

every Member of the House, and any Member can withdraw a question. It is not there to be abused, however.

Mr B McCrea: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, for the purpose of clarification. I understand that a number of options are available. It would have been useful, because provision exists under Standing Order 19(11), for the Member to postpone the question until another day. I wonder whether the Member took advantage of that facility.

Mr Speaker: That is not a relevant point of order. Any Member of the House can withdraw a question. It is my understanding that the Member concerned withdrew the question.

Mr McFarland: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have a broader question. As I understand it, Members submit their questions for oral answer, which are then balloted. They are put in order, and you take the first 20 questions. Unlike the first Assembly, in which only the odd question was withdrawn, I notice that this week, and in previous weeks, it has become quite common for questions that have been selected out of the ballot to be withdrawn during the interim two-week period. That means that other questions did not make it. That is the first matter that I would like you to look into.

Secondly, in the first Assembly, it was considered really bad form to submit a question and then to be absent from the House at Question Time. At Westminster, a Member is viewed in a very bad light if he or she does not turn up to ask a question for oral answer. Will you examine that issue, Mr Speaker? At the moment, we are hopping all over the place with the questions, and Members withdraw them willy-nilly, even though other very important questions may have been left out of the ballot.

Mr Speaker: I hear what the Member is saying, and I agree with some of the points that he has made about Members submitting questions and withdrawing them at short notice. The other issue, which was commented on by Members on all sides of the House, is that Members have on occasion not been here to ask the questions that they submitted. There are a number of issues, and I agree with the Member to a certain extent.

On the other hand, the Whips have complained that Ministers have not always been able to answer enough questions, and sometimes only get to answer three or four. The Ministers have done extremely well today. The problem is that Members have been caught out: they have not been in the Chamber because they did not believe that we would get through such a number of questions. There are certainly issues for both Ministers and Members to consider.

That concludes Question Time. We will now resume the debate on roads maintenance funding.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Roads Maintenance Funding

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Regional Development to review roads maintenance funding and to ensure that sufficient funding will be made available in line with the Roads Service structural maintenance funding plan. — [*Mr McCallister, Mr Cobain, Mr Elliott*]

Mr B Wilson: I welcome this opportunity to discuss our roads, and I agree that more money should be spent on roads maintenance. However, I do not share the feeling of doom and gloom that other Members have expressed. Our main roads are not that bad, although I accept that minor roads have some problems.

Mr McCallister: There are cracks in the coalition.

Mr B Wilson: Some Members have mentioned that road conditions impact on the number of road accidents. In fact, there is no evidence that road condition have anything very much to do with accidents. Some 40% of accidents are due to the use of excessive speed; 25% are due to the use of alcohol and drugs; and 10% are due to inattention, but there is no indication that accidents are due to the state of the roads.

Priorities must be considered. If I had £20 million extra, would I spend it on roads maintenance? I am not sure that I would. Spending an extra £20 million on healthcare would prove more effective in improving people's quality of life. Likewise, £20 million extra for social housing would benefit the homeless and more vulnerable in our community. Then again, that extra £20 million could be used to tackle child poverty. There is certainly a good case for funding roads maintenance, but many other areas are underfunded, and there are many other demands on a very limited budget. I am simply not convinced that roads maintenance should have priority over those other areas.

However, I must agree with Mr Dallat's amendment. I am more concerned about the manner in which the roads maintenance budget is allocated. The immediate budget allocation is inadequate to meet the ongoing maintenance requirements, but it is supplemented by further funds that are allocated throughout the financial year in the in-year monitoring rounds. That system does not make economic sense and is a grossly inefficient way of using resources. It makes planning impossible. Local Roads Service offices have no idea how much money they will have to spend, or when they will receive the money. Invariably, they receive the money late in the financial year, and are then required to spend it before the end of that same year, which can lead to chaos. Thus, instead of carrying out the most beneficial schemes, the Department will

select the projects that are easiest to complete within the limited timescale.

Last month, North Down Borough Council received an additional £1 million, which was to be spent before the end of March. Much of Bangor has come to a standstill as three or four major roadworks schemes have started in the past few weeks. Instead of phasing in that work throughout the year, all the schemes started at the same time, causing gridlock on the main roads.

A further problem is that the additional funding is allocated in the middle of winter, which is the most difficult time to carry out roadworks. The bad weather — snow, ice and rain — certainly does not make that work any easier. Winter also brings shorter days. Often, workers must work late into the night, and floodlighting is required to enable them to carry out that work. That is an inefficient process, and the work should be carried out in the summer when the evenings are lighter.

Those problems were illustrated in Bangor this past weekend. The ring road was closed at 10 o'clock on Friday night to allow resurfacing work to be carried out overnight. For two or three hours, I was swamped by phone calls from residents complaining that the work was being carried out in the middle of the night. There were massive floodlights all over the place, pneumatic drills were going and jackhammers were thudding. The entire operation caused chaos in the middle of the night and was a massive nuisance. The project should have been phased in earlier in the year when the nights were long.

I welcome the additional funding for roads maintenance, but the present method of funding through monitoring rounds is unacceptable. It is an inefficient use of resources and makes long-term planning impossible.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Members who introduced the motion and the amendment today. I welcome the opportunity to debate the funding for resurfacing of roads across the North. The maintenance of road surfaces, their underlying structures and footways is essential to the social and economic well-being of the North, and it is a high priority for Roads Service.

All of the Department's programmes are under-resourced, which presents us with difficult choices at Budget time. The good news is that on the capital side of the Budget, which is aligned with the first three years of ISNI 2008, the roads network will benefit from £612 million of investment over the three years to 2010-11. That will result in a significant increase in the size of the motorway and dual carriageway network, reduced journey times and improved access to urban centres and regions in the North.

The cost of the combined ISNI proposals for roads is in excess of £3.1 billion over a 10-year period,

including £400 million from across the island of Ireland to upgrade the A5 and the A8. That is a significant increase from the level of funding envisaged in the regional transportation strategy and the scale of investment currently being delivered by the Roads Service. The majority of the ISNI investment is earmarked for strategic road improvements on key transport corridors. In its allocation for maintenance, the Roads Service has consistently given the highest priority to structural maintenance and kept other maintenance to a sensible minimum.

In the Budget that was announced on 22 January, funding for structural maintenance was £56.3 million, £71.8 million and £70.4 million over the three-year Budget period. It is, however, accepted that that total of almost £200 million is approximately £125 million below the level recommended in the structural maintenance funding plan. Initial Budget allocations for structural maintenance in 2006-07 and 2007-08 were approximately £46 million and £59 million respectively. Therefore, in comparison, the Budget for 2008-11 provides a real-terms increase in the resources allocated to that key activity.

Many Members referred to the Budget, and the Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee, who spoke first, wondered how Budget priorities were identified. I found that puzzling because, apart from my Department and me, he probably has the best access to information on how the Budget priorities are arrived at. In fact, his Committee provided valuable scrutiny of, and comment on, that process.

Tom Elliott from Fermanagh asked how happy the Department was with its Budget allocations. As is generally the case, most Ministers — indeed, all Ministers whose views I have been privy to at Executive meetings — are equally unhappy with their allocations. One of the Finance Minister's tasks is to provide as many resources as he can, and all Ministers argue for more than they ultimately receive. When the Department is allocated funding for road maintenance, or receives additional in-year funding, it is welcome. However, I noted Mr Robinson's remark that when I am not successful in getting funding, it is my responsibility and when I do, it is the Minister of Finance's responsibility. I cannot win either way. Nonetheless, that is how the Budget is decided.

Following the lengthy debate and all the Committees' discussions on the Budget to which Members have been privy, Members know that no Minister is completely satisfied with his or her Budget allocations. As a consequence of identifying priorities and dividing the finite resources, tough decisions have had to be taken. Roads Service's funding allocations are issued on a district-council basis, and I assure Members that there is an equitable distribution across the North. As Members know, Roads Service prepares the annual

work programmes that cover the development and maintenance of the network, and they reflect the availability of finance.

This year's 2008-09 work programme is being finalised in preparation for presentation to the respective district councils at the spring meetings that will be attended by Roads Service managers. In distributing the resources available for road maintenance, including resurfacing, patching, gully cleaning, grass cutting and so forth, allocations are made to the four divisions of the Roads Service on the basis of need, and a range of weighted indicators tailored to each maintenance activity are used. The four divisions use those indicators when apportioning resources across council areas to ensure, as far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds. Resurfacing work is generally undertaken on the basis of priority and reflects the structural condition of the road and the volume of traffic that it carries.

Mr Speaker, you were not in the Chair for the first part of the debate, when Members cited many examples from across the constituencies of what they perceive to be poor roads. Perhaps Strangford topped the poll.

I do not have information about the specific roads mentioned, particularly those on Mr McCarthy's lengthy list. However, my Department will endeavour to provide answers to Members who had queries.

4.15 pm

I note that Mr Brian Wilson is content with the roads in North Down, so I can stroke that off my list of places to visit.

Mr McElduff: Will the Minister visit Altamuskin Road?

Mr Murphy: I will bear in mind a visit to Tyrone.

Road safety is always the top priority, and Roads Service has a regular inspections system, which ensures that essential maintenance is identified and completed when necessary. The key issue for public safety is defect repair. Roads Service has an excellent track record in meeting defect response and repair targets, which has been recognised by the courts in public liability cases.

Over the past few years, considerable effort has been made by Roads Service to resurface the main traffic routes across the North, particularly those in the strategic road network that link the more heavily populated urban areas.

Of course, it is always the case that more resurfacing work would be carried out if more funding were available. I appreciate that funding for structural maintenance in the past three years has been almost £50 million short of the levels recommended in the regional transportation strategy. However, it is important to consider the issue in the context of correctly managing

the overall Budget, which involves assessing competing priorities and making decisions. That is the job of the Executive, and it was supported by the Assembly when Members voted for the Budget.

In the last three years, £788 million has been spent on developing and maintaining the road network in the North. Some £503 million has been invested in revenue activities, including maintenance, and a further £285 million was invested on capital projects.

Up to 2018, the investment strategy envisages that £3.1 billion will be invested in road improvements, subject to the availability of resources in future Budget rounds, economic appraisals and statutory re-approvals. In the three years to the end of March 2008, £211 million will have been invested in the structural maintenance of our roads. However, I assure Members that Roads Service will continue to make strong bids for additional structural maintenance funds as part of the in-year monitoring process.

With regard to Mr Dallat's proposed amendment, I do accept — and Brian Wilson also made the point — that Departments release moneys increasingly throughout the monitoring rounds that they know they will not spend. Therefore, the biggest release of money takes place usually during the last monitoring round of the year. Roads Service can then try to take advantage of that by having projects ready to be progressed when the moneys are released. That is not the optimum way to do business and it is not good for the industry. I have discussed the issue with people from the industry.

Although that has been the custom and practice for many years, there is a desire in the Executive for Departments to identify much earlier moneys that they may not spend during the year. That will help the process because it will allow the Department for Regional Development to identify areas where money could be spent earlier in the year, rather than rushing to complete work in the last quarter of the year, which, as Brian Wilson said, results in many projects being crammed into a short period of time.

Therefore, the onus is on all Departments to be more up-front in their assessments about moneys that they have been allocated as part of the Budget that they know — for whatever reason — they will not be able to spend as part of that year's spending process. Those sums can then be reallocated earlier.

Roads Service is well versed in dealing with end-of-year funding: it has great experience of that and is able to take advantage of such situations. Owing to the flexibility of the industry, it is normal for Roads Service to benefit from underspends in other areas. Its divisions have predetermined work programmes that target the worst roads; these can be implemented immediately on the additional funding becoming available.

Roads Service works closely with the Quarry Products Association to ensure that the industry can cope with what are quite often significant increases in output. I will bear in mind the point that Mr Wells made about the small quarry owners and their ability to respond to increases in output.

Although the Department would prefer the additional funding earlier in the year, it welcomes additional resources at any time. Roads Service is content with the current arrangements for managing that funding. However, as I said, the Executive do want to improve the way that funds are identified and returned to the central pool much earlier than has been case over the past number of years.

More than £15 million of additional funding was allocated to Roads Service divisions in January 2008. I understand that they are on course to spend that record amount of end-of-year money, although that does depend on the weather remaining reasonable.

I am sure that all Members will agree that maintaining the surfaces and underlying structures of roads and footways is essential for the socio-economic well-being of the North. When the time comes, I hope that Members will support my Department's bids for additional structural maintenance funds. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank all Members who contributed to, and intervened during, the debate. The SDLP amendment is not entirely incompatible with the motion, and the flavour and content of the debate has reflected that.

Mr McCarthy outlined several issues. He is sitting beside his colleague Brian Wilson, with whom, after this debate, some bridge building may be needed, although that might be the wrong term to use in the circumstances. Issues were raised that affect constituencies across the North. I am glad that Mr Willie Clarke is confident that the Minister will deliver on road schemes and other issues that were raised. My colleague John Dallat has a constituency interest in some —

Mr Dallat: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: I will.

Mr Dallat: Does Mr McGlone agree that, given that it is the most polluted town on these islands, Dungiven should be included in the magic tour that some Members are arranging for the Minister?

Mr McGlone: I hope that the magic tour will include Dungiven, as well as Mr McElduff's Altamuskin Road. That is a plug for Barry.

Mr McElduff: I thank the Member for that.

Mr McGlone: Mr Elliott referred to the condition of roads in the west, where there are no longer any railways. Proper investment is required in our roads. Mr Irwin said that maintenance of our rural roads is

patchwork, as is the state of some bus routes. The SDLP proposed the amendment to create an in-built mechanism to end the last-minute rush by deeply committed staff in our district offices to undertake maintenance schemes. I pay special tribute to the staff whom I know from my constituency. They are dedicated and on the ball, but, inevitably, they must wait until the last minute — I am sure that the same happens in other districts — to try to spot extra cash, and, if any extra cash is available, to decide to which project it should go.

My colleague P J Bradley referred to inadequate investment in our roads and to how that manifests itself; for example, roads are subsiding, and culverts and small bridges are not being maintained. If the Speaker will permit me some leeway, I shall mention some areas in my constituency that require extra road maintenance: Kildress; Ardboe; Moortown; Ballinderry; Ballyronan; Ballymaguigan; and Newbridge.

On the capital side of the departmental budget, the Minister mentioned an investment of £612 million, which will result in an increase in the motorway and dual-carriageway network and in improved access to urban centres and towns. As important as that is, it is just as important that those who live in and commute from rural areas receive a slice of that budget.

Mr George Robinson said that there is not a bottomless pit and that funding should be ring-fenced for upgrades and maintenance. I pay particular tribute to Mr Wells's research, which revealed that there is £30 billion worth of assets in our roads and that 0.5% is spent maintaining those assets. He compared the £2,800 per kilometre that is spent in the North with the £12,000 per kilometre that is spent in England and the £7,500 per kilometre that is spent in Wales. Mr Wells articulated his point well, and we should learn from his remarks.

Mr Shannon, whom I thank for supporting the amendment, mentioned roads in Newtownards, accidents as a result of falls, slippery roads and the necessary requirements for resurfacing. I was surprised to hear that some roads had not been resurfaced for 68 years, which is incredible.

Mr Brian Wilson said that the £20 million that is spent on roads maintenance could be better spent on health, child poverty or housing. I do not agree with the latter part of that comment, but I, and many people in my constituency, feel that all those sectors should receive extra money. However, I do not know how possible that is.

I support my colleague Mr Dallat's amendment, which adds to and complements the original motion.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Members who participated in the debate. Mr Elliott expressed some reservations about accepting the SDLP's amendment, but we are prepared to accept it.

My colleague Mr Cobain began the debate by talking about the importance of investing properly in roads, and he cited the example of France. We need not look that far. Our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland have experienced rapid economic growth and have invested in their roads infrastructure.

A recurring theme of the debate has been short-term fixes to our roads and the heavy over-reliance on in-year monitoring rounds. Mr Dallat referred to the current stop/start approach as “impulse buying”. It is difficult to manage such an approach. I accept that the Roads Service does its best, but a stop/start approach is far from an ideal scenario for meeting the demands of the Roads Service, managers, contractors, the quarrying industry and workers.

Mr Bresland referred to the importance of roads to the west and to how dependent on roads that area had become, because there has been no rail link for many years. Mr McGlone talked of “bridge-building” between the Alliance Party and the Green Party. Some bridge-building may also be required within Sinn Féin, because Willie Clarke spoke of the less-than-adequate budget for road maintenance, but Mr Boylan talked of a generous budget. The Sinn Féin camp may need to collect its thoughts because there is clearly some confusion about whether the structural maintenance budget represents a good or a bad settlement. Perhaps the Newry and Armagh area is getting too much money, and some should be diverted to South Down.

Brian Wilson of the Green Party said that roads maintenance funding was not that bad, although I am not sure what he meant because he went on to say that Bangor was gridlocked. I accept Mr Wilson's point that there will always be competing demands for resources — one could refer to health and social housing. However, I contend that roads are important. The Minister said that it is important to keep our roads in good condition and for people to have good access. Public transport relies predominately on roads, which are important for social inclusion and for addressing health needs and inequalities across Northern Ireland. We must have a decent and properly maintained road network.

There was some rivalry between Mrs Robinson and Mr McCarthy about who spoke for all of Strangford. I am not sure who won that argument. Mr McCarthy was probably quite pleased that there was a debate between him and Mrs Robinson.

The rural nature of constituencies such as Strangford, Fermanagh and South Tyrone, or my constituency of South Down, makes the road network vital to those communities. Mr McCarthy mentioned some of the roads.

At the risk of leaving out any road in South Down, I ought to list every road in the constituency, but, to everybody's relief, I will not.

4.30 pm

The rural nature of most roads in Northern Ireland was the crux of most of the arguments. Mr Irwin also talked about rural roads, and he made an important point about the criteria for deciding which roads are gritted in winter. Like me, many Members may feel that certain roads in their constituencies should be gritted, although those roads do not quite meet the criteria.

Mr Elliott spoke about the lack of choice in relation to public transport and poor access to services. Those matters are critical to those of us who represent large rural constituencies and who are concerned that services are maintained and not devalued. Poor road drainage and other problems are costing businesses money. Heaping more costs on to businesses will cause problems with employment, and areas that have poor road networks will be much less attractive to inward investment.

It would be remiss of me not to pay tribute to Mr McElduff for sacrificing his St Valentine's night to go to a meeting about a road. I am sure that his wife was delighted, although I am not sure how Mr McClarty knew about it. That was very commendable of Mr McElduff, and I am sure that he is delighted about the money that he saved.

Mr P J Bradley mentioned the traditional “road man”. Many people who may not be as young as I am have talked about a similar theme. That sort of local knowledge and the pride that is involved in keeping local roads, verges and drainage well maintained may be something that the Minister might wish to consider in the future.

Mr Wells gave us some interesting figures on roads. I was surprised that he sounded so reasonable — almost uncharacteristically so. When even Roads Service's own annual report talks about papering over the cracks, we must find a better system. An over-reliance on in-year monitoring puts pressure on the entire system, and the Minister for Regional Development accepted that in his speech. I noted that the Minister mentioned that the Minister of Finance and Personnel seemed to take credit when the money was available. I could not agree more. In the previous Executive, the concessionary-fares scheme seems to have been all his idea and nobody else was involved. However, as I have pointed out before, only his party could have introduced something so unequal.

Mr Shannon suggested that we get the roads that we pay for. He highlighted concerns about the skid resistance of roads and the recording of accidents. The Minister should examine the way in which accidents

are recorded throughout Northern Ireland to ensure that, if roads are at fault, that defect is properly recorded.

It has been a good debate, the main theme of which is that we must find a better way of financing road maintenance. The infrastructure is much too important to neglect, and we do not want to end up as the poor relation in that regard. The infrastructure must be financed and looked after; it is extremely important for travel, for health provision and for the economy, and we must get it right. We must look after our roads and ensure that they are maintained in good condition. After all, once roads fall into a bad state of repair, bringing them back up to standard can cost four or five times as much as maintaining them properly. I thank all the Members who have spoken in support of the motion.

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 Regional Development to review roads maintenance funding and to ensure that sufficient funding will be made available in line with the Roads Service structural maintenance funding plan; and further calls for an urgent review of end of year management of funds to ensure that a more strategic approach is applied to the way in which maintenance schemes are undertaken immediately before the end of the financial year.

Reclassification of the Terrorist Campaign

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

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

Mr Storey: I beg to move

That this Assembly repudiates any suggestion that the 30 year terrorist campaign in Northern Ireland be re-classified as a "war".

I preface my remarks by remembering all those innocent victims who have been murdered, maimed and injured over the past 35 years as a result of what can only be described as a terrorist campaign. The motion should act as a reminder to the republican movement that, however it may view its position in the Assembly, it is being scrutinised. Despite what Caitríona Ruane may wish or think, my party will continue to scrutinise it in every aspect, policy and issue. Sinn Féin Members should never think that they may have pulled one over on the unionist community. We will not see their portrayal of IRA violence as anything other than an attempt to airbrush history and distort the true facts. Robin Eames and his colleagues should also be clear that any attempt to support the rewriting of paramilitary terrorism will be totally rejected by the unionist community. I hope that Members on the SDLP and Alliance Benches will also utterly reject such a notion.

I am not blind to the activities of loyalist groups. However, their support was always tiny and, as we can see from the Chamber, it has diminished further.

The IRA murdering campaign will always remain what it was: the grubby, cowardly actions of sectarian terrorists who are in denial about their past and who betrayed the very cause that they claim to support. Republicans are in denial about the nature of Irish republicanism, about their so-called struggle and their personal responsibility in it. They still try to deny, for instance, their direct role in the demonising and targeting of the Loyal Orders, despite Gerry Adams's boastful claiming of credit for it on the part of Sinn Féin activists. They are still in denial about what they have called "collusion", because they claim that loyalists colluded but that republicans did not. They still try to deny that the republican movement was riddled with informers, even though it was, and that the security forces utterly infiltrated and fatally compromised it, even though they did. Sinn Féin still denies the truth that by the early 1980s, surveillance was in place, by the mid-1980s, it had been infiltrated and agents recruited at all levels across the entire movement, and that by the early to mid-1990s, it was a busted flush looking for a way out.

Although Sinn Féin means “ourselves alone”, the truth is that, for many years, it was not alone, because British Intelligence had placed its people at the very highest level of Sinn Féin, ensuring that it would, in the words of Mr Molloy in 1999:

“administer British rule in Ireland for the foreseeable future.”

He continued:

“The very principle of partition is accepted.”

I shall return to that theme in a few moments.

Irish republicanism is also in denial about the true nature of its so-called struggle. There was no war fought out in the ditches, houses, hedgerows, back alleys or dark corners of Northern Ireland. We know that because, when terrorists crawled out of their lairs to murder their neighbours, they ignored every convention of warfare. In warfare, prisoners are afforded certain rights and standards of treatment; however, the Provos tortured and murdered their prisoners and then booby-trapped their bodies.

The Provos also broke regulations with regard to the wounded, whom they tortured and killed. There are regulations to ensure that people do not:

“employ weapons, projectiles, materials or tactics of a nature to cause superfluous injury”.

Once again, the Provos ignored that. Consider the planning behind Bloody Friday — in the Sinn Féin leader’s territory — when bombs were planted specifically in order that civilians might run directly into their path.

Furthermore, they ignored the regulation that states:

“The attack or bombardment of towns, villages, habitations or buildings which are not defended, is prohibited.”

Consider the Claudy bombing — in Martin McGuinness’s territory. Consider how many major town centres were blown to smithereens. In all of those cases and others, the Provisional IRA deliberately ignored the international conventions of warfare, at will, for decades. Therefore, no war was fought in Northern Ireland.

If the IRA campaign was not a war, what was it? In order to answer that question, the Assembly must consider exactly what the IRA did. In some instances, the IRA murdered people for no reason other than their religion. The Kingsmill massacre was carried out by the IRA under a cover name. The gunmen asked each of the workers their religion. One of them was a Roman Catholic. He was told to get out of the way. The rest — 10 men in total — were riddled with bullets because of their religion. In other cases, people were specifically targeted because of their ethnic background. Consider the bombings of Birmingham and Warrington, where people were attacked because they happened to have been born British.

In other cases, people were murdered because of their political opinion. When I look across at the Ulster Unionist Party’s Benches, I think of the late, and greatly missed, Rev Robert Bradford and Edgar Graham. I look at my own Benches, and although I am thankful that planned attacks failed, I know that many of my colleagues are only alive today because the IRA failed in its plans. Its intent, however, was the same.

The Assembly knows that the IRA did not fight a war because it ignored the international conventions that govern warfare. It knows that the IRA stands guilty of sectarian, ethnic and racial murder and political assassination. Therefore, what exactly was the IRA’s campaign about? It simply fought a seedy, grubby, sectarian, terrorist campaign — nothing more or less.

The only alternative would be that if the IRA’s campaign were a war, Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness are war criminals every bit as much as Mladic and Karadzic, or any others who are associated with atrocities in the former Yugoslavia. The IRA campaign was no war. The IRA merely inflicted its sectarian misery on society.

It was, however, a fatally compromised and infiltrated sectarian terrorist organisation. As I said earlier, by the mid- to late 1980s, British intelligence had agents across all levels and every section of the organisation. In 1984, Gerry Adams was still saying that:

“You cannot claim to be an Irish nationalist if you consent to an internal six county settlement and if you are willing to negotiate the state of Irish society with a foreign government.”

In 1986, Gerry Adams was still saying that:

“Irish nationalism within British constitutionality is a contradiction in terms.”

In 1986, Martin McGuinness was saying that:

“Those who collaborate with Britain in exchange for a slice of the cake will implement British policy and remain silent when Irish people are murdered and oppressed.”

In 2008, however, McGuinness and Adams implement British rule, just as Francie Molloy had foretold.

The IRA was simply the largest terrorist organisation in Europe. The people who were dead and mourning were left that way, not as part of any war, but as the result of the Provisionals’ naked sectarian hatred. It is painful for democrats to comprehend that the political representatives of such a body should sit in an Executive in a democratic country. For some people, it is not only painful, but unbearable. I have every sympathy with those who feel that way.

However, I take comfort from the fact that although there was no conversion on Sinn Féin’s part, there was corruption from the inside.

Although there was no transformation, there was infiltration from the outside, and although Sinn Féin

used to be a political wing of the IRA, it is now, in many ways, a political wing of MI5.

4.45 pm

The House should send out a clear message today that, although all that is true, we will not play along with Sinn Féin's self-delusion, nor have anything to do with the Eames/Bradley group's proposal to airbrush history. Members should send out the message that we know Sinn Féin for what it is and what it did, and that its past crimes should neither be covered nor whitewashed. As we try to complete the task of creating a new, better and prosperous Northern Ireland, we should send out the message that, in the process of achieving that, we will not leave the truth behind. I support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that every other Member who speaks will have five minutes to do so.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I want to say, at the outset of the debate, that I very much doubt whether the sponsors of the motion really care how the conflict that we have all been through is described. It was not that long ago that they were calling on the IRA to say that the war is over, and they consistently called on the IRA to say that. They had no problem using the word "war" when it suited their own political interest, but now it is like a scene from 'Fawlty Towers': "don't mention the war".

In speaking against the motion, I am mainly concerned about the relatives of all those who have been killed in the conflict. I could bring Mervyn Storey, or anybody, to any republican or nationalist constituency — even just a few streets from where I live, he could speak to a woman whose 12-year-old daughter was murdered by a British soldier firing a plastic bullet, as the child went to fetch a carton of milk. We can all talk about that type of thing, but I am not going to do that now.

Not for the first time in recent months, unionist parties — in their endeavours to score points against each other — have brought motions to the Assembly that have more to do with reaching out to the unionist electorate than with improving the quality of people's lives. The sponsors of the motion know that Sinn Féin, and its electorate, have an entirely different view of the origins of the conflict and of the reasons why we ended up in the conflict situation that resulted in so many people losing their lives.

To nationalists and republicans, the core problem in this country is partition and the British Government's historical occupation of Ireland. I know that the Members opposite think that we lived in a wonderful little place prior to 1969, and that is always their reference point. They simply ignore the injustice of

unionist one-party rule, which treated nationalists and Catholics as second-class citizens in their own country.

Mr D Kennedy: Does the Member not accept the historically accurate fact that Ireland has never been united except under the British Crown?

Ms J McCann: No, I do not agree with that at all. *[Interruption.]*

Can I finish? I did not interrupt you.

It is the unionist parties opposite that are living in denial, not republicans. Those parties are in denial about the role played by unionists from the time of partition, and about their responsibility for the conflict. They need to get real about the injustice of partition and about the society that they created and forced nationalists and Catholics to live in.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: No, I let you finish and I would like to finish what I have to say. I only have five minutes to speak. *[Interruption.]*

Right, go on ahead.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. I will ask a question that I have failed to get an answer for from republicans. I do not accept the premise that there was injustice, because unionists had equal difficulties with the problems of running water and housing that it is claimed were suffered by nationalists and Catholics. However, even if that injustice did exist, did that justify the murder, mayhem, graves and sorrow that were inflicted for 35 years?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will allow the Member an extra minute.

Ms J McCann: It was not just the IRA that did those things, OK? I am not even going to get involved in that debate, because it must be recognised that other people were involved in the conflict, including the British state.

The sponsors of the motion need to be mindful of the language that they use, because it could be deeply offensive to the people whose lost loved ones were members of the IRA. Those who died on the republican side were noble, brave people: they were patriots, involved in a struggle to end Britain's occupation of this part of Ireland — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor. It is fine to disagree with her, but Members must allow her to have her say, just as they were permitted to have their say.

Ms J McCann: I am not asking anyone in the Chamber to accept my views, but I have a right to express them. I am asking Members to respect the feelings of the relatives of those who died. Their grief

is the same as that of anyone else who has lost a family member. Their tears are the same.

I have no difficulty in accepting that because of the actions of republicans, relatives of members of the Crown forces who were killed, are hurting. I would not, for one minute, consider making remarks that could cause offence to those families. All I am asking for is the same level of respect for republican families.

The sponsors of this motion, and similar motions, should bear all that in mind when referring to IRA volunteers and their families. I remind unionist MLAs that they are part of a power-sharing Administration with nationalists and republicans. It is a very —

Mr T Clarke: Under British rule.

Ms J McCann: Well, you are still here. It is a very popular Administration among unionists and nationalists across Ireland. Many people in conflict situations around the world visit us, seeking help to —

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

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this debate. The suggestion that the IRA terrorist campaign of the past —

Mr McCartney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kennedy: Very briefly.

Mr McCartney: The Member made an intervention and stated that Ireland was only ever united under the British Crown. Is that an acceptance that uniting Ireland is a worthy cause?

Mr Kennedy: Yes — under the British Crown. If the Republic wants to rejoin the British Commonwealth and renegotiate the terms and conditions for the union, I would withhold any objection.

The suggestion that the IRA terrorist campaign over the past 35 to 40 years was a war — as opposed to an insurgency — is not only emotive but offensive to unionists. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the motion has been tabled for debate because of recent leaks from the Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past, and that this course of action was, perhaps, under active consideration.

The move that this motion exposes and opposes would be very inappropriate in any Western democracy at any time. However, in the world climate, following 9/11, it is a complete non-starter. I can only imagine what people in the United States, for example, would think of such a proposal, given the brutality and loss of life that took place on 9/11, and the ongoing threat posed by the terrorist organisation al-Qaeda.

Legitimising terrorism is not what the world is about these days — dealing decisively with terrorism,

in the interests of the public who are threatened by terrorists in life and limb, is what we are about nowadays. Trying to rewrite history is never a good idea, even at the best of times. In a very real sense, one cannot rewrite history in any case. The past is exactly that — warts and all. Playing with words is also not a good idea — because that is all it really is. Nothing can take away from the sacrifice of the thousands of victims of the IRA terrorist campaign.

At the very least, we owe victims the respect of refusing to place their murderers on a moral par with them. That would be dishonest and grotesque.

I counsel the political representatives of the terrorists who perpetrated crimes against humanity — and that is exactly what they were — that their interests would be better served by keeping quiet about the past in the hope that, in time, people would stop seeing them as the men who gave up Armalites for Armani suits and would begin to view them as members of a legitimate political party.

Sinn Féin is taking a big risk with the continued existence of the IRA army council, which, if that party had any sense, it would disband. Tomorrow, a debate is due to take place on the murder of Mr Paul Quinn. Every such incident inevitably raises the question of whether the IRA was involved and whether it is still inextricably linked to Sinn Féin, which places its political project, as it calls it, at risk every day that the IRA army council continues to exist.

Talk about terming the IRA terrorist murder campaign a “war” is as laughable as any debate about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin — it is irrelevant and inappropriate. However, such talk still has the power to hurt the victim community.

When proposing the motion, Mr Storey remembered the sacrifices of many politicians, including the Rev Robert Bradford. When Members approach this Chamber and the Senate Chamber, they see memorial tablets in honour of Senator Paddy Wilson, Senator Jack Barnhill, Sir Norman Strong and his son, Jim, and Edgar Graham. Those are chilling reminders on which all of us should reflect, every day, as we pass them. We do not want to go back to those dark days.

This Assembly should pass the motion and, in doing so, should dismiss the notion that a terrorist insurgency was in any way a legitimate war. I shall watch with interest to see which way the political representatives of the IRA vote. I support the motion.

Mr Durkan: Contributions to the debate have already demonstrated that this is an emotive subject. The colour of those contributions perhaps suggests why a body such as the Consultative Group on the Past had to be established and why the victims' commissioners designate for might be better able to make progress on

the legacy of the past than politicians in this Chamber or elsewhere.

It is all very well for the DUP to tell us — as Mr Storey did — that people find it unbearable to take part in the power-sharing arrangements. It seems to me that the DUP is grinning and bearing power-sharing rightly. DUP Members use motions such as this to beat their breasts and Provo-bash and to talk about the past in a very emotive and one-sided way.

The SDLP does not believe in classifying as a war what we went through during the Troubles, the conflict, the division, the violence — all the terms that Members are comfortable with. Members use much the same language about the past few decades of our history.

The SDLP does not believe in equating victims with victim-makers in any way; however, there was not just one set of victim-makers. My party never condoned, excused or indulged violence from any source in any circumstance. However, today, we are being lectured by members of a party that was prepared for years to retell the lie that loyalist violence existed simply in response to republican violence. That is an absolute lie and is completely wrong.

Mrs I Robinson: Does the Member accept that his party was happy to use IRA violence to ensure that it got plenty of handouts from the British Government through the years — by claiming that if the Government did not do a, b or c, succour would be given to Sinn Féin/IRA?

5.00 pm

Mr Durkan: I refute that as an outrageous untruth. The SDLP neither did anything nor argued for anything on the back of the IRA campaign. Unionism argued for plenty on the back of the IRA campaign, and on the back of the so-called loyalist backlash, which was supposedly responsive, yet was not. Loyalist violence was absolutely wrong; republican violence was absolutely wrong.

Some of the people who examine issues of the past mean well, but it would be equally wrong were those people, in a well-meaning effort to deal with the past, to airbrush from history some of the hurtful truths that were experienced. To pretend that what happened was a war would be completely wrong. To talk about there being blood on everybody's hands and about there being wrong done on both sides would be wrong, because many, many people in this society made a conscious decision to play no part in supporting violence, whether that violence was committed in the name of the state, in the name of Ireland or in the name of Ulster. Those people do not have blood on their hands. The only blood that some people have had on their hands was the blood of their innocent loved ones while they tended to them.

The SDLP is opposed to all the crass moves to deal with the past in a false, phoney and dangerous shorthand, whether that be done through branding our recent past a war — as though everybody should have been on one side or another — or through somehow trying to pretend that the Troubles were some necessary and inevitable prelude to the peace process. Thank God that we are here in these power-sharing institutions; however, we could have been here decades ago. Parties must ask themselves about the position that they attempt to justify. There is no point in their simply condemning the violence that others practised. What about the vehemence that they displayed in opposing power sharing, North/South arrangements and political accommodation? That opposition ensured that we endured lost years, lost opportunities and lost lives for longer than was necessary.

That is why, Mr Deputy Speaker, although the SDLP does not wish to see our recent past, in order to airbrush atrocities and people's suffering, branded some sort of war, we shall not trot along behind the DUP into the Aye Lobby to vote in favour of the motion. The DUP does not have the right to propose a motion that deals with the past in a partial and emotive manner. That is no way in which to deal with the past, and it proves why we need — [*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr T Clarke: Provo lover.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please give the Member —

Dr W McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Dr McCrea, I am talking about the noise that has been created. Allow the Member who is speaking to make his point. Several Members have yet to speak, so those Members who have been interrupting will have opportunities to make their point.

Dr W McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It has been said that we had no right to bring the motion to the House. Is it not correct that the Business Committee accepted the motion, so it has a right to be debated?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Absolutely, I could not agree more. Those Members who tabled the motion had a right to bring it before the Business Committee. The Business Committee decides whether a motion can be debated, and its decision was that it could be debated.

Mr Durkan, I shall allow you a further 30 seconds.

Mr Durkan: I was making the point, Mr Deputy Speaker, that the DUP had no right to table a motion that, in purporting to deal with the past, deals with it very partially and emotively. Rather than jumping in irrationally and emotionally, what we all need to do is

allow Eames, Bradley and the others who are dealing with the issues to deal with them.

Yes, for its own political convenience, it suits the DUP to have such a motion debated, but that motion makes no contribution to the past, no contribution to the victims' lot and no contribution to progress. We are hearing lectures from the man who shared a platform with Billy Wright, yet he dares to call me a Provo lover?

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

Mr Lunn: The Alliance Party has no difficulty in supporting the motion. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Lunn: The Alliance Party has no difficulty in supporting the motion, although we doubt its necessity. As far as we are concerned, those who view the years of conflict as a war will continue to refer to it as such, and no number of motions being debated will change that.

The proposers of the motion evidently feel so strongly about recent comments made by people who should, by now, know the effect of wrongly used language in this country that they must emphasise their point again. I must say that I was equally surprised by the language that the Eames/Bradley group used, and the circumstances in which that language was used.

Factually, our conflict was never a war. The internationally recognised Army of the state was never placed on a war footing in Northern Ireland. That is why the Alliance Party was correct to back demands for investigations into allegations of collusion. It was also correct to oppose internment many years ago. Collusion and internment are not legitimate features of peacetime counterterrorism or intelligence gathering.

The positions that have been taken by the unionists and Sinn Féin are contradictory. The broad unionist position — not just that of the DUP — rejects the term “war” but is quite happy to use the term “private armies”. Unionists have been known to demand assurances that the war is over. They do not see the urgency of investigating collusion, although that should be a massive issue for them in peacetime. Sinn Féin, however, sees the past as a war, but it demands inquiries into collusion and events such as Bloody Sunday. If it really was a war, collusion and such events would, by now, be regarded as unfortunate but necessary, or, in the modern, Iraqi-style terminology, “collateral damage”.

The real issue is that there are parties who are so entrenched in division that they cannot deal with the tragedy of the past 30 years without dividing it up. Sinn Féin's campaign is concerned with legitimising the illegitimate by trying to make out that a grubby campaign, which failed utterly, was somehow a

glorious success. Meanwhile, others seek to deny their role in creating the conditions for that tragedy.

It is interesting to debate such matters. Indeed, raking over the past seems to be one of our national pastimes. Although the past must be dealt with, rewriting history is not desirable. I hope that a campaign by terrorists will never be reclassified as a war, or given any kind of legitimacy.

Lord Morrow: As my name is one of the ones in which the motion stands, I support it. Over the past 35 years, Northern Ireland has suffered severely as the result of a vicious, sectarian murder campaign. It was waged, in the main, by the Provisional IRA, which claimed some 1,800 lives. The brutality of that campaign can be measured by the number of people who lost their lives — around 3,600. It seems that hardly a family has escaped. That systematic annihilation was carried out by those who were intent on driving out a people who wanted to be a part of the United Kingdom, and forcing those who remained into a united Ireland.

The neighbouring state, the Irish Republic, was not a disinterested bystander. Rather, it permitted its territory to be used as a safe haven for those who fled there after carrying out their deadly deeds. During the long years of that terrorist campaign, co-operation from the Irish Republic Government was in short supply. Extradition was never going to be implemented, and the reason for that was simple: the aims and objectives of the Provos were similar to those of the Dublin Government. They agreed on those; the only thing on which they disagreed was the tactics.

We have moved to the stage at which some in our society want to see the past redefined as a war. They want to lend some respectability to what happened over the past 35 years; to lend some credibility to those who carried out those dreadful deeds, with victims and perpetrators treated as equal. Could anything be more absurd? That would be rubbing salt into very raw wounds.

We all thought that the release of prisoners under the Belfast Agreement and the destruction of the RUC was the final insult, but now comes a further heinous suggestion — that those who carried out those murders be treated in the same way as their victims. Could anything be more hurtful, repulsive and soul-destroying than such a dirty suggestion? Surely, victims and Northern Ireland as a whole have suffered enough. To even attempt to justify such actions is a travesty — it is an insult to the victims and the memories of their loved ones. That would be to conveniently smooth over a horrendous part of this country's past and piece together a more presentable history on which to build its future.

To attempt to cloak the past 30 years or more of terror in a shroud of respectability demeans the intelligence

of all right-thinking people and heaps additional pain and suffering on victims and their loved ones. Reclassification of the terrorist campaign as a war feeds the ego and is a misplaced belief that there was a struggle towards a goal. A romanticised “La Resistance” image is always portrayed by the so-called IRA volunteer who gave the ultimate sacrifice in search of freedom: that is a fairy tale. They were sadistic, bloodthirsty, remorseless criminals of the worst calibre who cared for nothing but the sheer driven imposition of their will.

In reality, the struggle was carried out by the citizens of Northern Ireland, who were caught up in a nightmare for over 30 years. They strove to carry on against all odds to maintain some semblance of normality. However, some of those citizens were caught up in attacks and became victims. The real claim to fame of the so-called fallen heroes, who are commemorated at various locations across the country, is murder and atrocity. They play no part in the sensible thinking of any society.

Attempts are being made to systematically remove the legal, justified heritage of this country — a country that is part of the United Kingdom. Those attempts are being made to facilitate the sensitivities of those who claim a desire for neutrality. However, they have not offered to remove the sick monuments that extol the virtues of a murderous villain who fell while on active duty. Once again, we are being exposed to the all-too-familiar stench of republican hypocrisy. They love to instigate the rules of change but fail to apply them to themselves. That is what we now define as Sinn Féin equality — it has a different meaning to the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of equality.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In the past, I treated this type of debate as a challenge, but now I approach it as a chore. I do not want my colleagues across the Chamber to think that they have worn me down in some way; they have not. If there is a debate on this subject next week, we will return to debate it, and, if necessary, we will come back again the week after that and the week after that.

What do we achieve by continuing to have this debate? I suspect strongly that it is more to do with providing therapy for the DUP Back Benchers than with anything that is based in reality. No matter how much some DUP Back Benchers wish to shy away from it, they are in a power-sharing Executive with Sinn Féin, and they will continue to be in a power-sharing Executive with Sinn Féin for as long as tens of thousands of people vote for us and put us in power. They will have to accept the reality that we have come out of 40 years — some would say 80 years or even longer — of terrible conflict. However, the motion gives an insight into the thinking of the unionist parties.

The motion is about reclassifying what happened over the past 30 years to a terrorist campaign. Three unionist Members have spoken on the debate so far, and the most time that has been spent on loyalist violence is three seconds. I watched the clock as Mr Storey, the only Member from the opposite Benches to mention loyalist violence, spoke only for three seconds on that subject before he moved off it. Therefore, on average, each of the unionist Members who spoke spent only one second on loyalist violence.

If it was not a war, it was hell. War is not nice. Republicans have not asked anyone to reclassify the campaign as a war. We know what we went through, and we know what our communities went through. Unionists will refer to it in whatever way they wish, but it was a war because it was hell. War is not a nice thing — people die, terrible things happen, and terrible things are done by all sides in a conflict.

Mr Storey said it was not a war because the IRA killed prisoners, but the British Army and the RUC killed prisoners. He told us that it was not a war because the IRA tortured prisoners, but the British Army and the RUC tortured prisoners.

Mr Burnside: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No, I will not give way.

Loyalists tortured prisoners. Mr Storey told us that it was not a war because the IRA targeted civilians deliberately. Civilians were targeted deliberately on Bloody Sunday. A 12-year-old child who was going to the shop to buy a carton of milk for her mother was a civilian, and she was killed by the British Army.

5.15 pm

The loyalist campaign of the UVF and UDA — with whom Members on the opposite Benches have marched — is based on the definition of terrorism. We got an insight into that from David Ervine who said that the UVF existed to terrorise the Catholic community — *[Interruption.]*

Mrs I Robinson: He did not represent us.

Mr O'Dowd: Members of the parties opposite marched with him often enough. They marched with him on more than one occasion and shared platforms with him.

The UVF existed to terrorise the Catholic community into submission. Who armed the UVF? The British Government armed the UVF. Who armed the largest terrorist organisation in western Europe? The British Government did that as well. The Ulster Defence Association is the largest armed group in Europe. It is no wonder that that group retains its weapons. If unionists devote only three seconds in this debate to talking about loyalist paramilitaries, what pressure is there on such groups to hand in their

weapons? There is absolutely no pressure on them. Is it any wonder that loyalist paramilitaries have murdered 30 people — the majority of whom were Protestants — in the past five years, when unionist representatives speak for only three seconds on the issue in the Chamber?

Members can feel free to define the campaign as they wish, but I would like to know why 30,000 troops of one ilk or another were on the streets of the North. The soldiers who served in south Armagh, east Tyrone and north Armagh and those who were in bases hidden under 20 feet of concrete should be asked whether they were at war. They knew that they were at war, and they knew that they were up against the force that was at war with them. *[Interruption.]*

The British Government put the Army on the streets; I thought that the Member might have known that. If Members want to have a quick history lesson, I will remind them that the British Army was put on the streets in response to a peaceful civil rights campaign.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. There is no time for a history lesson.

Mr Simpson: When the Eames/Bradley group briefed the media that it was considering recommending that decades of terrorism should be repackaged as a war, it was understandably met with outrage, because it is an outrageous suggestion. It was also met with shock, not only because of its shocking revisionism but because it appeared to come out of nowhere. However, in Northern Ireland, nothing of that nature comes out of nowhere. My understanding is that the Eames/Bradley group was divided on the issue, and there were two differing factions on the matter.

There are serious questions for the Eames/Bradley group to answer. Why were the press briefed about something that was not the view of the entire group? Did the press briefing amount to one faction briefing against another? How can we, or the public, ever trust the group's recommendations? The proposal to reclassify the terrorist campaign is disgusting, but so is the way in which the hurt and bereavement of the long years of the Troubles has been used by elements of the Eames/Bradley group for their own ends.

There ought to be no cover given, or legitimacy afforded, to those who over many decades have visited sectarian misery and slaughter on all sections of the community. Did republicans claim to be at war with Roman Catholics? They say no. Why, therefore, was the IRA the greatest killer of Roman Catholics during the Troubles? In her speech, Jennifer McCann said that those republicans who died during the conflict were brave, noble people. Jennifer McCann should tell that to her co-religionists who were butchered by those people and to the young victims of the Omagh bomb — whose limbs policemen had to carry — and its unborn victims. There is nothing brave about that sort

of republican activity. As a woman, Jennifer McCann should understand the feelings that were stimulated when unborn children were butchered by republicanism.

Did they claim to be at war with their Protestant neighbours? It often appeared that way; however, republicans tell us that they were not. Why, then, did the IRA follow Protestants for many weeks, carry out dummy runs in preparation for real operations, and then cut many hundreds of Protestants down in cold blood simply because they were Protestants?

Did they claim to be at war with people who held a different political opinion? Today, they would tell us that they were not. Why, therefore, did they set out to murder unionist representatives and leaders?

Did they claim to be at war with the British Government? They say yes. Why, therefore, did so many republicans, from the top down, so readily, quickly and effectively collude with the security forces against the ideals for which they claimed to be fighting? We have already heard that old phrase, "collusion is not an illusion", and that certainly applies to the republican movement.

However, that did not simply drop out of the sky onto an unsuspecting and ill-prepared republican leadership. The groundwork was carried out over years. In 1981, Sinn Féin decided to contest Northern Ireland elections. In 1982, it fielded candidates in elections to the Prior Assembly. In 1985, its members took up seats on local councils. In 1986, it recognised the legitimacy of the Dáil. By the end of that year and into 1987, it was negotiating with the British Government. Someone once said that the definition of a good politician is someone who, once he is bought, stays bought. Few would argue that Sinn Féin members are not good politicians.

My time is running out. I fully support the motion tabled by my colleagues; it is a disgrace that anyone, or any organisation, would even attempt to offer amnesty or declare that this was a legitimate war.

Mr Burnside: I support the motion because I do not wish to glamorise or dramatise the conflict as a war. However, in some ways, I have a split mind on the subject. In some ways, I wish that, back in the late 60s and early 70s, it had been declared a war. Sinn Féin/IRA thought that it was a legitimate state army, representing authentic Irish republicanism, and it wanted to declare its vicious little insurrection a noble war against the British state, with the objective of British withdrawal from Ireland — which it has totally failed to achieve.

Sinn Féin/IRA was glamorised and given authority by the then party of Government in the Irish Republic, which is the same party that now forms the Government in the Irish Republic — Fianna Fáil — and which, through Haughey, Boland and Blaney, organised Sinn

Féin/IRA's original financing and has helped to finance the republican movement for the past 35 to 40 years.

Those of us who supported the British state — the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the Ulster Special Constabulary, the UDR and the regular Army — were not allowed to fight a war. If we had, there would be many fewer of the current elected representatives sitting on that Bench, including the president of Sinn Féin and the deputy First Minister. However, the British Government did not authorise the fighting of a war.

Mr Molloy: Will the Member explain whether that is a threat directed at the Members on these Benches about what he would have done if he had been given the free rein that he would have wished?

Mr Burnside: If there had been a declaration of war and, through emergency powers, the methods acceptable in war had been used by the British Army and state, many of the commanders and members of the Provisional IRA — and of any other terrorist organisation — would have been removed from society using those methods. That is the reality of life. However, we had to fight a Southern Government that laid claim to us and was helping to finance a terrorist campaign — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Burnside: — terrorist campaign in this country that did not allow the security forces the opportunity to act as in a war in order to achieve their objectives.

Special methods had to be used. We had to bend civil society, using Diplock courts and other methods that no one in a normal democratic society would want to use to defend democracy and freedom against rebellion and insurrection. Credit is due to all those who served in the RUC, the UDR, the regular Army, the support services and all the brave Catholics who stood up against intimidation. Credit is due not just to those Catholics who joined the police, the UDR or the Prison Service but to ordinary Catholics who had to keep their heads down in their own communities because of intimidation by the same people who still intimidate in south Armagh. The remnants of the terrorist army — an army only by Sinn Féin's definition — is still intimidating there.

Let us not rewrite history. We stood up against the party opposite; we will not glamourise what they stand for by calling what happened a war. We will not glamourise the disgusting acts of those who, in the name of loyalism, took out ordinary Catholics because they were in the wrong part of Belfast at the wrong time of night. That butchery shamed loyalism and unionism. It is nothing that we should be proud of, and we condemn it. It happened during the conflict, and it should be condemned completely.

This is a condemnation society; it is very easy to condemn. It was much more difficult to support the security forces during the Troubles to fight the terrorists who wanted to glamourise themselves by calling the Troubles a war. It was an insurrection, which I hope is now over. Sinn Féin has not moved fully from terrorism and criminality to democracy, but it is going in the right direction. Do not go back to where we were. I support the motion. What happened was not a war; it was an insurrection against the legitimate state: the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The IRA was defeated in the war that it wanted to fight, because there is not and will not be a united Ireland — unless it is under the Crown.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to debate this issue, even though it provides the DUP with the usual ritual that it goes through every once in a while to assure its base that it is still as hardline as ever.

Forty years ago, the civil rights campaign took to the streets in a peaceful protest to demand the rights that Mr Storey said were not denied. That campaign was an attempt to secure civil rights for everyone: the basic right to a vote, a house and a job. This little statelet could not deliver those basic rights; this little black statelet ensured that it went down rather than grant those basic civil rights.

Mr Storey says that it was not worth one death. That is true, to a point. Mr Storey ignored all the nationalist deaths. However, the first death that he forgot to tell us about, which I witnessed, was that of John Gallagher. He was taking part in a peaceful civil rights march on Cathedral Road in Armagh when he was mowed down by the Tynan platoon of the B-Specials, who were brought in with their .303 rifles to mow down peaceful demonstrators. Let us talk about reality: the people of this country were denied the basic civil rights that they were entitled to, and they were shot down in the streets for demanding them.

We could talk about other incidents. Patrick Rooney was a young fellow who was shot dead as he lay in bed in his home in Divis Flats by an amalgam of the B-Specials and the RUC. The aim of the unionist pogrom was to burn the area down, as happened later in Bombay Street. There was no sign of the IRA. In fact, the IRA was criticised for not defending the community at that time.

We have talked about other deaths. No one wants to glorify any death, but we have to face reality. Mrs Kathleen O'Hagan was a young pregnant mother from Creggan in County Tyrone who was mowed down by Portadown loyalists in her own kitchen only days after the RUC had raided the house.

5.30 pm

Mr T Clarke: It is interesting to note that everything that the Members cites is from the republican side. When will he get to the part where his party perpetrated murder on the innocent Protestant victims — and I stress that they were innocent victims — in Northern Ireland?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to please be careful about what he says.

Mr Molloy: I have already talked about the innocent victims. Let us be quite clear: my party did not inflict any death on anyone.

The murder of the victims that I mentioned earlier shows how this conflict started and how people had to defend their homes — and I make no apology for that defence of their homes at that time. It was the British Government, through Reginald Maudling, who declared that they were at war with the IRA. Let us be very clear where the declaration of war came from. It was those who were part of the British Government's murder machine — the RUC, the B-Specials, the UDR and the RIR — who wanted their names on the war memorials to justify their actions. They declared it a war because they wanted to be included in that particular line.

Mr Kennedy: What is the Member's view on the murder of Jean McConville by the IRA? What status has that murder in republican theology?

Mr Molloy: Republicans have made their position on that very clear; they have said that they regret all deaths that have occurred, whether as a result of IRA actions or the actions of other organisations. Every death is regrettable.

Remember the situation that existed at the time: people wanted very basic civil rights. While we are on the subject of equality, the Rev William McCrea was the man who gloated on television that republicans were on the run from loyalist paramilitaries. On that same weekend, he stood on a platform in Portadown in support of Billy Wright, the loyalist murder squad leader who, day and daily, brought death and destruction into republican homes around Mid Ulster and the murder triangle. Let us be very clear where you stand and about your association with —
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. This is a debate, and the two sides of the House will get an opportunity to debate. I ask each side of the House to please give the other side the opportunity to put their argument across.

Mr Molloy: Thank you, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Republicans do not have to justify to our community whether or not what happened was a war. The nationalist and republican people know that there

has been a war for 800 years, during which the British Army and the British Government have occupied this country against the will of the people. When the people voted for the independence of Ireland, the British Government imposed partition and denied the people their rights. They armed the loyalist murder squads, and, as they have done in every other country around the world, they adopted the policy of divide and conquer. They created and supported colonial powers, and murder and destruction was part and parcel of what they did at that time.

Let us be very clear about collusion. If there was as much collusion as Mr Simpson talks about — although he does not talk about it that loudly — then why did the British Government, your Government, allow the IRA to be so successful on so many occasions?

Mrs I Robinson: Time.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mrs Robinson, thank you for that reminder; I will decide when time is up.

Lord Browne: I support the motion and reject any suggestion that the Provisional IRA's 35-year terrorist campaign should be classified as a war. Historically, the term "war" has been used to describe conflict between nation states. So-called rules of war have been drawn up since the time of St Augustine until the present day Hague Conventions. Those rules extend to the justification of war in self-defence, the treatment of enemy aliens, the treatment of prisoners of war and the outlawing of certain weapons, such as gases and biological agents.

Today, we talk loosely about all kinds of wars; for example, the war against poverty, the war against drugs, and the war against crime. However, today I will confine my remarks to the traditional definition, which confers a certain dignity and legitimacy, because of the rules that I have just outlined.

There must be an agreed definition of terrorism, and I suggest the following attributes: the terrorist is a non-state actor who uses violence for political ends, contrary to both domestic and international law. That, undoubtedly, accurately describes the Provisional IRA's activities of the past 30 years.

Terrorists seek to achieve their objectives by instilling fear and frightening their opponents into submission. I do not need to list the numerous occasions on which civilians were deliberately targeted. However, the occasions when naked sectarianism was displayed in the singling out of victims from the unionist community are perhaps particularly worthy of mention — one need think only of the appalling massacres at Kingsmill and Darkley.

A terrorist employs unconventional military methods that may be regarded as immoral. Again, I do not want to provide a detailed list, but the summary

execution of three off-duty Scottish soldiers, who were lured to their deaths when out for an enjoyable evening, was outside the rules of war and morally repugnant to all right-minded people.

Such acts of terrorism can be accorded the dignity of the description of acts of war only in exceptional circumstances. Such atrocious means of achieving political ends may have limited justification when all other means have been exhausted. For example, Jews in the Warsaw ghetto were being systematically murdered in the Treblinka extermination camp — imprisoned and denied any right to political action, they were justified in employing unconventional military measures when they rose against their oppressors. To a lesser extent, Nelson Mandela may be regarded in a similar light, because blacks were denied the right to vote and freedom of movement in their country.

Those campaigns could, perhaps, be dignified by being described as wars, but the Provisional IRA's campaign in Northern Ireland in no way meets those criteria. Those with nationalist sympathies were free to organise political parties, and on several occasions Sinn Féin won seats at Westminster that they refused to take up.

Nationalists had complete freedom of movement in Northern Ireland and beyond. They were free to address meetings and circulate literature that advocated a united Ireland. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Molloy is shouting from one side of the Chamber to the other. He should be acutely aware of the necessity to maintain order in the House.

Lord Browne: The much maligned Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Acts were applied only when acts of terrorism were being contemplated.

It is absurd to apply emotive language, such as a war of liberation or a war of independence, to civil disorder and violence in a liberal democracy.

Mr Brolly: Will the Member give way?

Lord Browne: No, I have nearly finished.

It is doubly absurd to apply such language when one considers that the vast majority of the population indicated through the ballot box time and time again that they had no desire to be freed and liberated by the IRA's terrorist campaign. I support the motion.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mrs I Robinson: Of all the proposals mooted in recent times, one of the most nauseating is the attempt to rebrand 40 years of cowardly terror as a war, thereby lending some credibility to those who participated in a diabolical campaign of murder and destruction. Despite the political progress and the fact that the DUP is today in a position to form an

Executive with others who have committed to the principles of non-violence and constitutional politics, what happened in the past was what it was: a campaign of guerrilla terrorism that included a dimension of genocide and the clearance of people from certain border areas because of their religion.

The legal questions as to whether the Troubles constituted a war have been well aired over the years and were put to bed long ago. It was anything but a war: the IRA failed to issue a declaration of war; its members targeted and murdered individuals because of their religion or their occupation; they caused billions of pounds worth of unnecessary damage; they tortured and murdered anyone whom they discovered had informed on their nefarious activities; they detonated hundreds of bombs that claimed the lives and destroyed the property of those not directly affected in their tawdry little campaign; and they tied victims into car bombs and ordered them to drive to checkpoints and blow themselves up under threats to kill their families. All those activities are in contravention of all internationally recognised laws of war.

At the same time, that organisation generated millions of pounds through tax fraud, racketeering and drug pushing. By the end of the 1970s, IRA members had even carved up Belfast between themselves and so-called loyalist organisations for the purpose of criminal activity. In doing so, they brought unparalleled deprivation to the community that they purported to protect.

I want the last female Member from Sinn Féin who spoke in the debate to tell me what my mother got as a widow bringing up six children in the Cregagh estate, which was built over 59 years ago and was a mixed estate. The answer is that my family got nothing more than our Catholic neighbours; we got no more help or no more money than the O'Neill family, the Hanna family and every other Catholic family in the Cregagh estate. Therefore, I want to put that argument to bed.

Ms J McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mrs I Robinson: I will not give way.

Ms S Ramsey: Her name is Jennifer McCann. The Member asked her a question, so she should give way.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Please allow the Member to speak.

Mrs I Robinson: I also condemn the loyalist paramilitaries — I make no bones about it because I have been threatened by them. As far as I am concerned, they are hoods, thugs and murderers. I always spoke out when a Catholic was murdered; I never held back on that.

Mr Molloy: Will the Member give way?

Mrs I Robinson: No, I will not.

Mr Molloy: Why not?

Mrs I Robinson: I am not subject to you.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Molloy, you of all people should understand that it is a Member's prerogative whether he or she decides to give way.

Mrs I Robinson: The difference between the unionist community and the nationalist community was that the nationalist community supported terrorists by electing them to a place of Government. The unionist community elected two, and, thank God, they are not here any longer, because they were an abomination to me and to the people whom I represent.

Yesterday, on the Lord's Day, I joined the families of those who lost loved ones and who were seriously injured in the La Mon House Hotel bombing 30 years ago. They were simply attending the annual dinner of the Irish Collie Club, and they were murdered because they were Protestants. We know who was responsible, and we know who did that damage; I named him in the House of Commons. Unfortunately, he is not present today. That bombing was one of the most cowardly gutless murders ever committed in Northern Ireland.

As for the SDLP, the moderate nationalist John Hume, when he was asked why the unionist population of one million Protestants and their elected representatives were ignored when the Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed, said that it was because they would not accept it. So much for being moderate; so much for democracy. Therefore, SDLP Members should never stand up and lecture me about moderate nationalism — it does not exist.

Sinn Féin/IRA are now targeting all that unionists hold dear, to the point of absurd pettiness in being offended in a local council by a mug with Princess Diana's face on it. SDLP members in Downpatrick would not even support the removal of the paramilitary trappings in a park in that town that saluted the heroes of Sinn Féin/IRA murderers.

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

5.45 pm

Mr Armstrong: Members should listen carefully to my speech in case they miss a wee bit. I welcome the motion, and I am pleased to support it.

Sinn Féin and the IRA have long sought to peddle the notion of a just war, and it is no surprise that they seek to rewrite history in a desperate attempt to justify the hell that they created and the misery that they put the people of Northern Ireland through.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Mr Burnside: Northern Ireland.

Mr Armstrong: Yes; Northern Ireland.

It is more surprising that the so-called Consultative Group on the Past, which was established to find the best way in which to deal with the legacy of the Troubles, is throwing the IRA a lifeline by considering asking the British Government to say formally that they fought a war against the IRA. That is utter nonsense and must be rejected firmly from the outset. We must not allow ourselves to forget the carnage that was inflicted on this country and its people. The Troubles were not inevitable; every death, shooting and bombing occurred because terrorists chose to carry them out. They had choices, and they chose violence deliberately. Those people must be forced to take responsibility for their actions, and they cannot be absolved by well-meaning liberals who, in the comfort of a more peaceful Northern Ireland, seek to rewrite history.

The IRA might think that it fought a war against the British state. The IRA can think what it likes, but the rest of us do not have to agree. The IRA fought a terrorist campaign, not a war. I base that statement on the principle that if something looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it is a duck.

I can recall many atrocities, but I shall mention only a few to make my point. I remember the horrific images of the Abercorn bombing, Bloody Friday, La Mon, Enniskillen, the three policemen who were killed at Carnan Corner, the two civilians who were killed outside Stewartstown, and the many other people from my area who were gunned down and lost their lives purely because of their religion. I also remember the so-called disappeared who were dragged off, tortured and had their bodies hidden. Sectarian murder, indiscriminate bombing and ethnic cleansing of Protestants in the west bank of the city of Londonderry, north and west Belfast and along the border area, are all the handiwork of republicans.

Some people may have forgotten what Northern Ireland went through at the hands of terrorists. It suits their agenda to forget. However, as an RUC reservist in Tyrone in the 1970s and 1980s, I assure those people that I have not forgotten. I have not forgotten the night, over 30 years ago, that I was hit by a bullet while I was on patrol in Stewartstown.

The terrorist campaign tried to end British rule in this part of Ireland and end the Union by force. It failed. Sinn Féin's acceptance of partition in 1998 was a public admission that the campaign had been defeated. Sinn Féin representatives sitting in the Assembly is daily evidence of the scale of that defeat. I have one question for those who still try to claim that there was a war: would they be prepared to have those responsible for acts such as Bloody Friday, La Mon, Enniskillen and Warrington tried as war criminals? If not, why not?

Dr W McCrea: I feel privileged to be making the winding-up speech on the motion because, before the

so-called ceasefire, my family and I were to be the last people to be executed by the gutless Provos. It is good to be alive and to be able to speak in the debate.

In Northern Ireland, we know how important language is, and that is especially true for victims. Former terrorists who attempt to reclassify themselves as volunteers add further insult to injury to the people whom they hurt deeply over the past 30 years. When a family is told that their loved one was not murdered as a result of an act of terrorism but instead was a legitimate target, killed by someone on so-called active service, they are made to suffer again.

There is no way that those who suffered at the hands of murdering thugs and gangsters of terrorism would ever describe the murder of their loved ones as being part of some "war". Those who went out to deliberately maim and murder can never be equated to those innocent people who suffered at their hands.

I reject utterly the description of terrorists as being "volunteers" and "on active service". That terminology is designed to infer that the IRA was a legitimate army. It most certainly was not. It was an illegal terrorist organisation that went out to murder, slaughter and maim an innocent law-abiding people, whose only crime was a desire to remain a part of the United Kingdom — a legitimate and democratic desire of any people. Thank God we still are, and will remain, a part of the United Kingdom.

Regardless of what terminology people want to use, the fact remains, and always will remain, that Tony McBride — and others of that ilk — was a terrorist who was shot by the SAS because of the illegal murderous campaign in which he was involved. The Provisional IRA never fought a war; it usually hid behind a hedge and shot innocent men in the back, without the guts to face them eyeball to eyeball.

I agree with the honourable Member Mr Burnside. In many ways, I wish that it had been declared a war, because our army could have taken the Provos on and they would have been put six feet under where they belong. Sad to say, that did not happen. It was a cold-blooded, sectarian, terrorist campaign that sought to wipe out the long-suffering Protestant minority along the border, with a desire to steal their farms after they had slaughtered their sons and daughters.

Methinks that Members across the way protest too much. Martina Anderson did not go to jail for being innocent. Some other Members across the way were smarting under the remarks that were made. As a child, I was told that when I threw a stone among a pack of dogs, I would know which one had been hit because it would yelp the most.

When I was MP for Mid Ulster I stood in the House of Commons — the Mother of Parliaments — and held up a wedding photograph of a bride, a bridegroom, a

bridesmaid and a best man, and the only person alive that day was the bride. The best man, the groom and the bridesmaid were murdered by gutless thugs of the Provisional IRA. Those people were butchered because they wanted to remain a part of the United Kingdom. We do not have to demonise those who supported the terrorist campaign; their actions stained with blood demonise them, and they will never be able to wash away their guilt. It is on their conscience, and neither God nor man will be able to remove that guilt from their conscience. Until they repent of their sins, God Himself will not forgive the deeds that they have done.

One Member said that if the terrorist campaign was not a war then it was hell. If that Member knows anything about the Bible, he will know that it was certainly not hell. However, there is a hell for those who will not repent of their sins and who have done the dastardly deeds of murdering and slaughtering the innocent people of the Province. That is the reality of the eternity that they are facing. Men and women must repent of their sins.

Let me make it clear. There can be no confusion —
[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Dr W McCrea: There can be no confusion on the issue. There can be no comparison between those who deliberately set out to murder and those who were murdered. There was a campaign of terror by the republican movement, and there was a totally inadequate response from our Government. Thank God that, at the end of the day, this is still British Ulster, and we are proud to be in British Ulster. No Provo will be able to take us out of our homeland and the place that we love the best.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 46; Noes 20.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Burnside, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Sir Reg Empey, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Kennedy, Mr Lunn, 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, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr T Clarke and Mr Moutray.

NOES

Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Doherty, Ms Gildernew, Mr G Kelly, Mr P Maskey, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr Molloy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ruane.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Butler and Mr McCartney.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly repudiates any suggestion that the 30 year terrorist campaign in Northern Ireland be re-classified as a 'war'.

Mrs I Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker — will you comment on whether it was appropriate for the Member from Sinn Féin to have been warned about his conduct twice during the last debate, given that he is a senior figure in the House and holds the office of Deputy Speaker, and also bearing in mind that he will call other Members to order who act inappropriately. Is that a proper way for the Deputy Speaker to conduct himself?

Mr Speaker: I acknowledge the Member's point, however I understand that Mr Molloy was speaking as an individual Member of the House. From time to time, debates provoke a rush of blood to Members' heads when they are speaking in the House. Members from all sides of the House occasionally get that rush of blood.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Discovery of Confidential Pupil Records

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Education that she wishes to make a statement regarding pupil records found in County Armagh.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): A Cheann Comhairle. I want to update Members on the discovery of confidential records dating from 1969 to 1974, which relate to pupils from the Southern Education and Library Board area.

Chuala mé faoin tarlú seo den chéad uair tráthnóna aréir agus labhair mé láithreach le príomh-fheidhmeannach an bhoird, a bhí i ndiaidh imscrúdú a sheoladh.

I first learned about the incident yesterday afternoon, and I immediately spoke to the chief executive of the Southern Education and Library Board, who had just launched an investigation. I am disturbed that those records were found in a public place, and I have asked the chief executive to ensure that all aspects of the incident are investigated fully, and that she reports to me promptly.

All public bodies need to be aware of their responsibilities under the Data Protection Act 1998 with regard to the collection, storage, and disposal of personal information that is held about individuals, particularly children. In addition, all staff members need to be aware of their individual responsibilities when handling sensitive personal information, particularly when that information is removed from official premises.

The initial investigation suggests that the folders were compiled by educational welfare officers, many of whom operated from their own homes at that time. That procedure is no longer practised, and has not been practised for some time.

I was also shocked and saddened when I read some of the descriptions used in the reports. They reflect some ways of thinking that existed at that time, but thankfully we now live in more enlightened and sensitive times. Today we have counselling services available to provide confidential support to children and young people in our post-primary schools who may be experiencing personal difficulties. Just last week, I announced that this counselling service will be extended to primary schools and special-needs schools.

Dúirt príomh-fheidhmeannach Bhord an Deiscirt go mbeidh a cuid oifigeach i dteagmháil leis na daoine a raibh a n-ainmneacha ar na taifid le haiféala an bhoird a chur in iúl dóibh má bhí siad i mbroid de bharr an

tarlaithe seo. Caithfidh mé a rá go bhfuil brón orm féin freisin.

The chief executive of the Southern Education and Library Board has told me that her officers will be contacting the people who are named in the records, in order to express the board's regret for any distress that may have been caused to them. Let me also say how sorry I am. Over recent months, there have been some high-profile cases involving the loss or mishandling of personal information.

6.15 pm

On 10 December 2007, my Department — as part of a public-service-wide review — initiated a self-assessment exercise to examine data-security arrangements. That exercise extended to my Department's non-departmental public bodies, including all five education and library boards. As a result, the Department is formally auditing its own processes — including the arrangements for the collection, recording, storage, retrieval, access, transmission of, sharing and management of electronic and hard copy data and information. We have also asked all our non-departmental public bodies to take remedial action as weaknesses are identified, to reassess their arrangements, and to report back to us.

We have also asked the education and library boards to ensure that schools — and other bodies for which they have responsibility in their areas — have robust procedures in place. In addition, the Department has written to all voluntary grammar schools and grant-maintained integrated schools to ask them to review their data security arrangements, and report back to the Department. That work is proceeding as a matter of urgency.

Dearbhaím mo chuid oifigeach dom, agus dearbhaím do Chomhaltaí, go dtarbhfaidh an t-athbhreithniú aghaidh ar na laigí a thug an tarlú cásmhar seo chun solais.

I am assured by my officials, and I can assure Members, that the review will address the initial weaknesses that have been highlighted as a result of this very regrettable incident.

Although the information that was found apparently relates to welfare visits carried out more than 30 years ago, it is possible that many of the children and families may still live in the same areas, and it is essential that their right to privacy is respected by those who have access to the information.

I am concerned that some of the records were passed to at least one of the daily newspapers, which reproduced parts of the documents. One of the documents clearly shows an individual's date of birth, and could lead to their identification. I understand that the records were first discovered on Friday. I have some

major questions for public representatives who have had possession of those personal records since Friday.

Cé go mbaineann an tarlú seo le leas an phobail, níl a fhios agam an gclúdaíonn leas an phobail foilsíú — *[Interruption.]*

I ask that Members treat this serious issue in the way that it deserves. To do otherwise is unfair to the children and other people involved. I should be able to make statements without snide comments being made about such a sensitive issue.

Mr Kennedy: Yes, Miss.

Ms Ruane: Thank you.

Cé go mbaineann an tarlú seo le leas an phobail, níl a fhios agam an gclúdaíonn leas an phobail foilsíú cáipéisí aonaracha ar ábhair ghoilliúnacha mar seo.

Although there is an issue of public interest in light of this discovery, I question whether that extends to the publication of individual documents on such sensitive issues. Why was no attempt made to immediately contact the Southern Education and Library Board, given — *[Interruption.]*

I am making a statement. Why was no attempt made to contact the Southern Education and Library Board immediately, given the obvious sensitivity of the content of the records? The chief executive's telephone number is in the telephone book. I spoke to her yesterday afternoon. Why were the records not handed to the PSNI, or another relevant authority? Why was one of the first communications about the records made to the media, instead of the appropriate authorities? In addition, was any thought given to the individuals who may be able to identify themselves from the personal information published in a newspaper?

This incident generates many questions that relevant bodies need to provide answers to, but there are also questions about how those records were handled and treated, since their discovery, by public representatives. It is important that those issues are also addressed. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I obtained a copy of the Minister's statement — in advance of her making it to the House — expecting it to contain all of the information that the Minister would report to the Assembly. Having followed the statement in close detail, it is clear that that was not the case. On at least one occasion, the Minister included a full paragraph that was not included in the text of her printed and published speech. Is that custom and practice, and is it permissible? Should it not be the case that, when a Minister is making a statement to the House, that statement is produced in advance, in full?

Mr Speaker: I will not rule on how a Minister may bring a written statement to the House. I am sure that Members can ask those types of questions themselves.

As Members realise, the business on the Order Paper has not been disposed of by 6.00 pm. In accordance with Standing Order 10(3), I will allow business to continue until 7.00 pm, or until business is complete, whichever is the earlier.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education

(Mr S Wilson): Like many Members, I am deeply disturbed that another Department has been found guilty of not being able to look after personal information that it and its associated bodies hold about individuals. Of course, the Department of Education is not the only Department to have been guilty of that. The issue reinforces the concerns that the public must have about the ability of public bodies to safeguard and keep secret the sensitive information that they gather and hold on individuals.

I have two questions for the Minister. She has commented on the use that the material has been put to by some public representatives; does she understand that one of the reasons for that is that when public bodies are found to be guilty of gross negligence in this way, Members are not convinced that those bodies will not cover it up and try to hide the impact? Does she accept that when public bodies — not only her Department — make a mistake in how they handle such information, they have a responsibility to act with total transparency in dealing with it? That may stop the way in which this was dealt with from happening.

The Minister mentioned that, in the past, some of the records were compiled and held by educational welfare officers in their home, but that that practice had stopped. Is the Minister telling the House that the information came into the public domain because one individual who held it dealt with it irresponsibly, or was it held centrally by the board and put into a bin without being shredded to ensure that it did not come into the public domain?

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. First, there will be no cover-up. I have been clear that full transparency is needed, because the information is very sensitive. Secondly — well, the Member asked more than two questions. He asked whether I take my responsibilities seriously: of course I do, and so do the boards.

No one in the House can support the way in which the documents were provided to newspapers, with elected representatives pictured looking at the documents. That is unacceptable behaviour, and I hope that everyone in the House agrees with that. It would worry me greatly if they did not.

The Member asked about the details of an investigation. An investigation is currently being carried out, and I will bring the results of that back to

the House. I do not want to go into any details of that now, because it is a live investigation.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a thabhairt don Aire Oideachais as a ráiteas.

There are two issues involved. As the Minister said, no one wants a cover-up. In recent months, several high-profile cases have related to missing disks. Elected representatives and those of us in the public domain are entitled to ask questions about such cases. However, there is a separate issue here: the material is sensitive, personal and confidential, and serious questions must be asked about the way in which certain individuals brought it to the media's attention.

Mr D Bradley: Questions should be asked about the way in which the files were dumped on the roadside.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Butler: I listened to Radio Ulster this morning, and the broadcasters had copies of this sensitive, confidential material on children in front of them. An article in today's 'Irish News' contained a photograph of Dominic Bradley MLA and a member of the Southern Education and Library Board examining the files. Why did that board member not alert his chief executive immediately to the fact that he was in possession of that material? Why did he not alert the PSNI, as the Minister said, rather than running to the media?

Ms Ruane: I made it clear that it was totally inappropriate for anyone to leak documents of such a sensitive nature to media outlets. The appropriate way to have dealt with the matter would have been to contact the chief executive of the Southern Education and Library Board. One of the representatives in today's newspaper is a member of the board.

The PSNI is involved in the matter. The chief executive met the PSNI this afternoon. It is investigating the vehicle from which the documents are thought to have been dumped, and it is checking CCTV tapes from the area. The PSNI is taking the matter very seriously, and it is important that the matter is treated with the outmost seriousness, because the children referred to in those reports are now adults, and they are very concerned about the matter. We will contact them to assure them that we will do everything in our power to protect their privacy.

Mr K Robinson: It is obvious from what the Minister has said that there is great concern about the impact on those who are affected: the children who are now adults. Over the years, professional staff, such as health workers, teachers or education welfare officers, have written professional, and, hopefully, accurate commentaries on situations that they were asked to investigate and perhaps resolve. If we are to continue

to rely on those professional people, there must be a safeguard that the way in which they have described a situation is as accurate as possible, so that a solution can be found for the problems that children experience in their schools. Unless we can assure those professionals that there is absolute security about what they write down, we will stumble into a situation in which they simply make bland statements that are no good to the children who are the subject of the reports.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member come to the question?

Mr K Robinson: The Minister talked about new procedures that she hopes to put in place. Will she ensure that those procedures are so watertight that any professional — whether health workers, education welfare officers, teaching staff, or anyone in the front line who is asked to produce one of those carefully crafted reports in order to help the children — will have an absolute assurance that the situation will not occur again?

Ms Ruane: There are two parts to your question. The first part relates to the content of the reports. I am mindful that the files date back 30 or 40 years, and that attitudes to many of the issues that we face in today's society were different. As I said in my statement, we now, thankfully, have a more enlightened approach. It is important for me to say that, because some of our young people today who are suffering in a similar way will be disturbed by the content and the way in which some of the reports were written.

I want to reassure those young people by sending out a clear message that things are done differently now.

6.30 pm

I did not intend to cause problems for anyone, or to pull a fast one, by making comments that were not in the statement that Members received. Rather, I wanted to explain that counselling services are available in all post-primary schools. Last week, as part of my budget announcement, I stated that those services would be extended to primary schools. Any young people who are affected by today's media reports should access those counselling services, because it is difficult for them to have to read such reports.

The second part of Ken Robinson's question asked whether the Department can be sure that robust procedures are in place to ensure that such an incident does not happen again and whether I can assure the House that it will not happen again. I wish that I could give such an assurance. However, it is not only the Department of Education that is involved in data handling but many organisations. All are working together, and when so much inter-agency work is involved in supporting our children, I cannot give an assurance that such an incident will not happen again. However, the education sector is determined that it will

have the most robust processes and the most professional standards in place to ensure that data are properly handled. The investigation will be thorough. I will study it carefully and report its findings to the House.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Mr Speaker, I do not know whether you are aware that I met with the chief executive of the Southern Education and Library Board this morning, and I handed her the missing files that had come into my possession. However, I did so with reservations, because it was her organisation that had lost the files in the first instance, and I needed the Minister and the chief executive to reassure me that those files would be stored safely in future, and that they would not reappear in the public domain.

Mr Brady: Will the Member give way?

Mr D Bradley: I will not give way. I was disappointed to detect from the chief executive of the Southern Education and Library Board an inclination to shoot the messenger. *[Interruption.]* I am coming to my question.

I detect that same inclination in the Minister; in fact, I can hear the chief executive's voice echoing from the Minister as if she were a ventriloquist.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Question?

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

Mr D Bradley: Members of the House are accountable to the public, not to chief executives of education and library boards. In fact, chief executives of education and library boards are accountable to public representatives.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Question?

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

Mr D Bradley: I am coming to my question.

Mr Speaker: I am trying to give Members as much latitude as possible when asking a question. The House has had a ministerial statement, so we do not need further statements from Members. Mr Bradley, please ask your question.

Mr D Bradley: I am coming to my question. Is the Minister aware that Southern Education and Library Board representatives are now saying that the files were stolen? This morning, the chief executive gave me the same details as those that are contained in the Minister's statement — that the files came from the home of an education welfare officer who had worked for the board. However, it seems now that the board is changing its story. I get the impression that the board's chief executive is looking for a scapegoat instead of facing up to her own responsibilities.

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. It is obvious that the Member is not coming to a question, and I have given him some latitude.

Mr D Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have asked a question. May I complete my remarks?

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister.

Ms Ruane: I am not prepared to play politics with this issue, because it is too serious and important. A thorough investigation is ongoing, and I will await the results of that investigation.

I shall make the House aware of the results of that investigation as soon as I have them.

The protection of children is the most important issue that faces the Assembly and our society, and it was one of the matters raised during the recent meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council. I believe in accountability, which Dominic Bradley mentioned; however, one can be accountable without affecting the confidentiality of children and young people. Mr Bradley knows that because he is a teacher. We must be careful about how we deal with this issue, and we must think of the young people.

I entirely accept that there is a problem, and I have apologised —

Mr D Bradley: Do not shoot the messenger.

Ms Ruane: I ask the Member not to interrupt me and to allow me to finish.

I accept that the fact that those documents were found is a serious problem and that the board has a case to answer. That is why I have instigated an investigation. However, playing politics is not the way to deal with that. We must send a message to children who are worried now, and who are watching the debate, that we will do everything possible to ensure the safety of their records. We must assure the adults who were children at that time that we will contact them and ensure that their confidentiality and identity is protected.

Mr Storey: Bearing in mind the circumstances in which the Minister has come to the House to deal with a sensitive and serious situation, I am disappointed that she made a political point. A third of her statement was, as Mr Bradley said, an attack on the messenger. I am also concerned that the files that were found might contain the answers to the questions that the Committee for Education has been waiting several weeks for, and that this was, somehow, another way of getting those answers to us.

The Minister said that we live in more enlightened and sensitive times. However, given that there is no record of the disposal of any documents, why, according to her statement, did the Department contact the bodies on 10 December?

In her statement, the Minister refers to the fact that the process that began on 10 December as part of a public-service-wide review was a self-assessment exercise. If that is so, and we now find that there has been a major problem with controlling sensitive documents, self-assessment is clearly inadequate and we require some form of independent assessment of how bodies deal with such information.

Will the Minister also inform the House about the arrangements to dispose of sensitive documents that have exceeded their lifespan?

Ms S Ramsey: Perhaps the Member might raise those points with his colleagues who sit on the Executive.

Mr Storey: On a point of Order, Mr Speaker. In the past 20 minutes, Members have had to sit and listen to comments across the Chamber from two Members. I did not ask that question of the Member, because I knew that she would not have the ability to answer. I asked the Minister of Education.

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind Members to behave in the House. As I have continually said, I understand that, from time to time, debates and statements can raise emotions. However, surely it is vitally important that Members attempt to respect one another.

Ms Ruane: I shall not pre-empt the investigation, but I take the Member's points. Those files date from 30 to 40 years ago, but the investigation will be thorough and, as I said, I will report back to the House. One reason that the assessment began on 10 December was because, over recent months, there have been several high-profile cases, and we must ensure that information that is held by the various Departments is stored and disposed of correctly.

The assessment will examine every aspect of storage and disposal, and I will bring a full report on it to the House.

Mr Lunn: My question is similar to the previous one. Nevertheless, I note that the self-assessment exercise began on 10 December. How long will that process take? Surely the disposal of records is a basic task. I would have thought that, in this day and age, paper records should never be disposed of in their complete form — there must be ways to get rid of them that involve their being destroyed and put beyond use.

I thank the Minister for her statement, but can she tell the House where those records were destined for, and how they came to be at the side of the road? Unlike most Members, I did not hear the news over the weekend, so I do not know where the records were going and who had custody of them.

Ms Ruane: I do not wish to repeat myself, but I do not want to pre-empt the ongoing investigation either. Given that this is a very serious matter, the PSNI is

involved, and I will bring the full details of its investigation to the House. I cannot say any more than that, but robust procedures must be in place for all aspects of the storage, retrieval and disposal of key documents such as this, particularly those that contain sensitive information.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I have no doubt that Dominic Bradley was surrounded by a media posse when he handed over the folder to the chief executive of the Southern Education and Library Board.

Mr D Bradley: Ask the question.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Brady: I wonder whether he gave back the copies that the radio presenters had this morning. As someone who has worked in an environment in which confidentiality was paramount, I think that Dominic Bradley and his colleagues have allowed confidential information to float around the countryside.

Does the Minister agree that it would have been incumbent upon Dominic Bradley's colleague, who is a member of the Southern Education and Library Board, to at least contact the board and make it aware that such confidential and sensitive information was either in the public domain or was certainly going to be so? Does she agree that he should not have been so blasé, as seems to be the attitude here today, about such sensitive and confidential information that could have had an impact on people's lives?

Ms Ruane: I agree that anyone who comes into the possession of documents has a duty to return them to the relevant authorities. If that person did not want to return those documents to the board, they should have given them to the PSNI. That is what should have happened, given that this is a very serious issue. I am sorry that it did not happen.

The chief executive of the Southern Education and Library Board has informed me that she has requested the return of all copies of the documents, including those that were in the possession of journalists.

Mr Kennedy: In reference to my earlier point, I ask the Minister that, when making statements to the House in future, she provides them in full so that Members can follow them in complete detail.

The Minister and others have made a mistake in attacking those who found this information and brought their concerns into the public domain. The Minister and those others should simply give the House a reasonable explanation, apologise, get over it and deal with it. I also want to place on record that the integrity and the professionalism of the chief executive of the Southern Education and Library Board should in no way be impugned.

It seems that Members are not getting all the details. If we were due the courtesy of an answer, it should be as complete as possible. Will the Minister confirm the precise number of files that were found? Will she also confirm that all those individuals whose details were found will be contacted — if that has not happened already — and that they will be given a full explanation and an apology?

Can the Minister at least provide some clarity about the records that were found? Were they lost by officials who are currently employed by the board? The suggestion seems to be that the records were held by private individuals who decided, for whatever reason, to discard them without due care and attention. We are entitled to know that much detail at least because the matter has been subject to speculation, not only in the press but elsewhere, and some conflicting answers have come from the board.

6.45 pm

Can I also respectfully say to the Minister and members of her party that in complaining about the actions of those who brought this matter into the public domain —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has already asked several questions. Is he now coming to the end of his questions?

Mr Kennedy: My final question is —

Mr Molloy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kennedy: No. As Deputy Speaker, Mr Molloy should know that questions should not be put to me; rather they should be asked of the Minister.

Mr Speaker: I remind the House that it is not appropriate for Members to give way when a ministerial statement is being dealt with.

Mr Kennedy: Mr Speaker, the Deputy Speaker should know that.

Will the Minister contrast her view of the actions of those who brought those items into the public domain with the actions of her own party when public documents, photo montages —

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

Ms Ruane: The Member's first question was a request for me to include everything in my statement. I brought the statement to the House immediately. As soon as I came in this morning, I made sure that my office contacted the Speaker about this important issue because I wanted to ensure that Members had as much detail as I had. I worked on the statement during the day; however, an important part was left out of the original statement, which I included this afternoon. Members must be careful before getting themselves exercised

about what should or should not be in my statement. I will read out that important part again:

“Today we have counselling services available to provide confidential support to children and young people in our post-primary schools who may be experiencing personal difficulties. Just last week, I announced that this counselling service will be extended to primary schools and special-needs schools.”

I am sorry if that caused difficulty, but I felt that it was important to say it. Some people listening to this debate, particularly children, may be going through difficult times right now. They may be traumatised by reading about this matter in the ‘The Irish News’ or in any other paper that has picked up on the story. I am trying to send a message to them that there are procedures in place to support them. I am sorry if that caused difficulty, but we had to get the statement photocopied and written up at very short notice, as well as having to speak to the chief executives of the education and library boards and get updates throughout the day on the investigation. Therefore I think that we should be given a little bit of leeway.

I want to make it clear that I support the chief executive of SEELB. I agree with Mr Kennedy’s comment, and I assure him that she is in no way being impugned today. She was very upset about what happened and spent her entire Sunday afternoon and today dealing with the matter.

Mr Kennedy also asked whether the people who have been affected by this matter will be contacted. They will be contacted, and they will be given a full explanation. He also mentioned the lack of detail about what has happened. There is a lack of detail at the moment because this matter is being investigated by the chief executive of the board, and the PSNI is also involved. Am I supposed to give out information on an ongoing investigation? I do not think so. However, I have said that I will bring a detailed report to the House.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr P J Bradley to speak, I remind Members from all sides of the House that it is important that they check a ministerial statement against delivery.

Mr P J Bradley: I heard the Minister express concern in her statement. However, I heard no criticism of the failed storage system. I heard criticism only of ‘The Irish News’ and of my conscientious colleague Dominic Bradley. I commend him for the action he took, which was in the interests of those named in the document and the public interest. Had Dominic not taken that action, the Minister would not have been pressurised into coming to the House to make a statement. There is no question about that, and it highlights the importance of Dominic’s action.

I heard the Minister’s reply to Mr Kennedy’s question, but is she aware of any of the same consignment being disposed of earlier than the one that was found by the

side of the road? Is there any chance that part of the original consignment is still being retained in the place where the lost files were kept?

Ms Ruane: I was not pressurised into coming here today: I wanted to come, and I contacted the Speaker accordingly. It is an important issue, and I ask Members to stop playing politics with it. I am glad to be here, and I am happy that Members are asking the necessary questions. As political representatives, we can be accountable in a way that respects the confidentiality of sensitive information — but going to the media is not the way to do that. The media could have been told that files were lost and had been handed back. Confidential files should not be given to the media: that is not responsible behaviour.

Mr D Bradley: Neither is leaving confidential files at the side of the road.

Ms Ruane: The people who found the files had a choice: they could have given them to the PSNI. People must face up to their responsibilities. I have expressed deep regret as have the boards. I have apologised unreservedly. In case P J Bradley did not hear me do so, I apologise again, because it is wrong that such information entered the public domain in that way. It is wrong that such information —

Mr D Bradley: It was wrong that it was left in the middle of the road.

Ms Ruane: Perhaps the Member will let me finish my point without interrupting. It is wrong that such sensitive information ended up on the side of the road. I ask Members to stop playing politics.

Mr D Bradley: The Minister is playing politics.

Ms Ruane: I am not playing politics. I came here to make a statement, because people are concerned.

Mr D Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Given the extensive input of the chief executive of the SELB into the Minister’s statement, I wonder whether it can properly be described as a ministerial statement. Is there not a conflict of interests?

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her statement. What has happened is terrible. The responsibility for securing such documents lies with the Minister’s Department. Therefore, I welcome both her announcement of a full investigation and the additional information that she provided to Members today. That was not included in the initial information that was provided to Members but, as Mr Speaker said, Members should check that they have received all the relevant documentation.

Does the Minister accept that elected representatives who find themselves in possession of such sensitive material have a particular duty of care to ensure that

there are no further breaches of confidentiality and that the details of the documented individuals are not provided — *[Interruption.]*

Mr D Bradley: Shoot the messenger.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Anderson: The Member should show some manners. Individuals' details should not be provided to the media, particularly given some of the descriptions that were ascribed to them. It is unacceptable for such information to be provided to the media, and I want to know whether multiple copies of the files were found, or were they photocopied or faxed for media distribution? I hope that all breaches of human rights associated with this find will be investigated.

Ms Ruane: I accept that every Member has a duty of care to children and to the adults who were children when the extremely sensitive information was documented. Their confidentiality must be respected, and the information was gathered on that basis.

At this point, I am not aware of how the documents were sent to the media as I have not yet received a report on the matter. I have been clear in my answer: I do not believe that sending the documents to the media was the right action to take. Members should reflect on that.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her statement. Does she agree that the people who tell us that everything should be passed on to the PSNI should heed their own advice in this type of situation? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Molloy: If it was a member of the board who found those documents, does the Minister agree that that member had a duty to ensure that the information was protected over the weekend?

Does the Minister know how many people may have read those documents over the past three or four days? Are we even sure how many days the files were missing? My colleague Martina Anderson mentioned the files being photocopied. Does the Minister share the concern about the number of photocopies that may exist?

Ms Ruane: My understanding is that the files were found on Friday and were not handed in to the Southern Education and Library Board until this morning. I am concerned about their whereabouts between Friday and Monday. That will all be part of the investigation.

Adjourned at 6.57 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 19 February 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: Yesterday, Members asked whether a statement was due from junior Minister Mr Ian Paisley Jnr. It is important that I clarify the situation for Members.

A junior Minister ceases to hold office if he or she resigns by notice in writing to the First Minister and deputy First Minister. There is, therefore, no legal requirement to notify the Speaker or the House. However, junior Minister Mr Paisley Jnr, as a courtesy, informed me yesterday morning of his intention to resign from office.

Should Mr Paisley Jnr seek to make a personal statement to the Assembly about his resignation, I shall consider his request.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am grateful for your early clarification. Can I have further clarification on the arrangements for the appointment of a new junior Minister? One presumes that ministerial appointments are subject to Assembly approval. On that basis, will the leader of the relevant party nominate a replacement, bring that nomination to the Assembly and, therefore, have the endorsement of that appointment?

Mr Speaker: Two junior Ministers were appointed and took up their posts on 8 May 2008 under an existing determination. That determination, in accordance with legislation, makes provision for a junior Minister ceasing to hold office and for the filling of vacancies. A copy of that determination is available from the Business Office.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council — Plenary Format

Mr 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 on the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in plenary format.

Recently, after ministerial statements have been delivered, Members have been in the habit of making their own statements rather than asking questions.

Yesterday, I was very clear, and I asked several Members to take their seats after lengthy statements, sometimes with no questions. Therefore, I say to Members on all sides of the House that there are questions to a ministerial Statement. I have given some latitude to Members who wish to lead in their questions; however, if Members insist on making long statements, I will rule them out of order.

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness):
A Cheann Comhairle, in compliance with section 52(c) (2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, we wish to make the following statement on the sixth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in plenary format, which was held in the Dundalk Institute of Technology on Thursday 7 February 2008. All Executive Ministers who attended the meeting have approved that this report be made on their behalf.

In addition to the First Minister, junior Ministers Paisley Jnr and Kelly and myself, our delegation comprised the Minister of Finance and Personnel, the Minister of the Environment, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Minister of Education, and the Minister for Social Development.

The Irish Government hosted the meeting, and the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern TD, chaired it. The Irish Government delegation included Brian Cowen TD, Tánaiste and Minister for Finance; Noel Dempsey TD, Minister for Transport and the Marine; Dermot Ahern TD, Minister for Foreign Affairs; Micheál Martin TD, Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment; Seamus Brennan TD, Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism; Éamon Ó Cuív TD, Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs; Mary Coughlan TD, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food; Mary Hanafin TD, Minister for Education and Science; Eamon Ryan TD, Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources; and Brendan Smith TD, Minister for Children.

The president of the Dundalk Institute of Technology, Dennis Cummins, with his staff and students, afforded us

an excellent welcome and highly professional arrangements, facilities and hospitality. We were very pleased to meet among young people in a modern institute of technology. Our young people are the key to our success, and we welcomed the opportunity to let them see that we are working together to build a better future.

At the start of the meeting, the Council expressed its united condemnation of threats to undermine political progress. Ministers resolved to maintain progress on building co-operation, and expressed appreciation of the strong, cross-border co-operation between the PSNI and the Garda Síochána.

During the meeting, Ministers had a broad discussion and exchanged views on matters aimed at delivering practical benefits, such as co-operation on EU issues, and the north-west gateway initiative. Ministers welcomed the opportunity to discuss those and other important issues.

The Council received a progress report, prepared by the NSMC joint secretaries, on the 13 NSMC ministerial meetings since the previous plenary on 17 July 2007.

The Council welcomed the work under way in the NSMC sectoral and institutional format meetings on a wide range of mutually beneficial and directly relevant practical issues.

The Council endorsed the progress made, including agreement on a management structure, to take forward the plenary decision on the A5 north-west gateway to Aughnacloy and the A8 Belfast-to-Larne road projects, and welcomed progress to date on the Narrow Water bridge proposal.

The Council welcomed agreement on the modalities for taking forward the re-opening of a stretch of the Ulster Canal between Clones and Upper Lough Erne.

Ministers emphasised the importance of these major infrastructural projects and the need to ensure that they are delivered in a speedy and efficient manner, on time and in budget. I stressed the need to consult local stakeholders during the construction phase of the Ulster Canal, and to develop a targeted marketing programme for this important new tourist facility.

The Council welcomed the decision to assess options for the future development of the Belfast-to-Dublin Enterprise rail service, including increased service frequency, improvements to rolling stock and elimination of speed restrictions. It agreed that co-operation on road safety will continue to be a high priority, including recognition of driver disqualification and penalty points, and road safety in border areas.

The Council agreed that the tourism sector is making a major contribution to economic growth and employment, and it welcomed Tourism Ireland's challenging targets of tourism revenue growth of between 6·6% and 7·5% per annum, visitor growth of between 4·2%

and 5·1% per annum, and promotable growth of between 14% and 17·2% over the next three years.

The Council looked forward to receiving reports from the working groups — which were established at the NSMC meeting in institutional format — on the cross-border transfer of pensions and on cross-border banking issues, which are of direct relevance to greater cross-border mobility.

The Council also considered a paper on child protection. It recognised that that is a crucial matter that affects us all. It welcomed the opportunity to discuss the matter and to consider how effective child-protection measures can be developed through enhanced collaboration and co-operation. It noted and welcomed the current cross-border co-operation on child protection, involving Departments, agencies and policing bodies.

In order to intensify co-operation on child protection, the Council requested that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and the Office of the Minister for Children establish and co-chair a cross-border group that comprises officials from relevant Departments. That work would include making early progress on an all-island child-protection awareness campaign; identifying other medium- to long-term measures to improve child protection, including an examination of an all-island approach to child protection, with a particular focus on vetting and the exchange of information; working on the areas for co-operation on children's services that are emerging from the North/South feasibility study on health and social services; and reporting any progress to the next NSMC plenary meeting.

The Council considered the progress report on the St Andrews Agreement review, and it noted the progress that has been made to date in advancing that review. It also noted the intention to present a final report to the NSMC plenary meeting later in 2008.

The Council considered a paper on a North/South consultative forum. It noted the completion of the Irish Government's consultation with their social partners and noted the position, as outlined previously, for reviewing the Civic Forum here.

Ministers also considered a paper on a North/South parliamentary forum, and they noted the ongoing discussions between the Houses of the Oireachtas and the Northern Ireland Assembly on the subject, which will be kept under review.

It was agreed that the Executive will host the next plenary in October 2008.

Mr Moutray: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. I welcome the progress that has been made to date on the reopening of a stretch of the Ulster Canal between Clones and Lough Erne. Will the deputy First Minister tell the House whether consideration was

given to pursuing the re-opening of further stretches of the canal, particularly the great many that remain in the constituency of Upper Bann?

The deputy First Minister: At the sixth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in inland waterways sectoral format, which was held on 17 October 2007, the Council approved arrangements that Waterways Ireland proposed. Those included joint-management arrangements and a targeted marketing programme to progress the restoration of the 12 km Clones-to-Upper Lough Erne section of the Ulster Canal over the next six years. Subsequent to advancing the project, Waterways Ireland officials met with representatives of statutory agencies, North and South. Along with local relevant interest groups, Waterways Ireland will progress the matter further by seeking to appoint a project manager and a consultant to undertake preliminary design work.

Although I know that there is tremendous interest in the further development of the project, progress on it must be made one step at a time, commensurate with affordability.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement.

Will he outline briefly the background to the Narrow Water bridge project? Will he further comment on the accuracy of the statement to the press on the €400,000 funding for the feasibility study for the bridge that Margaret Ritchie, the Minister for Social Development, made following her meeting with Dermot Ahern?

The deputy First Minister: In March 2007, the Irish Government's Finance Minister, Brian Cowan TD, stated that they looked forward to working with the restored Northern Executive in order that his Government could further advance proposals in their national development plan, including the Narrow Water bridge project. The NSMC meetings in transport sectoral format in September and December 2007 noted progress on the Irish Government's proposals for construction of a bridge at Narrow Water, linking County Louth with County Down.

The Department of Transport and the Marine in Dublin has provided some €390,000 to Louth County Council to undertake a technical study of the proposed project. Once the outcome of the technical work is available, the Irish Government will share the results with the relevant Departments here.

10.45 am

There was no detailed discussion on the matter at the NSMC plenary meeting. The discussions that Minister Ritchie held with Dermot Ahern TD were not part of the formal meeting. The Irish Government's decision to fund a technical study on the Narrow Water bridge proposition was taken well in advance of the NSMC

plenary meeting on 7 February 2008. No decision was taken on the technical study at that meeting. At the moment, the head of the Civil Service is investigating the circumstances surrounding the issuing of press releases by the Department for Social Development, including the involvement of officials, and will report back to the Executive in due course.

Mr Kennedy: Is the deputy First Minister aware that the Narrow Water bridge proposal does not have widespread support? It is the view of many, including Warrenpoint Harbour Authority, that it will not resolve the severe traffic difficulties in the Newry and Mourne and south Down area. In fact, there is greater support for the relief road proposal, which would, in many ways, help to resolve the ongoing traffic problems in the Newry area. Would it not be better to spend some time examining that proposal in detail instead of advancing a rather hare-brained scheme to create something that will have no long-term benefit?

Will the deputy First Minister provide more detail on the papers that were tabled on both the North/South consultative forum and the North/South parliamentary forum? Will those papers be deposited in the Assembly Library? How does he intend to consult in the Assembly, either through the Assembly Committees or with the political parties, in respect of those matters?

The deputy First Minister: For the moment, it must be accepted that a feasibility study, funded by the Dublin Government, is taking place, under the auspices of Louth County Council. There is no doubt that before we get close to a point of decision on any of those matters that there are all kinds of processes to be undertaken. The views of everyone are important.

On the matter of the southern relief road, I have been advised by Minister Conor Murphy that his Department's Roads Service has employed consultants to undertake a feasibility study to explore options for a new Newry southern relief road that would link the A2 Warrenpoint Road, a few miles north of Narrow Water, to the A1, just south of Newry. That study, which is ongoing, will assess the benefits to strategic traffic management and the potential to ease traffic congestion in Newry. I have no doubt whatsoever that the two projects that are undergoing feasibility studies will be watched carefully by everyone.

At the plenary meeting in July 2007, the North/South Ministerial Council noted that the Irish Government would consult the social partners on the North/South consultative forum and also noted the review of the arrangements for consulting civic society in the North. Since then, the Irish Government have held formal consultations with their social partners.

The First Minister and I have commissioned a review of the Civic Forum. At the NSMC plenary meeting, I made it clear that although we are keen to

see progress on that, we need to get it right. That will include taking on board the views of Members of this House and of the Committee that the Member chairs.

At its plenary meeting in July 2007, the North/South Ministerial Council noted the provisions of the St Andrews Agreement relating to the North/South parliamentary forum and that any development of a joint parliamentary forum is a matter for the two elected institutions. The Council agreed that officials from the two Administrations would make contact with the Assembly and the Houses of the Oireachtas and report back to the NSMC at the earliest opportunity on prospects for developing such a forum.

Officials from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) wrote to the Clerk of the Assembly conveying the Council's decision. Subsequently, a meeting was held between An Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann and the Speaker of the Assembly, and further discussions have taken place between the two elected institutions at official level.

All parties recognise that any forum will be a matter for the Assembly and Dáil Éireann to consider. At the NSMC plenary meeting, Ministers noted that discussions are ongoing between the Houses of the Oireachtas and the Assembly on the North/South parliamentary forum, and the matter will be kept under review.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the deputy First Minister's statement on the good, positive work of the NSMC. I also welcome the high priority being given to road safety, particularly to ensuring that we can reduce, where possible, the carnage on our roads. That correlates with something that was not mentioned in the statement, although I think that it was mentioned by the deputy First Minister, namely alcohol misuse and abuse across the island.

Almost 37% of road deaths in the Republic are caused by drunk drivers; and there was an announcement this morning in our constituency, Mr Speaker, that almost 50 youngsters under 15 years of age, including one 10-year-old, have been admitted to accident and emergency departments due to drink-related injuries. What priority is OFMDFM going to give to ensuring that the next generation of children is not going to face the same pressures regarding the abuse and misuse of alcohol, and self-harm?

Finally, the north-west gateway initiative was mentioned at the NSMC meeting. Will the deputy First Minister give details of the action plan for health and education and, in particular, whether there will be any co-operation on sporting events in the initiative?

The deputy First Minister: We are pleased with the continuing level of co-operation with the Minister for Transport and his officials on road safety. In 2007, positive progress was made in the North on road safety, with a reduction of 11% in road deaths — from 126 to

112. The latter figure equalled that for 1947, which was the lowest on record.

The number of children who were killed on the roads fell by more than 40% — from nine in 2006 to five in 2007. That number is also the lowest on record.

Road safety is one area in which we cannot become complacent — each death is one too many. We have introduced a number of new road safety initiatives since devolution, and we welcome the publication of the new road safety strategy by the Irish Government.

I share the Member's concern regarding alcohol abuse, and drink-driving in particular. During the Christmas period, An Garda Síochána and the PSNI issued statistics on the number of people who were caught drink-driving. Such behaviour is completely and totally unacceptable.

I am pleased to report that we are making steady progress in reducing the number of people being killed and injured on our roads, and that is very important.

Mr Ford: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. I listened closely to the questions asked by Mr Kennedy; however, I do not think that the deputy First Minister listened to them because Mr Kennedy did not seem to get answers to some specific points.

I ask the deputy First Minister specifically: will the Executive publish the progress report on the review of the St Andrew's Agreement; will the Executive publish the report on the North/South consultative forum; and will the Executive publish the report on the North/South parliamentary forum? I note in particular, Mr Speaker, that the final issue is the responsibility of you, An Ceann Comhairle of Dáil Éireann and An Cathaoirleach of Seanad Éireann — why, therefore, was the NSMC discussing the matter?

The deputy First Minister: As work progresses on all those matters, decisions will be taken by the Irish Government and us under the auspices of the NSMC. The time is not appropriate for me to make any commitments on behalf of the NSMC because the Council, meeting in plenary sessions, is subject to joint decisions made by the Irish Government and the Executive Ministers who attend.

Mr Shannon: I have two questions to ask. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Nigel Dodds, told me in a recent written answer that there had been 2.1 million visitors to Northern Ireland last year. The deputy First Minister said that he intended to increase the number of tourists by between 4.2% and 5.1% per annum. That being the case, what policies will he be introducing to ensure that those numbers increase? Mr Dodds's answer also revealed that there had been only 166,000 visitors from North America; perhaps that is one of the areas on which we should be focusing.

My second question is in relation to cross-border co-operation on child protection. Have there been any discussions between the PSNI and the Garda Síochána on vetting and the exchange of information, which I think is vital?

The deputy First Minister: Tourism Ireland markets the island of Ireland overseas as a preferred tourism destination. Its key role is to provide strategic leadership and international marketing with world-class marketing programmes.

The first NSMC tourism sectoral meeting was held in Dublin on 8 November 2007. Tourism Ireland's business plan for 2008 and corporate plan for 2008-10 were approved at that meeting. At the NSMC plenary meeting, the Council recognised the significance of tourism in the delivery of economic growth. It welcomed Tourism Ireland's challenging targets of tourism revenue growth of between 6·6% and 7·5% per annum, visitor growth of between 4·2% and 5·1% per annum, and promotable growth of between 14% and 17·2% over the next three years.

There is no doubt that we are seeing a steady increase in the numbers of tourists coming to the North. That feeds into our economy, so it is important that we continue to grow those figures. Arrangements are being made for the next meeting of the NSMC in tourism sectoral format to be held in May.

The First Minister and I agree that children are our most important asset; they are our future, and it is our duty to protect them. Taking account of the important debate that took place in this Assembly, we agreed to raise the issue at both the NSMC and the British-Irish Council (BIC).

The NSMC discussed how more effective child protection measures could be developed through collaboration and co-operation across the island, including between the PSNI and the gardaí. There is already significant collaboration and co-operation involving Departments, agencies and the policing bodies, but we need to maintain momentum to ensure that the collaborative arrangements are as effective as possible on a cross-border, east-west basis.

The NSMC agreed that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Office of the Minister for Children should establish and co-chair a cross-border group of officials to intensify co-operation, including early progress on an all-island child protection awareness campaign; the identification of other medium- and long-term measures to improve child protection, including examination of an all-island approach to child protection, focusing in particular on vetting and the exchange of information and any areas for co-operation in children's services emerging from the North/South feasibility study on health and social

services; and a commitment to report progress to the next NSMC meeting.

This issue is taken very seriously by all of us. It is imperative that the police forces, North and South, in particular, work closely together, and we intend to give them every encouragement and support in their task.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. It is good to see such robust and dynamic all-Ireland work taking place. Will the Minister confirm that there is a need for a step change in the north-west gateway initiative to make it less aspirational and more operational? That is how we in Sinn Féin have always viewed the initiative. Despite what the SDLP and others told us, we knew that it was only ever going to be an aspirational document.

It must become more operational. Will the deputy First Minister confirm that that will happen? My constituents in Derry, and those who took part in the Stand up for Derry campaign, would welcome a step change in the north-west gateway initiative.

Mr Speaker: Order.

11.00 am

The deputy First Minister: The importance of progressing the north-west gateway initiative's work was agreed at the plenary meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council. I said that OFMDFM hopes to submit a paper to the Executive on the matter in the next few weeks.

Mr Beggs: The deputy First Minister said that the NSMC requested the creation of a cross-border group of officials to co-operate on child-protection matters, and that that group would identify child-protection issues in the medium term to long term and focus on vetting and on the exchange of information. Why is nothing happening in the short term? The inadequacies of the Republic of Ireland's child-protection system have been highlighted in previous Assembly debates. Those inadequacies endanger children in Northern Ireland never mind those in the Republic of Ireland. Will the deputy First Minister state why he has not pressed for short-term changes to the Republic of Ireland's inadequate system for protecting children? Is there a cosy relationship, similar to the one between the DUP and Sinn Féin, developing between the First Minister and the Irish Government? Why have the inadequacies of the child-protection system in the Republic of Ireland not been highlighted at the NSMC meeting?

The deputy First Minister: In short, there are constitutional difficulties in the South that the Irish Government must address. The Irish Government's commitment to the deepening consensus on amending its constitution to incorporate the rights of children — contained in the 28th Amendment of the Constitution Bill 2007 — has led to the establishment of a joint committee on the constitutional amendment for children.

That committee's terms of reference are to examine the proposals in the amendment, which include the exchange of soft information. The committee is due to report back to the Oireachtas by the end of March 2008. We await a decision on a date for that constitutional amendment with as much interest as everyone else.

Mrs M Bradley: The deputy First Minister said there was broad discussion and an exchange of views on matters aimed at delivering practical benefits such as the north-west gateway initiative. Was any consideration given to issues of concern to older people who live at the border? They could make good use of services that are available in the North, which are only between one and a half and two miles away from their homes across the border. At present, they stay at home because there are no day-care centres, or any other facilities, near them. I want issues such as that addressed.

The deputy First Minister: Naturally, I sympathise with the Member's comments. The issue was not discussed at the plenary meeting of the NSMC. However, the First Minister and I intend to publish proposals, which the Member, along with the other Members who represent the north-west, will await with interest.

All Members have a responsibility to do as much as possible to ensure the safety and well-being of our older people. The Member has raised a health issue, which requires a feasibility study to detail the extent of the problem for older people who live in border areas.

Mr Elliott: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. My question relates to the Clones and Upper Lough Erne stretch of the Ulster Canal. Has any timescale been set for the restoration of that part of the canal? Has there been any estimate of the costs that the project will incur?

The deputy First Minister: At the sixth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council at the inland waterways sectoral meeting on 17 October 2007, arrangements proposed by Waterways Ireland were approved, which included joint-management arrangements and a targeted marketing programme to advance the restoration of the 12-kilometre section of the Ulster Canal from Clones to Upper Lough Erne over the next six years.

There is a six-year time frame. Subsequently, in taking forward the project, Waterways Ireland officials have met representatives of statutory agencies North and South, along with relevant local interest groups. Waterways Ireland will progress the matter further by seeking to appoint a project manager and a consultant to undertake preliminary design work. After that, we will have a better idea of cost.

Mr Gallagher: I thank the deputy First Minister for the paper that he has brought to our attention and the progress that is evident on a range of issues. However,

there is a serious question about the repatriation of illegal waste originating in the Republic of Ireland. We are led to believe that Dublin City Council is the authority responsible for repatriation, but the Minister of the Environment has been unable to get a commitment from Dublin City Council that it will take responsibility for the repatriation of that waste, despite the risks to health. Was that matter raised at the Council meeting and, if not, will it be a matter of high priority at the next Council meeting?

The deputy First Minister: A road map drawn up to deal with issues of illegal cross-border waste was endorsed by Ministers at the NSMC meeting in October 2007. Officials have held discussions with their Southern counterparts aimed at repatriating waste originating from two specific sites in Ireland at Slattinagh and Trillick. A formal request has been made to the Irish authorities to repatriate the waste in line with that road map and the relevant EU legislation. There has been very little progress on that matter, and Minister Foster has recently raised the issue with John Gormley, who, I understand, is taking a personal interest in resolving it. I am convinced that Minister Foster is proactively pursuing the issue.

Mr Dallat: I note that there will not be another plenary session until near the end of the year. Given the serious issues under discussion, including child protection and road safety — matters involving life and death — is there not a need to let the handbrake off and have more regular meetings so that those outstanding cross-border issues can be discussed?

The deputy First Minister: It would be a mistake to think that all of the work is carried out at the plenary meetings. Many cross-sectoral meetings take place in between Council meetings, and the respective Ministers, North and South, have the responsibility of dealing with the detail of those issues.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Update on Bluetongue

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that she wishes to make a statement to provide an update on bluetongue.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I wish to make a statement about the bluetongue virus that has been found in animals imported into the North from Europe.

Before I go into detail, I will make a few preliminary comments. First, I pay tribute to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) staff who have worked so hard in recent days — and nights — and who are still working to defend the agriculture industry from bluetongue.

Secondly, I acknowledge the recent unanimous support from agriculture industry leaders for messages urging potential importers not to put their own businesses, as well as those of their neighbours, at risk.

Finally, I appreciate very much the press release issued by the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee on 15 February. I agree wholeheartedly with Dr McCrea that our farming industry does not need any further challenges at this time. His appeal to the whole industry to work with DARD to enforce high standards of biosecurity effectively reinforced similar messages from me and from farmers' leaders.

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

Also, I wish to thank Members from all parts of the Assembly for their understanding and support at this difficult time.

I will start by outlining the background to bluetongue. The bluetongue virus is present in many countries worldwide, and various strains have been present in the Mediterranean area for some time. However, in 2006 bluetongue serotype 8 began to circulate in northern European countries, such as Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, Holland and France. In 2007 the virus appeared for the first time in Britain, in East Anglia.

Bluetongue is an economically significant disease for ruminant animals, mainly cattle, sheep and goats. However, it does not affect humans, and it spreads in a very distinctive way. I wish to make it clear that bluetongue does not spread by direct transmission from animal to animal — as foot-and-mouth disease does, for instance — nor is there any risk to farmers or stock handlers. Bluetongue is spread by midges. If an infected animal is bitten by a midge at a time of year when the ambient temperature is consistently above 15°C, the

virus can develop within the midge, and the midge can then infect any other ruminant animal that it bites.

The incursion of bluetongue into England last autumn is believed to have been the result of wind-borne midges having arrived from the continent via prevailing easterly weather patterns. That incursion has established a beachhead of infection in south-east England that could spread north and west this summer through midge activity. However, as I have repeatedly said, the more immediate threat to the North, and the more likely way in which the disease could arrive here, is through imports of infected animals from bluetongue-affected areas in Britain and the continent. That is why I have been encouraging farmers here not to import animals from such regions.

The economic consequences of the disease can be severe. Belgian sheep farmers have reported mortality rates of up to 30%. There is also a loss of production in both dairy and beef cattle, although mortality rates are much lower, with a figure of around 1% having been reported. However, this is a new serotype of the virus, and my Department is currently assessing the potential economic impact of its becoming established in the North. Whether it will transmit easily in our climate remains to be seen.

It should soon be possible to vaccinate animals to provide protection from bluetongue. Veterinary pharmaceutical companies are developing a bluetongue vaccine, and supplies of it should start to come on stream this summer. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has ordered more than 22,500,000 doses of the vaccine. Although my Department has input into the vaccination plans, European Commission rules prohibit vaccination in bluetongue-free areas, such as the island of Ireland, at this time.

It is imperative that we seek to keep bluetongue out for as long as possible. We operate a programme of restricting and post-import testing all animals that are imported from the continent or from bluetongue-affected areas of Britain. Such imports are restricted on farms here until post-import tests prove negative.

Turning to recent developments, on 14 February my Department obtained a preliminary blood-test result which indicated the likely presence of the bluetongue virus in one imported dairy heifer on a farm in north Antrim. On the same day, I took the decision to cull that animal as a precautionary measure while we waited for confirmation of the result from the community reference laboratory in Pirbright. The result, which was formally confirmed the next day, showed the presence of bluetongue virus in that animal.

The animal was one of 21 dairy cattle that had been imported to the farm from a collection centre in the Netherlands in January. The animals had originated

from farms in the Netherlands and Germany. These animals had been tested for bluetongue after their arrival here, on 22 January, as is routine for any ruminant animal that is imported into the North from the continent. At that time the animal was negative for both evidence of exposure to the virus — as shown by the enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) test — and the presence of the virus, according to the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test.

At that post-import test, eight heifers in the group of 21 tested positive for antibodies, which indicated that those animals had had previous exposure to the virus — they were ELISA-positive. To explain what that means, the animals did not have the live virus in their blood, only antibodies. For example, a person who has had chickenpox as a child will continue to have antibodies to that disease for many years.

The animals were also tested for the live virus, through the PCR test, and all were found to be PCR-negative, which indicated the absence of active infection. However, my Department took the precaution of restricting the herd for a longer period than is usual, and we retested all of the cattle 30 days after import.

11.15 am

That retest was carried out on 11 February and one heifer showed up positive on PCR: that is, we found the presence of the bluetongue virus. Having culled the infected heifer, and having received confirmation of a positive test, the decision was taken on Friday to cull the heifer's calf as an additional precaution. That was done because it was possible that the calf had become infected through virus transmission before birth and through the close contact it had had with its mother.

Over the weekend, we received results of tests on blood samples collected on Friday 15 February from calves born to other cattle in that group. They showed that three out of four calves born to heifers in the group were ELISA positive and PCR positive — that is, they also showed active infection with the bluetongue virus. On the basis of those results, and in the light of the findings of the investigation so far, I took the decision on Sunday to cull the remaining 20 cattle and all of their calves in the imported group. The culling of those animals was completed on-farm yesterday.

It was judged prudent to remove all the remaining heifers in the group, as the mechanism by which the original animal and the calves became infected is uncertain. That group of cattle had already been exposed to the infection and presented a risk. The mechanism by which animals in the group had become infected is still under investigation. Further tests are taking place in laboratories in the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute and in Pirbright as I speak. Importantly, no evidence exists that vectors are active in that shed, and the suckler herd held in this same

airspace remains uninfected, although intensive surveillance of that group continues. I will return to that point shortly.

Yesterday, as a precautionary measure, we culled a further three animals, imported in another batch. Because of the uncertainty of the mechanism by which the animals in the first group contracted the virus, it was considered prudent to remove the additional animals. In total, 30 animals were culled on the farm.

The Department is under no obligation to pay compensation for imported animals that have been affected by, or exposed to, the bluetongue virus. I repeat that the Department and I are determined to do all we can to keep the North's bluetongue-free status. The cull does not mean that the disease is circulating here.

Recognition of an outbreak of bluetongue, and that a country has infected status, depend on evidence that the virus is circulating in animals other than imports. Such evidence is taken to demonstrate infection of the local midge population. Our active surveillance has yielded no such evidence, and so the North, and the island of Ireland, retains bluetongue-free status. Both DEFRA, and Mary Coughlan, the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in the South, have been kept informed.

I assure Members that I will continue to focus on ensuring that the disease is contained through quick and decisive action. The remaining cattle and sheep on the farm will continue to be restricted and they will be tested regularly until we are satisfied that no risk of infection remains. Surveillance-testing will be extended, as necessary, to other imported animals and across other areas of the North. I have asked my officials to consider what else needs to be done, and I will announce what further steps are to be taken in the coming days.

In the meantime, nothing must divert us from the immediate task of implementing intense surveillance of the infected farm in north Antrim. The farm in question is the only farm that has given cause for concern. I will keep the Assembly informed as the investigation progresses, and as more information comes to light which helps us to understand the incident on that farm.

Go raibh maith agat. As I said on Friday, farmers who consider importing livestock from bluetongue-affected areas should wise up if they are serious about keeping bluetongue out of the island of Ireland. On Friday, the president of the Ulster Farmers' Union called for a voluntary ban on the import of animals from bluetongue-affected areas. I welcome that move, as I have no statutory power to ban such imports.

Once more, I plead with farmers who are considering the importation of animals to think again. This experience demonstrates that importing is far too risky. I wonder how long it will be before the message gets through.

Since my appointment, I have reminded farmers about vigilance in relation to bluetongue a staggering 23 times. On six occasions since May 2007, I have explicitly asked in my press releases that farmers think carefully before importing.

The Chief Veterinary Officer has written to all cattle and sheep owners in the North about that, and DARD has issued posters and flyers to farmers and private veterinary practitioners. This week, DARD will again run a series of advertisements to remind farmers to be vigilant and to remind them of the precautions that they should take in relation to bluetongue.

I regret the circumstances that have led to my having to make this announcement. One farming family has already suffered loss. I appeal again to anyone considering importing animals to think twice about the impact that it may have on their business and on the wider community. I assure the House that I and my Department will continue to do all that we can to retain our bluetongue-free status, but, as I have repeatedly said, everyone in the farming community must be responsible and vigilant. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that they are to ask questions about the Minister's statement.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): I thank the Minister, the Department and the farming industry for their continued vigilance, and for working to ensure that the disease does not become the epidemic that we all fear. I endorse the calls for the industry to remain on high alert, and I welcome the fact that Northern Ireland is still a bluetongue-free area. I also support the action that has been taken.

The Minister previously told the House that she would adopt a fortress mentality towards disease. However, now that the threat is at the door, there appears to be a hesitation to take the only appropriate action that is available — to ban imports from bluetongue-infected areas. On 1 October 2007, the Minister said that her disease strategy:

“recognises that different regions have different priorities to consider, and it provides for us to respond in a way that is specific to our circumstances.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 24, p102, col 2*].

The Minister said then that she had the capability to act, but now she has told the House that she does not have the statutory authority to act. Who has the statutory authority, and is the Minister seeking to have that authority invoked? Does she agree that now is the time to address our specific circumstances by banning imports, rather than simply calling for the voluntary ending of imports? Having agreed with me that the farming industry does not need this challenge, does the Minister agree that action beyond the wait-and-see approach is desperately needed? Can the Minister tell the House why she does not seek to implement the very practice

that she has personally promoted — turning Northern Ireland into a fortress by banning imports from affected areas?

An order for the bluetongue vaccine has been placed for livestock in England and Wales. What steps have been taken for a vaccine to be made available should bluetongue, God forbid, become a reality in Northern Ireland? I ask the Minister to keep the Committee fully informed as the issue develops.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Committee Chairman for his comments, and I welcome the good working relationship that we have had on the issue. I will, of course, continue to keep the Committee fully informed.

The question about the ban is an obvious one. The higher-risk imports are from areas affected by bluetongue in mainland Europe. Under EU legislation, we are unable to ban imports if the relevant trade conditions are met. On 26 October 2007, Commission Regulation 1266/2007, which allows for the movement of animals from bluetongue zones under certain conditions, came into effect. Banning imports would contravene that legislation. The regulation came into effect because so much of Europe was affected. I was opposed to the regulation, and I lobbied intensely on the matter. I wrote to Jeff Rooker at DEFRA, and spoke to colleagues there, about voting against the European Commission's regulation. However, the UK Government voted in favour of the legislation. I do not have the statutory authority to ban imports; that is why I appeal to farmers and the agriculture industry to work with me to impose a voluntary ban.

Although we were part of the vaccination strategy and the discussions around that, we are not part of the tender process. At the moment, no animals in the North are infected with bluetongue; therefore, we are not permitted to vaccinate. If we require the vaccine, we will obtain it through our own procurement process. We are developing a vaccination strategy in partnership with DEFRA and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (DAFF). I should also point out that the vaccine is expected to have a limited shelf life. If we were to invest money in the vaccine this year and, all being well, not need it until next year, that money would be wasted.

We are keeping a close eye on the situation, but we are not permitted to vaccinate against the disease while we are bluetongue-free. Therefore, we must wait until animals become infected before we can buy the vaccine and distribute it to farmers. We will keep a close eye on the situation as it develops, and we will do all in our power within the legal framework to keep bluetongue out of the island and out of the North.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend the Minister and her Department

for their swift and decisive action over the past few days. Everyone has put in a huge effort. Will the Minister elaborate on the conditions of bluetongue-free status? Are all the results now available?

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. We have not lost our bluetongue-free status. Unlike other diseases, bluetongue is not confirmed until there is evidence of circulation of the active virus between susceptible animals and the midge vector population. In other words, we retain our bluetongue-free status until bluetongue is found in the midge population. We are at higher risk from imported animals than from midge activity.

The animals that were culled yesterday are still being tested, and we are awaiting some retests on samples that were sent to Pirbright laboratory. This is a live situation, and results are still coming in. We will keep a close eye on those results as they come through and take the necessary action to protect our bluetongue-free status.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for her statement and for the work that she and her Department have been doing. I would like clarification on the testing regime, as eight of the 21 imported animals tested positive prior to leaving the country of export. They then appeared to test negative when they came to Northern Ireland. However, at the most recent test on 11 February, they tested positive again. Will the Minister clarify how those results differed so much?

Ms Gildernew: With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, this will be a lengthy answer. I will go through the timeline of events to put the matter into perspective.

On 11 January, some 36 animals arrived here from an assembly centre in the Netherlands. The animals originated from Holland and Germany, and they tested negative for bluetongue in the pre-import test before leaving the Netherlands. The consignment went to two separate farms. The animals were restricted on those farms, in line with post-import control for bluetongue-susceptible animals. On 21 January, we tested all the animals from the second farm, and they all tested negative for bluetongue. On 22 January, the 21 animals from the first farm were sampled and eight of them tested ELISA-positive, which means that they showed immunity to bluetongue. In other words, the animals had been exposed to the virus and had antibodies in their blood, but they did not carry the live virus. Therefore, we took the further precaution of restricting the herd for longer than usual to carry out further tests.

On 24 January, the PCR test, which shows whether the virus is active in the animal, showed that none of the animals had bluetongue. It was decided to test the animals again 30 days later, and midge traps were placed in the shed.

11.30 am

The animals that were imported on 11 January were retested on 11 February, and on 13 February one animal tested positive for bluetongue virus. A further sample was taken from that animal, and both samples were sent to the reference laboratory in Pirbright. On 14 February, the holding was restricted. The decision to cull one animal was based on suspicion and taken as a precautionary measure. On 15 February, we received the official results from Pirbright, and by that time the cow was culled. On the advice of scientists, that cow's calf was also culled. Test results on the calf showed that it was ELISA positive, because it was exposed to the antibodies that had been passed on through its mother. The calf, however, was PCR negative. Therefore, it had immunity, but it did not have the virus. All other cattle on the premises were sampled.

On 17 February, results showed that three calves that were born to ELISA-positive dams were PCR and ELISA positive. Interestingly, the calves that had not been exposed to vector activity were found to be PCR positive. One calf was ELISA positive but PCR negative, so it had the immunity but not the virus. Samples from other animals gave cause for concern, so those animals were retested, and the samples were sent to Pirbright for analysis. On 18 February, the remainder of the cohort that came from the Netherlands — 20 cattle and five calves — were culled. Yesterday, the Department took the precautionary step of culling a further three animals. Those animals did not test positive, but we were not 100% happy with the results.

At all times, the Department has taken a belt-and-braces approach to contain the disease and to do what is necessary to protect the industry and to cull the animals.

Three out of the four calves that were born to the imported heifers were PCR positive, so the virus was, obviously, transmitted through their mothers. However, the Department and the scientists are still involved in robust active investigations on all of that.

I apologise for the length of my answer, but, in short, the animals tested negative before they left the Netherlands, tested negative on arrival here, but tested PCR positive when later tests were carried out.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for updating the House on the bluetongue virus, and I thank her and the Chief Veterinary Officer, Bert Houston, for their constant attention to the threat and for their call for vigilance; that is appreciated. The events following the detection of the first case prove that our post-import detection is working, but it also shows that we are not impregnable and that our flocks and herds are at risk. What is known about the area of the Netherlands from which the affected animal came? The Minister said that she cannot ban imports from that area, but why are animals allowed in

from the likes of the Netherlands and Germany when those countries are so prone to the disease?

Ms Gildernew: The bottom line is that the heifers from those areas are cheap. Members are aware of the challenges facing the red meat industry. The farmer who imported the cattle had a suckler herd, but he wanted to move into the dairy sector. Dairy heifers are cheaper to buy in countries where bluetongue is prevalent than they are to buy here. Therefore, the farmer made an economic decision. I can understand that; I am not entirely unsympathetic to his situation. The heifers were cheaper to buy and import, and the farmer was thinking of going into the dairy sector. Those heifers had to be culled because they were exposed to the virus, and we have to protect our industry.

The situation should act as a timely reminder to farmers that it is a false economy to bring in heifers from bluetongue-affected areas, because they could end up losing them.

The heifers also came through an export assembly centre. They were collected from different parts of the Netherlands and Germany and brought to an assembly centre. The farmer followed the correct procedures involved in the pre-import and post-import testing, but the risks exist in spite of the procedures. That is why I am reiterating my message: please do not import bluetongue virus into the country.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her statement and actions and those of her Department's staff, particularly the Chief Veterinary Officer and those who work with him.

Considering the Minister's answers, some serious questions about the science remain unanswered. Although there was no evidence of a vector, calves tested PCR positive. Therefore, maternal transmission occurred, which, previously, was not considered to be the case. A heifer that tested negative before leaving the Continent tested PCR positive in Northern Ireland. Clearly, much is unknown about the science.

Dr McCrea's point about the necessity of going back to Europe in order to request import restrictions is emphasised by the facts that have emerged over the past few days.

In addition, if the post-import tests were only performed on the farm after 10 or 11 days, is that satisfactory at a time in which there has been such a level of threat, or is there a need to impose testing at the ports in order to ensure that it is done at the earliest possible time?

Concerning the Minister's request for farmers' vigilance, which we all accept, rather than a vague reference to north Antrim, is it not incumbent on the Department to give more precise information about the location of outbreaks in order that people who live

nearby can be more vigilant, ensuring that they and others are protected in the future?

Ms Gildernew: I thank the Member for his comments. We must remember that a farming family is affected by that outbreak, and that is why the location was described as north Antrim. Every farmer in that area — and in the North — should be vigilant. If the infection had been transmitted by the midge population, they would not have stopped at the boundary to the next-door neighbour's farm.

Concerning the origin of the transmission, the Member is right about the fact that scientific evidence of which we were previously unaware is emerging. That evidence is subject to ongoing investigation and, at this time, it is unhelpful to speculate about the results of such an investigation. However, when the outcome is known, it is incumbent on me to keep Members informed about developments.

It is necessary to wait for 10 days in order to allow recently infected animals to develop the disease to a point at which it can be detected. The testing regime is conducted subject to that timescale, and that allows us to obtain the most accurate results from blood tests. Therefore, we take into consideration what we know about the disease and apply that to our testing regime.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her statement, in which she said:

"I have been encouraging farmers here not to import animals from such regions ... farmers who consider importing livestock from bluetongue-affected areas should wise up ... I have explicitly asked in my press releases that farmers think carefully before importing."

In addition, the president of the Ulster Farmers' Union called for a voluntary ban.

Will the Minister confirm whether the continuing cattle imports from the Netherlands and Germany pose a real threat to the Northern Ireland cattle industry?

Will she also make a statement about the Ulster Farmers' Union's comments? Perhaps, instead of calling for a voluntary ban, it would be better if the Ulster Farmers' Union asked for a statutory ban and used its influence in an attempt to persuade people across the water, where the real power lies?

Ms Gildernew: I thank the Member for his questions. When the Member said "across the water", I presume he meant London. However, on this occasion, the power lies in Brussels. In October, the EU Commission introduced regulations that mean that, if importers meet all the trade conditions, we cannot stop animals coming from infected areas. Therefore, we must be aware of the points at which to apply pressure.

The Member mentioned the fact that the agriculture industry's leadership has been helpful concerning this matter, which it has, and I welcome the comments made by the president of the Ulster Farmers' Union, Kenneth

Sharkey. I also welcome the stark call made six or eight weeks ago by the secretary of the local branch of the National Sheep Association, Edward Adamson:

“anyone considering importing animals from a Bluetongue Region — DON'T!”

We must get such stark language across to people.

We were lucky that this incident occurred during the recent cold snap. It was a timely reminder to the industry of the risk that exists. Had those animals been imported and found to be PCR positive at a later time of year, in August or September, perhaps, the situation could have been very different, because midge activity at that time of year might have resulted in a bluetongue outbreak. In some ways, I am thankful for the weather that we have had.

We are in a position to argue our case in Europe for a ban on imports. However, in the absence of such a ban, we must ask the industry to impose a voluntary ban. Until I have the power to impose a statutory ban, the industry must do it voluntarily. I ask anyone who is thinking of importing animals from bluetongue-infected areas not to do it. It is too risky, both to themselves, to their neighbours and to the entire industry.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister and her Department for the way in which they have dealt with this issue. The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development mentioned the vaccination programme. For the purpose of clarity, when will that programme be made available, and how quickly can it be introduced in the event of an outbreak? Bearing in mind that there is North/South and east-west co-operation on these issues, are there any other new measures that can be introduced to maintain the North's bluetongue-free status?

Ms Gildernew: Vaccination supplies are only imported when a disease is confirmed to be in circulation in a country, and then only within the protection zone. Thankfully, we are not in that position. However, we have to plan strategically in the event that we require vaccines in future.

May I ask the Member to repeat his second question? Did he ask what happens if an outbreak is confirmed?

Mr Boylan: No. What new co-operation measures are available to keep the North bluetongue free?

Ms Gildernew: We must keep our colleagues in Dublin and London up to date on our findings. We have worked and will work closely with Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and their counterparts in Dublin to ensure that they are fully apprised of the situation as it develops. Work is ongoing, and there will be further liaison with veterinarians and scientists in Europe. This is emerging science, and Europe will be interested in our scientific findings. I congratulate Agri-Food and Biosciences

Institute and our veterinarians for discovering that previously unknown transmission route. Europe will look closely at how the disease is transmitted. If that helps to make decisions on vaccination procedures it will be very useful indeed.

Mr Bresland: I thank the Minister for her statement. Can she assure the House that the Veterinary Service has enough resources to deal with any potential outbreak of bluetongue in Northern Ireland?

Ms Gildernew: Obviously, at a time like this, the resources that the Veterinary Service needs to deal with and contain this situation will be made available. Since last week and before, the Veterinary Service has been busy testing animals and carrying out surveillance. Additional midge traps have been placed in the sheds. The Veterinary Service has done sterling work on site, ensuring that we get results as quickly as we can, and that we are kept fully apprised of the situation. I have to rely on scientific evidence and veterinary advice. Everyone has worked hard to ensure that the Veterinary Service can do its job, and that we take the decisions that are necessary to protect the industry.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I wish to seek clarification about the Department's policy on compensation. Will individual farmers whose herds are affected by bluetongue be compensated in this instance? What procedures for compensation are in place should an outbreak take place?

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. The Department is under no obligation to pay compensation for imported animals that have been infected by, or exposed to, the bluetongue virus. We must be very clear about that.

If an outbreak is confirmed, the animals will not be culled because the mortality rates are such that culling is not necessary. Animals can become infected by bluetongue, but then develop a resistance to the disease and recover from it. If an outbreak is confirmed, we will obviously have to change tack. As I said, we will not cull, but we will still not compensate farmers for the slaughter of any animals that become infected by bluetongue. As we do not have the statutory authority to ban imports, we need some mechanism that will encourage people not to import animals and put the industry at risk.

11.45 am

Mr T Clarke: My first question perhaps follows on from the previous question. The Minister said in her statement that the Department is under no obligation to pay compensation. Does that mean that there is no willingness on her part to pay compensation to the farmers who are affected? The fact that the Department is not under any obligation to pay compensation does not mean that it cannot pay it. Therefore, I ask the Minister: will she pay compensation?

Secondly, does the Minister accept that her comment to farmers that they should wise up was offensive?

Ms Gildernew: No, I do not think that the comment was at all offensive. I was simply appealing to farmers who may be thinking of importing animals from bluetongue-infected areas to recognise that their actions will place the industry at risk. It was a straightforward message to farmers, and I received no negative criticism for using those words. I had to make my message clear and simple.

I have repeatedly told farmers that I will not pay compensation for imported infected animals. As I said, some mechanism is needed to deter farmers from importing such animals, and if that means financial loss, then so be it. The importing of animals that are infected by bluetongue puts our industry at risk. As the Chairman of the Agriculture Committee said, farmers need no further challenges at this time. A suitable mechanism is required, and if that involves farmers facing a financial hit, then so be it. I have repeatedly said publicly and to the media that I am sympathetic to farmers' losses, but that a message must be sent that there should be no imports of animals from infected areas because that puts our industry at risk.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement, and I commend both her and her departmental officials on the work that they have done to address the issue. My question was about the banning of imports, and that has been fully answered on a number of occasions. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Irwin: I want to associate myself with the remarks made by the Chairman of the Agriculture Committee. Many of us are concerned that, even after all the testing and screening, an animal with bluetongue can still get through the loop and be brought into Northern Ireland. Surely this latest confirmation of bluetongue strengthens the Minister's case in going to Europe to seek a ban on imports from all bluetongue-infected areas?

Ms Gildernew: I thank the Member for his comments. He makes a very valid point. We will discuss the implications of our findings with Europe, and we will press the issue. However, I do not want to place anyone under any illusion that we will be successful. The European Commission has been very clear that, because so much of Europe is now affected by bluetongue, a ban would entirely shut down the movement of animals within Europe. We will take whatever action we can, and we will talk very forthrightly to the commissioner about our findings and the implications for the industry. All the checks and balances are in place as regards pre- and post-import testing, and the science is such that the animal did not get through the loop — we caught it. That is the point, and that is why I am making this statement today. Once findings are determined, we

will decide what we need to do in our negotiations with Europe. Again, I am happy to keep Members informed of those deliberations.

Mr Burns: Does the Minister agree that local midges would carry this disease? If that is the case, would vaccination be our only defence?

Ms Gildernew: I thank the Member for his question. It was very gallant of him to ask it, given that he has almost lost his voice.

If the midge population has bluetongue, there will be a live outbreak and further precautions will be implemented. However, we are not at that point. The longer the midge population goes without bluetongue, the better it will be. Local midges are as able to distribute and transmit the disease as other midges. If that happens, we will be able to vaccinate against the disease.

My Department is continually working on a contingency plan to avoid the disease. There is also a plan to protect the industry if and when we are unlucky enough for the disease to spread. The longer we can hold bluetongue off, the longer we can protect our industry from it, and the longer we can maintain our bluetongue-free status. It will be better for the industry if our animals are free from the disease. I assure Members that my Department will be working to that end.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Budget Bill

Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the Consideration Stage is intended to enable Members to debate any amendments to the Bill. As no amendments have been tabled, there will be no opportunity to discuss the Budget Bill [NIA 10/07] this morning. However, Members will have an opportunity for a full debate during the Final Stage of the Bill.

I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group the seven clauses for the Question on stand part, followed by the Question on the four schedules and the Question on the long title.

Clauses 1 to 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 4 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 10/07]. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Tourism

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

One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech.

Mr P Maskey: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to bring forward plans to develop tourist infrastructure, particularly in areas of social need, and to recognise the significant potential of political tourism.

I have a conflict of interest as I am currently the chairperson of Fáilte Feirste Thiar, which is a West Belfast tourism initiative. I am also a board member of the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau.

The motion has been tabled for a number of reasons. First, it is to recognise that there is a significant increase in the tourism budget, which I welcome. Tourism offers the potential to deliver a sustainable economy, but only if it is worked right and we get our act together by working collectively to ensure that that is the case.

The next reason is to recognise that the number of visitors who travel to the North has increased greatly over the years, which generates hundreds of millions of pounds in expenditure every year that can be invested in the economy. The tourism industry sustains over 36,000 jobs in the North. However, we have yet to reach the full potential of the number of jobs that could be created, or the visitor numbers and the expenditure that that would generate.

The motion also seeks to draw attention to the fact that many thousands of visitors come to see certain areas, but the local communities do not benefit due to the lack of infrastructure and underinvestment from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Many of those communities are in areas of social need and would benefit from investment as it would bring them into line with others.

Due to the lack of investment, there is nearly a fishbowl scenario — visitors come into the community on a bus or in a taxi, look out the windows and drive off again.

No money has been spent by those tourists in the local community. Such visits, therefore, have little or no benefit to the area. People who are from outside the area benefit on the backs of the people of the local community.

The area that I represent, West Belfast, has many thousands of visitors every year, yet it has no hotels. There are only a small number of B&Bs and one fair-sized tourist-accommodation establishment — Farset International on the Springfield Road. Clearly, however, it does not have enough rooms to cope with demand. In Belfast alone, a 30% to 50% increase in bed space must be provided during the next few years in order to cope with the increased number of tourists. How many of those beds will be provided in west Belfast and the greater Shankill? I imagine that none or very few of them will be provided in those areas, or in any of the other new TSN areas throughout the North.

If the Assembly is serious about tourism and tackling areas of social need, the motion must be taken seriously. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment stated that it will target 50% of financial assistance for all tourist-accommodation projects to new TSN areas during the 2005-06 financial year. I tell DETI clearly that none of that money was spent in Shankill or west Belfast.

The West Belfast and Greater Shankill Task Force's strategic review report stated that:

"Tourism is a fast growing industry and in West Belfast there are many community initiatives"

— such as Fáilte Feirste Thiar and Shankill Tourism —

"which have the potential to significantly contribute to the local economy."

It went on to state that:

"Invest NI and NITB should be financially assisting and encouraging local community tourism initiatives, local businesses and hoteliers alike to invest in a range of tourism initiatives, including accommodation to boost the local economy."

That will help to eradicate the fishbowl scenario.

Those areas have yet to see any commitment from Invest NI or the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) with regard to tourism. I sincerely hope that the Assembly, under Minister Dodds, will go some way towards dealing with those issues. For too long, his Department — under direct rule, I might add — has only paid lip service to those communities.

The tourism product is often discussed. I agree that development of the tourism product must be high on the Assembly's agenda in order to enable the North to attract new visitors and, even more importantly, repeat visitors.

Another aspect of the motion is the potential for political tourism. Political tourism attracts many visitors, whether people like that or not. Curiosity is a major reason for that attraction. During the years, Belfast City Council has carried out several tourist surveys. The results indicate that more visitors would rather see attractions that relate to the Troubles than those that relate to the Titanic Quarter. However,

currently, the NITB neither invests in nor recognises that type of tourism.

I understand that people have sensitivities towards political tourism. However, I also recognise that it has massive potential to grow the tourism industry and will assist in the regeneration of many areas of social need throughout the North. One only has to consider the number of journalists who have written many articles on political tourism and the opportunities that it creates. In a guide compiled by 'The Independent', one of Britain's top travel writers, Simon Calder, placed gable-wall art above any other visitor site. Instead of going to Buckingham Palace or the Tower of London, the journalist advises visitors to go straight to the Shankill and the Falls. That is an important statement from a significant travel writer. Another recent poll that highlights the places one must visit before he or she dies includes the North's political murals.

Such articles show the potential of political tourism. The Assembly must grab the opportunity to build tourism infrastructure, recognise its importance and pay attention to what journalists write about it. People are interested in and curious about the North's history. They want to be told that history by the people who have lived through it. The Assembly has that clever marketing tool at its disposal. Political tourism showcases the North to the rest of the world in a positive manner.

As I mentioned earlier, certain organisations work together in order to bridge and deal with tourism issues. Their co-operation shows great leadership. EPIC, which is a loyalist ex-prisoners group, conducts tours in the Shankill area. Many tourists and journalists have availed of those tours. Coiste, a republican ex-prisoner group, conducts daily walking tours of the Falls Road. On many occasions, the two organisations have worked closely to promote their communities and give tourists what they want. They have seen the demand for political tourism and have grasped its importance. They recognise that if political tourism were promoted and developed by the NITB and other bodies, it has the potential to lift those communities from areas of social need into areas that have great employment and socio-economic opportunities that will become must-see areas for tourists. The possibilities are immense.

12.00 noon

Writers from the 'Lonely Planet' series of guidebooks gave great reviews of the tours that they took with both organisations and raved about what the areas have to offer. I am sure that NITB officials have read the reviews of many journalists from throughout the world on political tourism. I daresay that NITB would be thankful for the free publicity that freed up hundreds and thousands of pounds of its marketing budget.

Many people from around the world read the reviews and travelled here to experience what is on offer. The

opportunity to expand the industry must be taken and the potential of all aspects of tourism must be realised. The Assembly must ensure that tourism benefits everyone. I am not saying that all resources should be invested in areas of social need or that political tourism is the only tourism product. However, infrastructure must be built in the areas that tourists visit. Pilot schemes that operate in those areas have no visitor accommodation, but they attract many thousands of tourists.

I am not hung up on its name but, for want of a better phrase, political tourism has massive potential. The relevant agencies must promote it, and NITB must explore its possibilities and offer it support. Fair play to those organisations that have worked on tourism schemes, because they have tried to create employment opportunities for local people. Despite having received no financial support from NITB, they have led by example and increased the number of visitors.

I urge all Members to support the motion and to recognise the importance of the tourism industry here. All aspects of its huge potential must be considered. Areas, such as the west Belfast and greater Shankill area that I represent are calling for that to happen. Local people see many thousands of visitors coming into their areas every year but they have no accommodation to offer, and there is little benefit to their communities. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Ross: I beg to move the amendment: Leave out all after 'infrastructure' and insert:

"; recognises the benefits to the local economy of tourism; and seeks to promote Northern Ireland in a positive manner."

In his opening comments, the Member acknowledged that tourism is a growing industry in Northern Ireland. It is recognised as such in the Programme for Government, which aims to increase the number of tourists from 1.9 million to 2.5 million by 2011, and to increase the revenue generated from £370 million to £520 million by the same date. Tourism is vital to the local economy, and it is one of the fastest growing sectors here. Public service agreement (PSA) 5 in the Programme for Government commits to:

"Develop our tourism sector and promote Northern Ireland as a must-visit destination to facilitate growth in business and leisure visitors."

I listened to Mr Maskey's opening remarks, and I had a similar debate with him on Radio Ulster in August 2007. He must recognise that people choose where they want to visit — they are not told where to go, and that is an important point. Unlike the motion, my amendment wants tourism to be developed throughout Northern Ireland and recognises that that will benefit everyone.

Although political tourism or terror tourism, as it been labelled in some quarters, will attract some visitors to the Province, Members must ensure that Northern Ireland sells itself as positive and upbeat. Everyone

remembers the days when the only coverage of Northern Ireland that appeared in the foreign media was of bombs blowing people to bits and destroying our towns and cities and of the numerous murders and shootings. Unfortunately, those were the associations with Northern Ireland, and they did not encourage anyone to visit. In fact, such imagery was the reason why people did not come.

Thankfully, Northern Ireland is moving into a more settled and prosperous time, and it is attracting record numbers of tourists to its shores. Although many people may come because they have a genuine interest in the history of Northern Ireland, many others visit for reasons that are totally unrelated to the conflict. Simply to promote Northern Ireland's political or terror tourism, or even to focus on that, does a disservice to many of the positives that Northern Ireland can boast.

It is important to state that political tourism can, and will, have a part to play in an overall tourism strategy. It would be naive to say that there is no market for it, although perhaps it may be deemed to be historical or cultural tourism. Perhaps cultural tourism could also focus on the celebrations that are held on 12 July every year. The Orange Order suggested that approximately £6.5 million could be generated for the local economy by promoting the Twelfth. Northern Ireland's Ulster-Scots heritage is also of interest to many Americans, who trace the roots of many presidents to this part of the country.

Political or cultural tourism has a role to play. Countries such as Poland and Germany have marketed that type of tourism, of which the Berlin Wall is probably the best example. Given our history, people are interested in areas associated with the Troubles. Yesterday's debate on the reclassification of the terrorist campaign demonstrates the fact that there is disagreement about the interpretation of our history. The Member for West Belfast referred to history being told by the people who lived through it; this side of the House resists any attempt to glamorise the past or terrorism.

Since devolution was restored in May 2007, there has been phenomenal interest in Parliament Buildings. My colleague Simon Hamilton has raised the need for a designated tourist centre on the Stormont estate. People are interested in modern political tourism in Northern Ireland, but if we focus only on such tourism, we associate ourselves only with the worst incidents of our history.

Northern Ireland should be promoted positively. We should promote the breathtaking scenery and the beautiful tourist attractions — the Giant's Causeway, the Fermanagh lakes, the Marble Arch caves, the Titanic Quarter, Londonderry's walls and the Ulster American Folk Park. We have the Mourne Mountains,

which reminds me about the possibility of a national park and Members' making their pitches.

In my constituency of East Antrim, Carrickfergus Castle is yet another attraction. East Antrim is the gateway to the coast road and is in a good position to reap rewards from our tourism potential. It is also important to promote and support our small hotels and bed-and-breakfast establishments.

There is an emerging market for other types of tourism. I am a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning, and, last week, we heard evidence from the owner of the Share holiday village, who told us that adventure tourism in Northern Ireland is on the rise. We must also consider that type of tourism.

Many tourists come to Northern Ireland for sporting activities, the best example being the North West 200. They also come for walking, cycling and fishing breaks or to play golf on some of the most splendid links courses in the world. Belfast has become one of the most popular destinations for weekend breaks. It has a growing evening economy, with bustling bars, restaurants and entertainment hot spots.

There are positive aspects to Northern Ireland tourism that we should promote. At the start of my contribution, I mentioned that the Member for West Belfast and I had a debate on Radio Ulster on this issue. That debate resulted from my travelling out from Belfast International Airport last summer and noticing that the shops in the departure area were not marketing specifically Northern Irish goods. The products in those shops were branded as Irish, with Celtic or Guinness logos, and everything from leprechauns to shillelaghs to shamrocks. Northern Ireland should be marketed as a destination of its own. The Irish Republic is our economic competitor, and we should recognise the constitutional reality and ensure that Northern Ireland is marketed as a single entity so that our hotels and bed-and-breakfast establishments can benefit from tourism and not lose out to the South.

My predecessor, the late George Dawson, was often critical of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board for not marketing Northern Ireland as a single entity. He had to travel all the way to the Epcot centre in Florida to buy products on which Northern Ireland was stamped. Fortunately, that situation has been remedied somewhat; the last time that I flew out of George Best Belfast City Airport, I noticed that Northern Ireland football merchandise is now being sold, which is to be welcomed.

Northern Ireland must be promoted in a way that not only reflects the fact that it is its own country but will attract tourists. Terror tourism will not do that. Terrorism was a sad blight on our history, and the majority of people want to move on. Recently, a tourist bus was burnt out, which is a sad reminder of our terrorist past. The company, Paddywagons, had suffered twice from such attacks. At the time, press

reports stated that a Canadian man who was on that bus said that he may never return to Northern Ireland because of the incident.

Such activity is characteristic of our past, and we should be committed to working towards a better future and moving away from our associations with terrorism, paramilitarism and conflict. The Member for West Belfast mentioned that many people visit Northern Ireland to see the murals. I recognise that, but Northern Irish people do not want to focus on the past. Articles in the 'Belfast Telegraph' and the 'News Letter' have stated that the majority of people who live near peace walls want them to be taken down once it is safe to do so.

People want to move on; they do not want to be stuck with the terrorist past and the conflict that we suffered for so long. Northern Ireland wants to move on as a place with a positive image, promoted not only locally but abroad. The amendment that we have tabled gives a much better way to promote Northern Ireland, irrespective of the tourist locations.

We do not have to be characterised by terrorism and our bloody past. Let us be positive about what we can offer tourists. I call on the House to unite behind the amendment and support the tourist industry in Northern Ireland.

Mr Cree: Since peace came to Northern Ireland, there has been a considerable increase in the number of tourists visiting the Province. Before the Troubles, Northern Ireland experienced considerable growth in the tourist market. The years between 1959 and 1967 were characterised by substantial growth, with tourist trips increasing from 615,000 to 1.1 million. After 1969, however, the number of tourists decreased dramatically and, in 1972, dropped to an all-time low of 435,000. Despite improved tourism growth during the latter 1970s, by 1981, the number of tourist trips had risen to only 520,000. It was not until 1991 that figures recovered to the level enjoyed before the years of terrorism.

Since 1991, there has been a year-on-year increase in the number of tourists to Northern Ireland. With a worldwide increase in tourism, Northern Ireland now welcomes substantially more visitors a year than at any other time in its history.

The preliminary forecast for January to December 2007 estimated, in total, 2,051,000 visitors to Northern Ireland — an increase of 4% from 2006. The revenue from tourism in 2007 was estimated at £366 million — a decrease of 1% from the previous year.

Northern Ireland has received significant praise as a tourist destination. In 2006, the 'Lonely Planet' travel guide tipped Northern Ireland as one of the "must see" countries to visit, and listed Belfast as one of the top 10 cities "on the rise".

In November 2007, Tourism Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board unveiled their 2008 tourism marketing plans. It was realised that to increase the number of visitors to Northern Ireland, it was essential that the infrastructure be improved.

The Programme for Government estimated an increase in tourist numbers from 1.98 million to 2.5 million, and an increase in tourism revenue from £370 million to £520 million, by 2011. Furthermore, it was hoped that the tourism sector would be developed and Northern Ireland promoted:

“as a must-visit destination to facilitate growth in business and leisure visitors.”

Although the Budget states that revenue generated by the tourist industry has almost doubled in recent years, that sector contributes significantly less to output in Northern Ireland than in any other region, and is well behind what is contributed in the Republic of Ireland. An issue for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is how to increase tourism's contribution to the Northern Ireland economy. Regional tourism organisations can assist, but they need more money.

The Budget allocation will allow for investment in marketing Northern Ireland as a tourism destination, in the Republic of Ireland by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and globally by Tourism Ireland Ltd. Moreover, the allocation will allow for investment in tourism signature projects across the Budget period; however, I have reservations about some of those. Much is being done, and I agree that areas of social need cannot be left behind in our drive to increase tourism.

There has been significant debate in Northern Ireland as to whether political tourism is appropriate. In ‘Dark Tourism’, Lennon and Foley argued that tourist interest in disaster and atrocity is a growing phenomenon, dating from the late twentieth century, and that it is a form of pilgrimage, or a way of memorialising death. If that is the case, political tourism may be something that should be avoided in Northern Ireland.

12.15 pm

It can be regarded as inappropriate to make a pilgrimage to places where individuals lost their lives, especially if the visits are made in order to glorify the murderers. Political tourism can also be seen to pose a problem in Northern Ireland, as feelings regarding the conflict are still raw. Although it may be argued otherwise, sectarianism still exists, if not overtly, under the surface. As such, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to give a neutral view of the Troubles, and visits to sites that are associated with the years of conflict may become occasions for political propaganda. For that reason, I am happy to support the amendment.

Mr P Ramsey: I support the motion.

There is no doubt that tourism can bring enormous benefits to this region. I heard recently that Galway city, which has a population of around 100,000, receives one million visitors a year. Those visitors stay in local hotels and bed-and-breakfast accommodation, and they buy local products from local shops. That means that hundreds of millions of pounds are being spent each year on the local economy, a great deal of which goes to local businesses.

I mentioned the Galway model for several reasons. First, it is a demonstration of the potential of tourism, and, secondly, an examination of the city and region demonstrates the quality that tourists expect.

Most tourists visit an area for several reasons. Ireland's clean, green image, its beaches, golf courses, rivers, the warm *fáilte* and the high levels of service are the attractions. A complete package is available. I do not think that any Member would argue that we should not develop our tourism package. Clearly, tourism is a potential growth industry here that should be exploited.

The motion also focuses on political tourism. That has many elements; academics and political practitioners from other regions of the world come to specifically research our conflict, including its causes and resolutions. Casual tourists also come here for many reasons, and they find it more interesting to sightsee in the areas that are recovering from conflict. Each tourist could contribute to our economy if our tourism package were constructed and developed properly.

Focusing on sightseeing tourism, which I assume is the primary focus of the Members who proposed the motion, there is no doubt that many people who visit Northern Ireland want to experience the story of conflict. Many are interested in our story, and developing a product that tells that story could provide an economic boost for areas that are recovering from conflict.

However, in building up such a product, we must ensure that the development and maintenance of our historical artefacts does not detract from other kinds of inward investment. I am aware of significant and unfavourable inward investment decisions. For example, a potential investor cited murals and flags as the reason for their not investing.

Mrs I Robinson: I am delighted that the Member gave way. Does he agree that certain artefacts should be returned to Parliament Buildings; for example, the table on which Carson signed the Ulster Covenant and all the paintings that were stored away because they were deemed offensive?

Mr P Ramsey: I do not have any difficulty with that argument; those artefacts are part of my culture as well, and they are part of the true culture of Northern Ireland.

The areas in which that investor chose not to invest were clearly not neutral; they presented the wrong

image of Northern Ireland. Investors in high value added knowledge-based industries do not locate in areas that are covered in political murals. The areas in question did not get to the first base, and the investors did not even want to see the business properties in question. I am sure that the Minister will be familiar with similar stories.

We need to ensure that the development of the tourism product does not damage the quality of an area for its residents. Many people question whether murals should perpetually mark an area as being either nationalist or unionist. There is no doubt that such murals do not inspire integration.

We must also ensure that the development of political tourism does not detract from more basic forms of tourism, such as that of the Galway model. Tourists often want to be educated, and they want to feel comfortable and safe. They may seek to visit an area to hear stories and see murals, but how many will want to stay in such areas and spend their money there? That is a challenge.

The good-news story in my constituency is that an interesting historical tourism product is being developed in Derry. The product includes the city walls, cathedrals, churches, museums, murals and the Apprentice Boys' hall. Each has a story to tell. There are stories of the Anglo-Irish, the Ulster Scots and the Gael — all interrelated and intertwined for hundreds of years. Those are put in a historical context. Visitors to the Free Derry museum or the Apprentice Boys hall get a sense of history — and it is history: the conflict is over. The Minister will be aware of our bid for world heritage status in an effort to ensure that our historical built heritage is preserved.

In Derry, the package is being developed to a high standard. The Walled City signature project involves about £10 million worth of capital investment. We are being careful to ensure that, in developing and maintaining our historical artefacts, we put our story into a historical context. It is important, for example, that artwork is constructive and not aggressive.

Is my time up, Mr Deputy Speaker?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I was going to give you a little bit of leeway, but you have decided to finish anyway.

Mr Neeson: I welcome the opportunity to debate tourism. There is a need to develop a new tourism strategy for Northern Ireland. Prior to suspension, the then Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment was in the middle of an important and significant inquiry into tourism. Perhaps the opportunity is there again for the current Committee to take up the challenge and to try to maximise the growing potential of tourism in Northern Ireland.

We live in a new dispensation. Statistics show that visitor holidays rose from 16% of the visitor-tourist population in 2001 to 20% in 2006. No doubt, 2007 will prove to have been even more significant. Members need only note the number of sightseeing buses that visit the Stormont estate daily. I welcome, too, the growth of the new air routes not only into Europe but to America and Canada. The arrival of both Aer Lingus and Ryanair is significant and shows the potential that can be achieved by the development of the air routes.

The development of the signature projects such as the Walled City of Derry and the Mournes is an important issue. It is to be hoped, too, that, with the controversy apparently out of the way, the development of the Giant's Causeway signature project will proceed. I have a particular interest in the Titanic signature project and wish to see that developed. With regard to that, I raise again in this House the issue of maritime heritage and the fact that no Department in Northern Ireland has responsibility for its development. That is something that must be sorted out quickly.

I mentioned the Walled City of Derry, but it must be remembered that my hometown of Carrickfergus is also a significant walled town. Increasingly, greater interest is being shown throughout Europe in walled cities and towns.

I want to encourage not only the development of tourism in areas of social need, as the motion states, but all forms of investment in such areas. In that respect, greater focus should be placed on the importance of the social economy in Northern Ireland. Once again, that is an area that the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee could examine.

What is meant by political tourism? Does it refer simply to the murals? To my mind, the murals in both loyalist and republican areas are symbols of the division in society. Clearly, people who live in those areas are greatly distressed by the appearance of murals. It is time to move forward. Obviously, we have to take the feelings of the victims of the conflict into account. However, we will not be able to move forward within a political culture of murals.

One of the most amusing and appropriate pieces of political graffiti that I came across was in Enniskillen about 20 years ago. On the gable end of a house, it read:

"Forget 1690, we demand a replay".

It is through that sort of tongue-in-cheek way that we can move forward.

Mrs I Robinson: How can we get rid of the murals that are offensive to both sides of the community if we are going to make them a tourist attraction?

Mr Neeson: I do not want the murals to be a tourist attraction: I want to move on. If we are to create a shared future, it will not be through political murals.

Mr Newton: I support the amendment because the motion contains some negativity. The Programme for Government rightly confirms that growing the economy is the Executive's top priority, and it has been adopted by the Assembly.

Tourism has been adopted as PSA 5 in that strategic approach. The overall aim is to:

"Develop our tourism sector and promote Northern Ireland as a must-visit destination to facilitate growth in business and leisure visitors."

There are two major objectives. The first is to:

"Enhance Northern Ireland's tourism infrastructure",

and the three associated actions, if successfully carried out, to ensure that we meet this objective are:

"Take forward key tourism signature projects to improve NI's tourism product

Manage and develop our inland navigations

Manage and develop NI cultural infrastructure".

Objective 2 is to:

"Promote the growth of the tourism sector";

and that strategic objective also has three associated actions.

However, I would like to mention the five signature projects for a couple of minutes before coming to political tourism — or "terror tourism", as it has been called.

The five signature projects have been identified for their potential to deliver world-class experiences — they will attract visitors from home and abroad. In achieving international stand-out, the projects will have a significant impact on Northern Ireland's tourism performance. In other words, they will be must-see attractions.

No one will be surprised when I list the top priority as the Titanic signature project. I agree with Mr Neeson — it is my favourite project. As a brand name in a world context, Titanic is second only to the well-known soft drinks brand name Coca-Cola. Developing that signature project will involve Thompson Dock and the Harland and Wolff buildings, etc.

I will turn to the negative aspects of the motion. Anyone consulting a thesaurus will see that the word "political" has other interpretations such as supporting; following; biased; taking sides; and being opinionated. There are already initiatives aimed at political tourism in west Belfast, south Armagh and the city of Londonderry.

A political tourism experience was organised by the West Belfast Festival, and I want to relay the experience of an American visitor who booked a place on the political tour.

"First, you will be taken on your tour by an approved Sinn Féin guide — you will understand that this guide will be completely unbiased — or he will play up a strong republican bias to prove he isn't an MI5 agent.

You will visit the political murals eulogising the republican heroes who blew up Saturday morning shoppers on the Shankill, bombed shops in Belfast city centre and shot policemen and soldiers in the back.

You can have your photograph taken at the mural involving that little Communist reprobate Che Guevara.

In Milltown cemetery, you will have a guided tour of the graves of infamous paramilitaries and hunger strikers with a Sinn Féin-approved tour guide: the graves of all those who shot, bombed and starved for Ireland. Of course, everything starts with a tour of the Sinn Féin bookshop, stocking all the political propaganda of the Provisional IRA's terrorist campaign."

12.30 pm

That is the experience of a visitor from the USA. If the role of political tourism is further developed, what will the additional experience be? Will the tourist experience mock kneecappings — maybe even the recorded screams of the supposed victims? What about dummy bomb runs? What about political beatings — hurley sticks provided? Even more ghoulish, what about the activities of the IRA's infamous nutting squad? With a bit of blindfolding and torture, the tourist could relive the experience of the terror victim.

There is a role for tourism. We all want to protect and grow tourism. However, the aim of political tourism is to confuse the political process and to present a biased and prejudiced approach to the events of the past. That is a road down which Northern Ireland tourism, and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, must not travel.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension today. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend this sitting until 2.00 pm.

Suspended at 12.31 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion.

The North of Ireland is investing a pittance in tourism in comparison with the South, and as a result, the potential to attract more visitors has not been realised. The return of devolution to the Six Counties means that the situation should improve beyond recognition. However, a cross-departmental approach to tourism is required to put the necessary infrastructure in place.

There are two signature projects in my South Down constituency — St Patrick/Christian Heritage and the Mourne. However, the roads and sewerage infrastructures are inefficient, and that is hampering efforts to attract visitors to the county. Years of underinvestment in the roads infrastructure has had a significant impact on the tourism industry. Visitors to the North do not want to feel stressed because they are stuck in traffic jams as they attempt to reach their destinations. In order to meet tight travel times, tour operators require a better transport network to compete competitively. The Executive must address those requirements.

Sinn Féin believes that there are huge opportunities in the development of political and cultural tourism. For example, the Long Kesh project, if realised, will deliver in a similar way to the Robben Island Museum in South Africa, where former African National Congress (ANC) political prisoners and wardens conduct tours. The project will also provide an opportunity for the development of a conflict-resolution centre to accommodate world peace efforts.

Another example is Kilmainham Gaol, where the leaders of the Easter Rising were held before their execution. The historical importance of the site is a major factor in attracting visitors, and it was used as a location for a number of scenes in the film, 'In the Name of the Father'.

Both locations have proven to be very popular tourist attractions, and there is no reason why we should not draw on our shared history to maximise the potential of our tourism industry, which also has significant educational merit.

The rising of the United Irishmen in 1798 is another event that has been used to promote historical-based tourism elsewhere. For example, much of the tourism in Wexford has been built on the town's links to the events of 1798. There is no reason why something similar could not happen in the North in respect of equally important events and battles that took place in towns such as Ballynahinch and Saintfield.

Gaeltacht tourism in areas such as west Belfast must be developed as it also has massive potential. Such potential is evident in Connemara, where local

residents enjoy huge benefits from being part of a thriving Gaeltacht.

As was said earlier, tours of Belfast and Derry, which visit murals in places such as the Falls, the Shankill and Free Derry Corner, have been very popular and must be better promoted in Tourist Board literature. However, accommodation must be provided in those areas so that the local community can also benefit.

The story of the Battle of the Boyne must also be told in an honest way; tracing the journey of Scottish planters through the glens of Antrim to the River Boyne in Drogheda. That has the potential to be a major attraction, particularly for visitors from Canada and the United States.

Investment in large hotels, such as the Slieve Donard Hotel in Newcastle, must be welcomed. However, that leaves a gap in the market. Grant assistance must be provided for the budget end of the tourism market because that has been neglected. Small hostels throughout Ireland are essential to achieving our vision of sustainable tourism. A network of hostels must be built throughout the island to provide accommodation for the thousands of backpackers would be prepared to stay for long periods if the necessary infrastructure were in place. Groups such as hill walkers, fishermen and students require budget accommodation every 10 or 15 miles. The North of Ireland lags way behind the South in tourism, and that is exemplified by the fact that there are more hostel beds in Galway than in the whole of the North.

It is important that young travellers from all over the world have fond memories of their holidays in Ireland, including the North, because they are the future business class who will return to our island for conferences. Their initial visits will shape the future attitudes of those people.

There must be leniency in the development of brownfield sites, such as old mills and barns, into budget accommodation, and that should be accompanied by substantial grants.

Sinn Féin also calls for the development of social tourism in line with continental Europe, where around 75% of families enjoy an annual holiday compared with fewer than two-thirds of families in Ireland. If the Executive are serious about a social-inclusion agenda, social tourism should be developed on a par with the high level of state-subsidised holidays that is provided to low-income families in countries such as France —

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

Mr W Clarke: Holidays are an essential part of family life and should be mainstreamed into social welfare policy. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Simpson: I am sure that Members will agree that tourism makes an important contribution to the

local economy. In 2003, income created by tourism was in the region of 3.5% of gross value added to the Northern Ireland economy. However, only 0.9% was generated by external visitors.

There is a clear need for the improvement of our infrastructure after 30 years of terrorist violence and mayhem. The unfulfilled potential of the tourism industry in Northern Ireland reflects the fact that it lost some three quarters of its global market share of incoming visitors at the start of the Troubles. Recent studies show that more visitors are coming to Northern Ireland. However, there is still a huge gap in the market that needs to be explored, and the Assembly and the Tourist Board need to promote, encourage and support new initiatives to regain and improve our maximum tourist potential.

It is vital that the Tourist Board provides an outstanding service that gives our taxpayers value for money, while identifying potential growth areas and maximising benefits to the community. We must focus on parts of Northern Ireland that can be further developed; the added benefits would lift those areas out of their current social need. For example, Craigavon has many popular attractions, including Lough Neagh, which is home to Oxford Island, the Kinnego marina and the Lough Neagh Discovery Centre — the second most visited tourist site next to the Giant's Causeway. Portadown has links to the formation of the Orange Order, and to the history of the Blacker family. It also had a role in shaping Irish history through events such as the 1641 rebellion. Banbridge District Council area is home to attractions such as the Scarva event on 13 July, the Brontë Homestead, and many more.

I encourage the Minister to engage with all those council areas, and to encourage the councils to engage with him —

Mr Shannon: Does the Member agree that what he has referred to in Craigavon is replicated in the Strangford area almost bit by bit, including its history, its attractions and the reasons for going to that area?

Mr Simpson: I will take my colleague's word for that. He is taking the opportunity to promote his area, and he did that in a very nice way. He slipped it in very well.

A Member: In your time.

Mr Simpson: Yes, in my time. I hope that the Speaker will be lenient with me as regards time.

Will the Minister give us some indication of how he will engage with those organisations and promote and develop those events?

I have many concerns about Tourism Ireland, but I commend it for the positive manner in which it is now showing willingness to promote the Twelfth of July

and similar events. I urge Tourism Ireland to keep at it. *[Interruption.]*

Sorry to disappoint you. You were supporting that.

As well as developing more tourist venues, we need to identify the tourists that we want to attract, and to increase the numbers of tourists coming from different areas. If we are to promote cultural tourism, we must maximise our US dollar takings, and in order to do that, we must package Northern Ireland in such a way as to attract people to the Province for different reasons.

The historical links with the US are well known across the Chamber. There are deep, long-standing links between the Province and the religious atmosphere in the southern states of America, and we should capitalise on that. As well as Patrick and the ancient Celtic Christendom, we could capitalise on the great hymn writers of history and emphasise the Wesleys, the Covenanters and the history of revivalism. By those and other avenues, we could court the American Bible Belt tourist. Does the Minister agree that in seeking the American tourist, a key target section of American society would be people from the Bible Belt who have much in common with Northern Ireland Christian historical heritage?

We must guard against the danger of glorifying terrorism, as that would send out entirely the wrong message. Northern Ireland must be open for tourist business, but it should not be marketed to tourists as a freak show. For that reason, I reject the motion in favour of my party's much more sensible amendment.

Mr McClarty: I strongly welcome the first half of the motion, which calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to produce plans to develop our tourist infrastructure. I recognise the need to focus on areas of social need, but I have severe reservations about political tourism.

Political tourism has the potential to freeze communities in the past, to prolong sectarian divides, and to glorify horrific acts of terrorism at the expense of innocent victims, painting Northern Ireland in a negative light.

Thankfully, tourism is a growing industry in Northern Ireland, and we are receiving accolades from around the world for our visitor attractions, most of which are in the premier tourism area of the Causeway Coast — with respect to the Member for Upper Bann Mr Simpson. However, we still lag behind the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, and it is essential that we continue to develop tourist infrastructure in order to attract more people to this Province.

In other debates, Members have called for better roads maintenance and improved public transport, all of which are essential for improving tourism. This morning, I was interested to hear on BBC Radio Ulster

that easyJet has criticised Northern Ireland for not having a rail link from Belfast International Airport to its two major cities. That lack of a rail link could damage our tourist industry in the long term and make it unsustainable. The Minister and his Executive colleagues must listen to business leaders, such as those in easyJet, in order to facilitate economic growth. Tourism and the general population of Northern Ireland will benefit from such growth.

Areas of social need cannot be left behind in our drive to increase tourism. Far too often, in cities and tourist destinations around the world, socially deprived areas are left to one side as central areas and infrastructure are developed. That is unsustainable, as socially deprived areas must be incorporated into tourist strategies so that their assets can be utilised to their benefit.

Although I cannot deny that there is interest in political tourism, I do not consider it to be of long-term benefit to Northern Ireland, particularly in socially deprived areas, for two linked reasons. First, Northern Ireland is still a divided society, within which, unfortunately, sectarianism is still rife. Many of the areas in which political tourism is an attraction are in cities, and such tourism focuses on the political divide. Tours often glorify division and our violent past. Unfortunately, that is a sure-fire way to remain in the past; it is not a way in which to regenerate areas and bring them out of social deprivation.

Secondly, Northern Ireland's past is very much part of its present. Many of the tours that are organised under the heading of "political tourism" pay attention to the suffering that victims of terrorist atrocities still undergo, whether they are suffering bereavement or living with an injury. Political tourism can be seen as a cynical attempt to make money out of other people's suffering. A leaflet that was produced by one such tour shows that cynicism. It says:

"A Blast from the Past, Luxury Tours".

The word "blast" appears in bold type in the leaflet, referring to the countless explosions that occurred in our towns and cities and destroyed much of our built heritage.

The leaflet goes on to let tourists know that they can see actual footage of the Troubles. That is disrespectful to victims and their families, and it will do no long-term good for the communities that it seeks to benefit.

2.15 pm

For that reason, I ask the Minister to develop tourism infrastructures that will incorporate areas of social deprivation; however, I support the amendment tabled by the DUP, which calls for references to political tourism to be deleted, and for Northern Ireland to be promoted in a positive manner.

Mr Dallat: I support the motion and I will not get too hung up on the type of tourism we need.

I will focus on infrastructure, which is a funny old word when applied to tourism. Indeed, I look forward to hearing the Minister define the word "infrastructure": I know that it includes posh hotels, golf courses and that it could even include the Maze stadium.

The word "infrastructure" also includes events such as the North West 200, which has already been mentioned, and the Milk Cup, which Mr McClarty knows about. It also includes festivals, walking tours, musicals, football competitions, bird-watching — the feathered type of course — and everything else that presents communities in a good light. We have not really ventured beyond that, and in the debate, we have tended to focus on the things that divide us rather than those that unite us.

Perhaps, initially, that is not a bad thing. It gets us started. However, eventually, we must package our tourism in a way that is understood by the international traveller who is not particularly interested in whether Carson's portrait hangs in this Building or whether he was a tourist from Dublin who did not go home. Rather, tourists want a snapshot of life here that embraces the culture, the music, the politics, the history and, above all, the beauty of the countryside: the mountains, glens, rivers and lakes — and, yes, the smiling people who are living at peace with one another, just as Members do in the Chamber.

In a peculiar way, we can make the motion outdated and irrelevant — if we make a success of tourism. People in socially disadvantaged areas do not want tourists gawking at them from open-topped buses — they want to be part of the success story, part of history, and part of burying the ashes of the past that practically wiped out the tourism industry. They also want to build anew.

Even if the Troubles had not happened — and I wish that they had not — buckets and spades and two weeks at the seaside are long gone. Gone, too, is the acceptance that service can be shoddy or second-rate. The need for physical infrastructure has never been more important, irrespective of whether the market is aimed at politics, culture, sport, leisure or whatever.

Were Members to take a trip to some of the more successful countries in the Balkans, they would see at first-hand just how good the infrastructure is in countries such as Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, and so on. Most importantly, one should listen to what the people in those countries have to say. They talk about the past, but they do not focus on the bullet-holes still evident in the buildings. Rather, their focus is on the future. Irrespective of what side they were on in the conflict, people will say that the hatred, violence, ethnic cleansing and all the rest should never have happened;

and they will tell you that they will never happen again. That should be our loud and clear message.

That is a good story. Every area has its own story to tell — it does not matter whether it is Sandy Row or Strabane, Larne or Limavady, Ardoyne or Ahoghill. In some cases, the story may be heavily focused on the past; in others, it may be about the rivers and lakes, the music or the craic. Tourism infrastructure, accommodation, places of entertainment, events, museums and things to do are all important, because they bring investment, change for the better, new hope and confidence in the future.

I will raise my glass to that, because I know that if we do it together, we will bring down the walls, whether they are physical or embedded in the mind. We will build our own infrastructure, which will be priceless when selling international tourism to people who do not want to be indoctrinated and who will make up their own minds about how to interpret the things that they see.

I support the motion for all the right reasons.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): I thank everyone who has taken part in the debate. It has been an interesting and useful debate on tourism across Northern Ireland. A wide range of issues has been raised, dealing with signature projects, investment in product and marketing and, particularly, in areas of social need. I hope to address issues that Members have raised, as well as make some points of my own.

The Programme for Government puts economic development at the centre of the agenda. As several Members have said, it clearly identifies tourism as a key economic driver, with the potential to make a significant contribution to the economic well-being of Northern Ireland. However, to realise that potential is a major challenge.

For too long, the international image of Northern Ireland was blighted by violence, murder and civil strife — all too often, capturing the imagination of people as they saw the images on their TV screens. Although we all fervently hope that those days are permanently behind us, one effect of our recent history is the fact that the tourist business in Northern Ireland has all but disappeared. Large numbers of people did not want to visit a part of the world that featured so strongly for all the wrong reasons. Nowadays, people have a vast array of choices, and there are much cheaper ways of travelling than there were in the past.

The evidence shows that, when deciding whether to visit an area, people put safety and security at the top of their considerations. Inevitably, the areas that were most in the headlines were areas of high social deprivation. People found those areas to be the most off-putting, because that is where the violence was

happening. During those years, Northern Ireland lost 80% of its share of the international tourism market. Even now, when significant progress is being made, we still attract fewer visitors than somewhere of comparable size. Given the vast number of tourist attractions that we can boast, we ought to attract more visitors.

However, the potential is there. Members referred to the fact that 'Lonely Planet' has billed Northern Ireland as one of the world's must-see destinations. The Antrim coast road was designated as one of the top 10 sites in the world. I am sure that the Member for Strangford Mr Shannon will be delighted that Strangford Lough was listed as one of the UK's top three beauty spots. We have a great deal going for us, but a lot more must be done.

Members have referred to a number of themes, and those are being actively pursued. The Programme for Government, with the comprehensive spending review, sets a target to increase visitor numbers from the current level of under two million a year to 2.5 million by 2011. More importantly, it aims to increase the tourist revenue — the amount that visitors spend while they are here — from £366 million now to £520 million by 2011. Those are challenging targets, especially when current world economic conditions and the exchange rate are considered. It is now more difficult to achieve those targets than it was a while ago. All of that plays a part in determining the willingness of potential visitors to travel abroad, never mind whether Northern Ireland should feature in their plans.

Those targets are backed up by increased resources. The Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland have received allocations that give them the resources to fulfil the targets. I will look to both organisations to continue to work enthusiastically and energetically to make significant contributions towards the achievement of those targets.

The motion refers specifically to the development of tourism infrastructure. I note carefully what has been said about the desirability of that investment in areas of social need. In recent years, the tourism infrastructure has received a fair investment from the public sector and the private sector. As part of the Causeway Coast and Glens signature project, 400 signs have been erected along the Causeway coastal route, leading visitors from the centre of Belfast to the Giant's Causeway, and further on to Londonderry, with the opportunity to visit inland scenic sites.

As the Member for Foyle Pat Ramsey said, the Walled City project has had sizeable public-sector investment. Phase one has been completed and elements of phase two are under way, with the implementation of the built heritage programme and the lighting strategy for the city, to which the Member referred.

A great deal of money has been spent on the St Patrick's signature project, mainly in the Down and Armagh areas. Other examples of recent public-sector investment in tourism infrastructure include the implementation of a comprehensive visitors' signage and interpretation strategy for Belfast.

Belfast has also benefited from the renovation of the Thompson dock and pump house in the Titanic Quarter. I remind the House of the importance of the Titanic signature project, which Mr Newton, Mr Neeson and others mentioned. I continue to work energetically to fill the funding gap left by the Big Lottery Fund's decision not to support the project. Mr Neeson referred to the decision of the National Trust and Moyle District Council to take forward the challenge of providing world-class visitor facilities at the Giant's Causeway. I welcome that positive development.

All those developments represent vast investment in Northern Ireland's tourism infrastructure. It is vital to ensure that everything is as attractive as possible for tourists. There are other issues relating to investment in tourism infrastructure, such as roads, access and visitors' ability to travel around the Province. Those areas do not fall within my remit, but they are wider issues for Government. They are all part of the development of tourism and the economy.

I have said many times in the House that developing the economy — whether that be through tourism, jobs or whatever — cuts across a number of Departments. For example, the Department for Employment and Learning may need to invest in skills; the Department for Regional Development may need to invest in roads and infrastructure; and the Department of Education and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment may need to invest in particular areas. All those Departments are vital in promoting the economy to make it easier for people to invest in, and to visit, Northern Ireland.

I could not agree more with Members who said — and I think that the proposer of the motion also said — that all areas of Northern Ireland must benefit from the increase in tourism and revenues from tourism. We cannot accept a fishbowl scenario where tourists come in on buses, visit areas and then leave without investing or spending in those areas. Yesterday, I met representatives from the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Task Force, and we discussed a number of issues. I am conscious of the need to ensure that all areas of our Province benefit from economic development and tourism investment.

We must also ensure that we do not forget the role of the private sector, because it has an important role to play. Mr Neeson mentioned the development of air routes. Five years ago, there was only one direct

international air connection from Northern Ireland, but now there are over 35 connections. Part of that interest was stimulated by public support through the air routes development fund. That fund no longer exists because it is not necessary, as the market has been stimulated. We now have private investors, and airlines such as Aer Lingus, easyJet and Ryanair operate routes from here. That is a tremendous testimony to the progress that has been made in recent years, and it will be an enormous boost to economic development and tourism. Although those airlines will take people out of Northern Ireland, they will also bring many people into Northern Ireland, which is very welcome.

In recent years, there has been unprecedented private investment in hotels and accommodation in Northern Ireland, and in Belfast in particular. There are plans in the pipeline for more hotels. We welcome investment in our hotel infrastructure, and we will continue to encourage such private-sector initiative and commitment.

Some Members raised the issue of hotel development, particularly in areas such as west Belfast, the greater Shankill and other areas where there is a deficiency in accommodation. There has been a moratorium in assistance for hotel development within 10 miles of Belfast city centre, simply because there is little evidence, at the moment, of market failure. Indeed, the growth of the hotel sector in Belfast bears witness to that policy. However, there are exceptions to that rule. It is important that we do not rule out assistance for hotel developments, particularly in areas of social need. I welcome such investment in my constituency of North Belfast, where there is a shortage of hotel accommodation. The policy is that the moratorium does not represent a total veto on assistance for attractive projects in areas that are designated as suffering from economic disadvantage.

In those circumstances, I assure the House that Invest Northern Ireland will consider the merits of any proposed hotel development and how such a proposal lines up against that body's normal support policy. Officials from Invest Northern Ireland are aware of several proposals for the development of hotels in west Belfast and have met project promoters.

2.30 pm

Northern Ireland has a great deal to offer through cultural tourism; for example, its art, architecture, music, dance, restaurants, bars and living culture are attractions. Members have mentioned various aspects of tourism. Mr Dallat and other Members referred to the broad mix of elements that attract people to any country or region. In moving the amendment, Mr Ross said that political tourism was part of what we had to offer, but that that it should not be seen as the be-all and end-all; it is simply one element of cultural

tourism. When talking about what we have to offer, it is important that Members do not get fixated on the notion that only one interest area can be used to sell Northern Ireland internationally; a combination of many can be used. Northern Ireland is fortunate to have great cultural diversity, and that is part of its attraction.

Some visitors to Northern Ireland will want to see some of the areas that were most affected by violence, for instance, but I agree with those Members who said that public money or Government support must not be given to any projects that glorify or seek to justify terrorism or perpetuate that kind of ethos in socially deprived areas. Any approach to the political element of cultural tourism must remain within clearly defined boundaries and demonstrate balance and fairness of interpretation. Under no circumstances will I support, or allow the Northern Ireland Tourist Board or Tourism Ireland to support, anything that seeks to glorify terrorism or acts of violence. I am reassured by Members' support for that view.

If anyone in Northern Ireland wants to glorify terrorism in the name of tourism or under any other guise, that is a matter for them, but they will not get any support from me, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment or the public purse. People would find such glorifications of terrorism deplorable and unacceptable, and, as Mr McClarty and others said, it would serve only to perpetuate enmities that we are seeking to overcome.

On the other hand, a balanced approach that seeks to provide the visitor with a factual account of events from Northern Ireland's recent past can be considered. I am aware that the Tourist Board is seeking to do exactly that by preparing a cultural tourism strategy, which encompasses four core cultural tourism themes — heritage, living culture, creative tourism and the arts — and their associated products.

The first task, which is in progress, is to complete a product audit that will identify Northern Ireland's strongest products and those that are unique and that will make Northern Ireland stand out in the international marketplace.

References were made to such activities as 12 July celebrations, events in the Ulster-Scots sector, and Irish dancing and music. Those activities have their part to play in attracting visitors to Northern Ireland and in entertaining them when they are here. Such activities and events — and others of a cultural and sporting nature — feature in material that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland have produced. I was delighted to hear Mr Simpson say that he welcomed the moves that Tourism Ireland has made to take those events and celebrations on board.

We are investing actively and strongly in tourism infrastructure, and it is important that we acknowledge

that some people will be interested in the wider cultural aspects of so-called political tourism. However, I want to reinforce my firm view — and what I believe is the firm view of the community in Northern Ireland — that even in the interests of attracting tourists, we cannot countenance anything that risks offending our people or our welcome visitors.

Mr Hamilton: I welcome the opportunity to discuss tourism, which is an issue of growing importance. Virtually every Member who contributed to the debate highlighted reasons why tourism is becoming such an important aspect of our economy. The Executive's top priority is to grow a vibrant, dynamic economy, and tourism has been given a privileged role in that. Substantial investment has been allocated and specific targets have been set in order to increase the numbers of visitors to and the amount of money that they spend in Northern Ireland.

Tourism is a growth area in Northern Ireland, whether that is measured by the number of jobs created; the number of visitors; the £750 million tourism contributes to the economy; the number of bed-nights sold or hotel-occupancy rates. It could also be measured by the number of flights coming to Northern Ireland, which was referred to by Mr Neeson, not only from short-haul UK airports but from Europe, North America and beyond, which, in itself, is testimony to this place's popularity.

Despite tourism's important position in our economy, its full potential has not been maximised. The Tourist Board has stated that if Northern Ireland had matched the Republic of Ireland's external visitor trends since 1969, tourism here would be worth an extra £270 million a year and would have generated an additional 11,000 jobs. Tourism represents only 2% of Northern Ireland's GDP, compared with 9% in the Republic and 11% in Wales, and we must ask ourselves why that is the case. It is not because we do not have the product. Perhaps we have been deficient in certain skills and services, but we definitely have the attractions, many of which have been mentioned: the Giant's Causeway, the Mournes, Strangford Lough and elsewhere.

One does not have to be a genius to figure out that the Troubles thwarted tourism marketing here and were the reason why the sector has not maximised its potential. As innocent people here were often caught up in the violence, it is not difficult to understand why visitors did not want to come and why the bulk of the tourists who did come comprised people who were forced to do so on business or to visit family members. David Simpson and Leslie Cree spoke about the fact that, between 1960 and 1972, which were some of the most violent years in our history, three quarters of Northern Ireland's share in the global-tourism market disappeared.

Although the 'Lonely Planet' designation of Belfast as a must-see destination was mentioned, that was applied after the Troubles ended and when we had entered a period of relative peace.

We all hope that those days are behind us. If they are, the potential exists not only to meet the Programme for Government targets but to exceed them, and those aims will best be achieved by projecting a positive image of Northern Ireland. In the past, a negative perception drove people away: a positive image will have them flocking here in droves.

How often have we said — and we have all said or heard it — that we would have a wonderful wee country if we only had the political and civil stability to back it up? Now that we have that chance, we must put our best foot forward.

There is no doubt, as has been said by the Minister and others, that some people wish to engage in political tourism. Whether that is supported by the Department or various agencies, it will be a factor and it will attract some business. However, such tourism creates difficulties about being sensitive to victims and survivors and is not a solid foundation on which to build future tourism growth. In addition, it would be wrong for the perpetrators of violence to profit in any way from their crimes.

Much was said about murals, and, indeed, Robin Newton spoke about a mural in Belfast that depicts Che Guevara. I am sure that that Marxist revolutionary is turning in his grave at the thought of contributing to capitalism in Northern Ireland.

As we seek to re-image our communities, however, that pursuit should in no way be hampered by the pull of tourism.

Northern Ireland needs a positive image. We have a positive message to send, and we must, at every opportunity, sell the positive side of our Province. I commend the amendment to the House.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I wish to echo the welcome that Paul Maskey gave to the increase in resources that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has made available for tourism.

We spend so much time talking about tourism because 99% of the natural resources that we have are those that can be exploited by the tourism industry. We have no coal mines, gold mines, tin mines or oil. We must decide that we are going to be a tourist area: there has never been a better time in our history to exploit the potential that we have.

There is a negative side — the kind of thing that has prevented the development of tourism here, apart altogether from our political Troubles, or whatever we want to call them. I am trying not to use the word "war". The political Troubles have had a negative

effect on where we are going. Nevertheless, when I look at Magilligan, in my constituency, from Magilligan Point to Downhill I see eight miles of the most beautiful, unspoiled and unexploited strand in Europe and possibly the world, sharing a shore with Lough Foyle and the great sea. What have we got there? A prison and an MOD firing range, in one of the most touristically exploitable parts of Ireland.

I have been doing everything that I can to impress on people how much could be done if we could turn that area into the tourist attraction that it should be, not just for the north-west, but for the whole of Ireland. I hope that, before I die, I might succeed in impressing someone enough that they will do something about it. I am about to receive a notional master plan of what that area might look like minus the prison and the firing range. It has potential for the economy and for the people of that most beautiful place. I hope that the Minister will remember what I have said when we come to talk about this matter again.

There were many interesting contributions to the debate. It eventually came to a divide over whether we should have political tourism. Political tourism is already a fact. People from other countries can be seen on the Shankill Road and the Falls Road every day. They alight from coaches to take photographs and use video cameras; people from all over the world are interested in those areas. We should not cut off our noses to spite our faces. We should not talk about glorifying these things; we are not glorifying them just because we make them available for people to come and see. We cannot do away with the Falls Road or the Shankill Road. They are there, and we should make people welcome to them. That is the job of the tourism industry.

2.45 pm

Alastair Ross had some difficulty with an all-Ireland tourist plan. However, it has been discovered over the years that tourism, like disease, does not stop at the border. The tourism drive should be a mutual exercise, and we can and should learn from the experience of the Twenty-six Counties. We should allow them to be a part of our drive to promote our only large industry — outside of the public service and, possibly, the building trade — and allow it to realise its full potential.

Leslie Cree provided some very good data on tourist numbers throughout the years, which showed how the numbers fluctuated. Obviously, the numbers dropped to a very low level during the Troubles. He also pointed out that infrastructure is sadly lacking here.

There has been the same short-sightedness about Portstewart's potential as there has been about Magilligan's potential. Portstewart was a lovely tourist resort on the north coast, in my county. It was a real tourist magnet; that beautiful place attracted millions of visitors over the years. What has happened over the

last few years? The developers have bought the hotels, knocked them down and built flats. Portstewart has virtually no tourist accommodation now. The only tourist accommodation left there is cheap flats and old houses that are rented by students at the nearby University of Ulster at Coleraine. We must consider that issue. We must stop the developers — or rather, we must get the developers working on our behalf, rather than destroying the only potential that we have. I ask the Minister to bear that in mind; indeed, all Members should bear that in mind in their own areas.

Sean Neeson mentioned the importance of having good air routes into the area, and of having good access to the main centres from the airports. We lack proper transport in those areas, which are woefully underfunded.

Sean Neeson also mentioned political tourism, which is a very important part of what we have to offer. We should not segregate and sectarianise that, or talk about glorifying it. We should simply accept that it is there. People from all over the world are very interested in what has happened here in the past 40 years. In fact, some people have taken a huge interest in all of Irish history for a very long time. Ireland is a very important part of the world, and always has been.

Robin Newton talked about some very important Belfast-based attractions. Both he and Sean Neeson talked about how poor we have been at exploiting our maritime heritage. The Titanic project is the big maritime venture that is under way at the moment. However, many other projects are under way in Derry and around the coast throughout the country, where a strong maritime history also exists. Mr Newton mentioned some of that work, but then, for some reason, descended into a kind of slapstick commentary about a tour of republican areas. That was entertaining, but not terribly constructive.

Willie Clarke zoomed in on Downpatrick, of course. He also mentioned the importance of the Long Kesh project, which will probably become a huge tourist attraction here when it is fully developed. That name rings a bell all over the world, and nobody should be afraid of that development. People from all sides were in Long Kesh, so we should enjoy and exploit those matters together.

The Battle of the Boyne site was mentioned. It has already become a huge attraction, and even those who supported King William and the great deeds that were done there might have been a bit shy about travelling from here to the Boyne, but thank God that that attitude is softening and people are beginning to become a bit more mature about such matters.

John Dallat spoke in the very reasoned way that he always does about the need for all of us to take a mature and broad-minded look at what we are doing.

We have to be careful not to cut off our noses to spite our faces because of some sectarian or political bias. Members have to work together, or nothing constructive will happen in the tourism industry.

If Members on this side of the House say that we do not want any loyalist murals, loyalist history, or that the Battle of the Boyne —

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

Mr Brolly: I was just getting warmed up.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to bring forward plans to develop tourist infrastructure; recognises the benefits to the local economy of tourism; and seeks to promote Northern Ireland in a positive manner.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Murder of Paul Quinn

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

I remind Members that absolute privilege attaches to the making of statements in proceedings of the Assembly only for the purpose of the law of defamation. It is important to remember that privileges do not extend beyond that.

I have said previously in the House that with such protection comes responsibility. I strongly encourage Members to act responsibly when speaking during this, or any other, debate. As no one has yet appeared before the courts on this matter, I am sure that Members will be particularly anxious not to do anything to prejudice any possible future proceedings.

I also remind Members that a live police investigation into this incident is ongoing. No Member will want to jeopardise future court proceedings, especially through the naming of names in the House.

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly condemns the murder of Mr Paul Quinn; notes the clarification by the British and Irish Governments that they do not hold the view that the victim was involved in criminality of any kind; further notes the assessments of Sir Hugh Orde and the Independent Monitoring Commission regarding the involvement in this crime of persons who are current or former members of the Provisional IRA, or who have associations with members or former members of the Provisional IRA; and calls upon everyone to encourage people to come forward and assist the police investigations being carried out by the PSNI and an Garda Síochána.

Saturday 20 October 2007 may stand out in some people's minds as the date of the Rugby World Cup final. Indeed, about the time that I got a phone call from my colleague Councillor Geraldine Donnelly at around 8.45 pm, most Members, like me, were probably watching that match.

Councillor Donnelly told me that she had received a phone call from a member of the Quinn family to say that Paul had been savagely beaten and was in hospital in Drogheda fighting for his life. Councillor Donnelly and I were asked by the family to meet them at the hospital. However, before we reached Drogheda, we were informed that, sadly, Paul had died of his injuries.

The scene at the hospital, as we gathered to pray around Paul's broken and battered body in the little mortuary chapel, can be imagined. His distraught parents, brother, sister, relations, friends and

neighbours were there. Gradually, we heard the story of how Paul had been lured to a lonely barn just over the border in County Monaghan and beaten unconscious with clubs and iron bars. We also heard how, even when he had stopped crying out for mercy, the dull thuds of the blows continued to rain down on his broken body until he lay motionless.

Even that was not enough. Paul's killers proceeded to spray his body and the crime scene with a substance that would render DNA evidence from the scene unusable. They wore forensic suits and gloves and smashed the mobile phones of those who were present before they left the scene. This was no ad hoc gang that had hastily convened to beat a young man: instead, it was a group of up to 10 people who knew what they were doing, had probably been involved in similar beatings previously and who organised, planned and executed that dreadful deed with military precision. They were 10 men against one young man, to show who was boss in the area.

I do not believe that anyone in south Armagh believes that the IRA was not involved in Paul Quinn's murder; at least, no one who was present at the hospital in Drogheda — Paul's family, friends and neighbours — believed that the IRA was not involved. The opposite, in fact: everyone who was there believed, on the basis of events that led up to Paul's death, that the IRA had murdered him.

In statements that I released after the murder, I did not accuse the IRA of murdering Paul. I said that the apparatus of paramilitarism had been used in the murder. Gradually, however, it became clear from the gardaí, the PSNI and the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC) that what the family had told me was the truth — the IRA was involved in Paul's murder.

After his murder, it was particularly upsetting for Paul's family that he was branded a criminal by his local MP, Conor Murphy. Conor Murphy said that he approached members of the IRA, who gave him solid assurances that they were not involved. What did he expect them to say? Did he expect them to put up their hands and admit to the murder; to tell him that he must go out into the highways and byways and tell everyone that the IRA murdered Paul Quinn? It would be naive of anyone to expect them to do so.

It is equally naive to expect people to believe that the murder was the result of a dispute between two criminal gangs, particularly considering the fact that several years ago, Conor Murphy berated Seamus Mallon for suggesting that there were any criminals in south Armagh, and accused him of supporting Merlyn Rees' castigation of south Armagh as "bandit country". Mr Murphy should tell the Assembly where all of those criminals have suddenly come from and how not

only one gang, but two, have conveniently appeared to bolster up his arguments.

It is shameful that Conor Murphy has not withdrawn the remarks that he made after Paul Quinn's death that criminalised him. In the past, Sinn Féin Members have complained about their being demonised, yet a member of that party now uses the same tactic against someone who is no longer with us to defend himself. Paul's family, however, can defend him. I welcome them to the House. I hope that in their presence, the debate will be conducted with dignity. The Irish Foreign Minister, An Taoiseach and the Secretary of State have all set the record straight, which has been some consolation to the family. I hope that Conor Murphy takes the opportunity to set the record straight in the debate.

An Garda Síochána, the Chief Constable of the PSNI, Hugh Orde, and the IMC do not agree with Conor Murphy's assertion that the IRA was not involved in Paul Quinn's murder. It is true that the Irish Government have said that the IRA was not involved, as a corporate entity, in the murder. Indeed, no one has argued that it was. I do not believe that the chief executive of the IRA, who might very well sit in the House, made a corporate decision to have Paul Quinn murdered; nor do I believe that the IRA's management team — the so-called army council — made that decision. However, as the motion states, I believe that current members of the IRA were involved in the murder.

Those nuances may be of particular interest to Members of the House — and so they should be. However, they are merely academic to the family of Paul Quinn, who know only that their son was brutally murdered by a gang that included IRA members.

3.00 pm

More than anything else, the family wants those responsible for Paul's murder to be apprehended and brought to justice. There are people in south Armagh who know who murdered Paul Quinn. Today, I ask them, as has the superintendent from An Garda Síochána, to examine their consciences and come forward to the gardaí with whatever information they have.

Some people have said that the murder of Paul Quinn has been politicised — and they are right. The involvement of IRA members in the murder politicised it from the moment of his death. Paul Quinn's murder poses political questions for everyone in the Assembly. Are the political parties that have endorsed the policing arrangements here willing to accept the continued existence of paramilitary groups that think that they are the law and can act as judge, jury and executioner if, and when, they decide that that is necessary?

Is the House happy that one of its Members, who is a Minister in the Executive, feels it necessary to act as a message boy, as the new P O'Neill, to help the IRA to

exonerate its members? How can consulting the IRA be reconciled with the Pledge of Office? Gerry Adams said:

"They haven't gone away, you know."

Conor Murphy said that the IRA continues to exist as part of the transition between conflict and peace.

It is past the time for the IRA to go away — and go away for good. Murder does not complete the transition from conflict to peace; it only prolongs the suffering. I want solid assurances that the IRA has gone away, that its violence and intimidation have come to an end and that it will murder no more.

The politicisation of the case revolves around the denial that there is still a functioning murder machine in south Armagh. The army council has prohibited actions such as organised beatings, but the Provos in south Armagh do not give a damn. They do not take orders from Dublin or from Gerry Adams in Belfast.

If the Paul Quinn case demonstrates anything, it is that the orders probably flow in the opposite direction. Even if the Provisional IRA has theoretically been stood down, individual members still have access to its structures, skills and experience. The group, as a whole, still tries to exercise control over the community, and, worst of all, it can still draw political support from Sinn Féin in doing so.

Even if the murderers of Paul Quinn are locked up for a long time — and I hope that they will be — that problem will remain. That is the challenge for the entire community, for all Members and for the entire democratic system. The Assembly must make its voice heard on the murder of Paul Quinn to ensure that no more young men are battered until every major bone in their bodies has been broken. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Donaldson: I commend the Member for Newry and Armagh Mr Bradley for introducing the motion. I also commend his colleague Councillor Geraldine Donnelly, who has worked closely with the Quinn family. I spoke to Dominic and Geraldine as part of the DUP's assessment of what happened. I commend the courage that they have shown when speaking out in south Armagh. The leadership that they have given to the nationalist community is also commendable.

The DUP will not ignore the murder of Paul Quinn. It is a terrible blight on society that there is still an area in Northern Ireland where people feel that they must assert themselves to demonstrate that they somehow are the law. They exercise that so-called law in the most brutal fashion imaginable, and it is totally unacceptable.

In moving Northern Ireland forward, the DUP is trying to show leadership to the community, and the party seeks to ensure that the Northern Ireland of the future is different from the Northern Ireland of the past. That means leaving behind the violence, intimidation, bullying and hatred.

It means crossing the line to accept and embrace fully the rule of law as the only way by which we order our society and our communities. The writ of law must run in south Armagh as much as it runs in other areas of Northern Ireland. The republican movement must address that fact.

There is evidence to suggest that members and former members of the Provisional IRA were involved in the murder of Paul Quinn; the Chief Constable and the Independent Monitoring Commission are on the public record to corroborate that.

We could debate several issues: who ordered the murder; was it done at local level, as the Member for Newry and Armagh suggested; was the army council involved; who knew about it in advance? Those matters may unfold in time, or they may remain in the shadows. However, we must take every reasonable step to ensure that what happened that day in County Monaghan does not happen again. We cannot return a son and a brother to the Quinn family, but we can try to ensure that their suffering is not visited on other families. It is wrong and unacceptable that people take the law into their own hands.

Sinn Féin cannot straddle the line between the rule of law and lawlessness. Whether it be in south Armagh or elsewhere, when people sit on the Policing Board and the district policing partnerships and state that they support the police and the rule of law, that support must be carried through to its ultimate conclusion. In the Quinn case, the ultimate conclusion means that if people have evidence of anyone's involvement in a crime — including murder — they co-operate with the police to bring those responsible for that crime to justice. There must be honesty and co-operation instead of denials, running away and covering up.

I acknowledge, and I have heard at first hand, that the police commanders who cover south Armagh and the district commander who is based in Newry have stated that co-operation is much improved. However, we must move beyond co-operation to ensure that evidence is produced and that those who are responsible are convicted.

I have said publicly, and the DUP has stated clearly, that if in the fullness of time it becomes apparent that the IRA was involved in this murder or in its sanctioning, we will not turn our backs on the political consequences. For that reason, it is important to deal with the issue. It is also important that the IRA finishes the business that we were told would be finished when Gerry Adams said that the army council would be dealt with to everyone's satisfaction.

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

Mr Donaldson: That must happen, and it must happen now.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. At the first opportunity that I had to address the House after the very brutal murder of Paul Quinn in October 2007, I made it clear, before a statement on departmental business, that I completely condemned his murder. I called on anyone who had information about the murder to co-operate with the police investigation on both sides of the border. I reiterate that comment today; I do not think that I can be any clearer. Since that brutal killing, I have been consistent and clear. I have also been consistent and clear in my assessment of what was at play. I have repeated, and stand by, my assessment of what was involved in Paul Quinn's killing.

The motion should have provided an opportunity for the House to unite in calling for support for the Quinn family and ensuring that people who had any information assisted the investigation. However, the motion's real intention is to be divisive and selective. Unfortunately, that has characterised much of the campaign by the group —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Murphy: No, I have only five minutes to speak.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Murphy: No, I have only five minutes to speak; other Members have 10 minutes.

Mr B McCrea: The Member will be given an extra minute to speak.

Mr Murphy: The Member will have his chance to speak, as will everyone else.

The motion has been crafted deliberately to make it divisive and selective. It quotes an assertion that one member of the IMC made that is so vague that it is utterly useless. In fact, Mr Bradley, through his association with that group, is now an associate of former members of the IRA. The motion ignores the assessment that the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform made in the Dáil last week, and it ignores the local assessment that the guards have made. It is unfortunate and regrettable that the motion is selective in its approach to the killing.

As a local MP, I shall not remain silent as individuals with varying agendas try to use this brutal murder to forge divisions in our community. Several of those who are involved in the campaign are former republican activists, all with their own anti-Sinn Féin and anti-policing agendas. The SDLP involvement is already well documented. That kind of politicking does not serve well the search for the truth about this murder, and it goes some way to explaining some of the recent, more personal attacks. I have made a conscious decision not to get involved in a public slanging match with the political drivers behind the campaign. I have, however, called publicly for people to co-operate with

the guards and the PSNI. I have met both agencies privately and offered my support. Furthermore, I have offered to meet the Quinn family face to face.

Unfortunately, innocent people have been linked to the crime. A campaign of intimidation has been ongoing against the Traynor family of Cullyhanna — their home has been attacked on numerous occasions, and a lorry that belonged to them was burnt. Those are facts, and, unlike the unsubstantiated rumours that gave rise to those attacks, they cannot be disputed. Indeed, the PSNI has been provided with CCTV images of one of those attacks. Graffiti naming others have been painted in Cullyhanna and Crossmaglen. In a later incident, local people's homes, cars and property were damaged. Moreover, over the Christmas period, individuals who claimed to be acting in support of the Quinn justice campaign brutally assaulted with hammers several young men outside the local disco. Again, the guards were informed.

None of that has a place in a campaign for justice. I appeal to those who orchestrated and carried out those attacks to think again. They do not help the task of putting Paul Quinn's killers behind bars. Instead, they increase community tensions and deter local people from uniting behind the demand for justice, which is what must happen.

Once again, I offer our support to the Quinn family and call for anyone who has any information to bring it to either the PSNI or the guards. I call for them to be allowed to get on with their jobs and for an end to intimidation and violence against completely innocent families. Furthermore, I call on people to reflect on much of the politicking that has gone on around the incident —

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Murphy: My time is limited; the Member's party has 20 minutes to speak, and I have five.

I call on people to reflect on the recent politicking that has gone on around the incident, and not to let it deflect them from the real task, which is to find Paul Quinn's killers. Sinn Féin has not sought, and will not seek, to play politics with the issue. Such public bickering does not help to advance the search for justice. Others must defend their own record in their dealings with the community.

We must send a strong message of support for the ongoing investigation into the murder. I commend the hundreds of people who, thus far, have co-operated. The police and the guards have said, and their point has been accepted, that there have been unprecedented levels of co-operation in the inquiry. That is how justice for the Quinn family will be found and how the killers of that young man will be found. I commend all those who have an interest in the matter to support those who

are tasked with bringing to justice those who are responsible. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: At the outset, I acknowledge the presence in the Public Gallery of the Quinn family, who have behaved with total integrity and dignity in the most difficult of circumstances — the callous murder of their son and brother.

As I have said before in the House and as I repeat today, if Members of Sinn Féin are serious about what they refer to as their political project, I do not know how they can allow the continued existence of the IRA army council. Every single act of criminality, murder and brutality that occurs in republican areas and that is associated with known republicans will raise the inevitable question: was the IRA involved? If the IRA no longer existed as an organisation that has an army council, that question could be asked — at least not in the same way — and those unanswered questions could not jeopardise the political process in any way.

A theme is emerging in our debates. Only last week, we condemned private armies. Yesterday, we rejected the idea that the IRA insurgency could be represented as a legitimate war instead of the murderous and brutal terrorist campaign that it was.

3.15 pm

The Sinn Féin Members opposite would do well to listen to the theme that is emerging from these debates and to what representatives of the unionist and part-nationalist communities are saying to them.

The motion condemns the murder of Paul Quinn. It was a particularly brutal and nasty murder that shocked the entire community and left ordinary people feeling deeply revolted that a group of men could so forensically and with such intent set about bludgeoning a young man to death. Mr Quinn had committed no crime; even if he had, the manner of his death was unacceptable and disgraceful. It puts his murderers on a par with the Mafia monsters who brutalised their victims.

His murderers are not just criminals; they belong to a group of individuals who can truthfully be described as having committed crimes against humanity. Their behaviour was based on an arrogant belief that they are somehow above and beyond the law. That arrogance leaves the rest of us stupefied and horrified. We know that those people represent the very face of evil. They are black-hearted villains, and their community must give them up to the forces of law and order.

No one in south Armagh can be safe while the murderers of Paul Quinn walk free. Those men clearly believe that they can do whatever they like. I say to the community, including friends and relatives, from which those who are responsible for Paul Quinn's murder come: what sort of monsters do you have living with you? Are you content to let those people go free? How

do you know that they will not some day turn on you for some imagined crime that you have committed against the IRA?

I say to their political representatives: you do not become democrats merely by using democratic words and pretending to be civilised. For as long as the situation continues where you could be linked in any way, however remotely, to this or any other murder, you must not let one more day pass without doing something about it. Mere condemnation is easy, but it must be matched by action. Action is not just a statement condemning this kind of activity; it means giving up those villains and doing that now.

The IMC finding that current and former members of the IRA were involved in the crime is a massive problem for Sinn Féin. Mr Murphy, a Minister in our Executive, has just said that he is sure that the IRA was not involved in the murder. Let him prove it. On what does he base that assertion? On what facts does his certainty rest? He has raged against the IMC, the findings of which brought this place into operation. Therefore, his democratic credentials are tied up in this incident, regardless of whether he likes it.

Let us have an end, once and for all, to private armies, army councils and the whole paraphernalia of the brutal terrorist past.

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

Dr Farry: I support the motion. At the outset, I commend Dominic Bradley for securing the debate. More importantly, I commend Paul Quinn's family for keeping their wider campaign for justice very much alive.

This motion may be one of the most important that we have debated in the Assembly so far. It goes right to the heart of the discussion of ascertaining the type of society that we will have in Northern Ireland. We must recognise first, however, that this is a human and personal tragedy for Paul Quinn and his wider family circle. His murder was cruel and brutal, and it was clearly planned and premeditated. It has been compounded by the subsequent character assassination of Paul Quinn. Allegations were made after that gentleman's death that would neither have been made nor sustained when he was alive. Only the courts can pass such judgements; Ministers and MLAs, who should be setting a better example, cannot make those judgements.

I note that Conor Murphy has left the Chamber — perhaps he does not regard what the Alliance Party has to say as important. Perhaps his colleagues will pass on the message that although he talks about divisions being created, the only division that I have detected is the one created by him. Four parties in the House are clear: Paul Quinn was not a criminal. Only Sinn Féin maintains that libel against his character. When it

makes those allegations about the circumstances leading up to the murder, it creates some kind of legitimisation of what happened, when, in fact, there can be none. The only crime was the murder of Paul Quinn. However, that crime was not just against Paul Quinn but against wider society. That presents a major challenge for us all.

After the ceasefires in 1994, a currency emerged in Northern Ireland whereby ceasefires were deemed to have been breached only in the case of attacks on the other side of the community, against economic targets or against the security forces. We made the mistake of allowing the situation to arise in which paramilitaries could do what they liked to what was perceived as their own side of the community without proper challenge. Inconvenient truths were swept under the carpet for the sake of the peace process.

Quite rightly, that proved to be unsustainable. Organised crime, paramilitary organisations, social control and gangsterism are corrosive of our society, the rule of law, democracy and human rights. They must all be challenged. We have learnt that, rather than sweeping those matters under the carpet, we must shine a spotlight on them. The way in which we deal with such incidents goes right to the heart of the type of society that we are building and the credibility of the new institutions.

Things have been getting better in Northern Ireland in recent years. We are moving forward as a society, and it is important that we not be dragged back by the failure to address such matters properly. It is important, too, that we send out a message today that the murder of Paul Quinn is not some awkward incident, a relic of the past from which we can move on and that we can forget about; it is something that we must face up to. We need to see justice brought to the fore.

There may be a temptation for some people to say that that issue can be handled internally and that it should be dealt with by the organisations involved. I say that it is a matter for the police and the courts to resolve. We must be clear that when we talk about co-operation, that means people coming forward with information either to the PSNI or to the Garda Síochána, the laying and taking forward of the basis of a proper prosecution, and justice, in its proper sense, being carried out.

The people behind the murder of Paul Quinn are a blight on our society, something that we need to remove. It is a cancer that affects us all. As an Assembly, we need to send out a clear, strong, unanimous message that that will not be tolerated in the new Northern Ireland and that we must move on.

Mr Campbell: The murder of Paul Quinn in the Irish Republic was abhorrent, and I join with other Members in congratulating Mr Bradley for bringing the motion before the House.

The murder of Robert McCartney in Northern Ireland was equally abhorrent, as were all the other murders that have taken place in Northern Ireland, in the Republic and elsewhere, carried out by whomever — there is no distinction. Sometimes in debates such as this there is an attempt to indicate that some of us condemn one type of murder but not another. All of them, without exception, are wrong. Not only should they be condemned, but every possible support and scrap of information should be given to the police in order to bring those responsible before the courts.

The issue is about justice. I know that the Quinn family, like the McCartney family and all the other families, want to see justice done. Those in this House who previously carried out that type of activity have moved to stop their actions.

They took a long time to do that, and it was right that they should stop; but they should not be commended for doing so, because they should never have started in the first place.

They have moved towards supporting the forces of law and order, and they were right to do so because they never should have been in the position of not supporting law and order in the first place. They have moved. However, they need to give the fullest possible co-operation and information to the police. As Dr Farry said, they can give such co-operation either to the police in Northern Ireland or to the police in the Irish Republic.

There are Members in the Chamber who have had links with the IRA. It would appear that there were IRA connections in the murder of Paul Quinn. Therefore, those who are in the IRA and those who were formerly in the IRA in that area will know people who have in their possession the knowledge and information to give to the police so that those responsible can be brought before the courts. All Members must be proactive in bringing those responsible for this and other murders to justice.

Sinn Féin, in particular, in this instance, has a responsibility to impart information in the best possible way to ensure a successful prosecution. That party moved towards supporting policing — and there was recognition across the divide that it had done so. That party has the votes that it needs to get into Government, but to get recognition as democrats, Sinn Féin Members need to go further. As yet, they do not share a level playing field with the rest of us, in spite of the movement on which they have embarked. Members of Sinn Féin must give the fullest possible co-operation to the police so that we do not have the families of murder victims saying that they were invited to a Sinn Féin party conference, but that the party did not give them its fullest support, and that when people were told by the

party to go to the police, they were also told not to give the full information. That must stop.

Normal courtesies cannot be extended to Sinn Féin while its members remain in some form of limbo. This Assembly is in the process of delivering for people. It would not be in the interests of anyone in Northern Ireland — let alone those of us with party interests — for murders such as the one that we are debating to precipitate a crisis. However, in the event of Sinn Féin Members' having information and declining to forward it, a crisis could well be precipitated.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am cognisant of the fact that the family and friends of Paul Quinn are in the Gallery and are listening to the debate. The death of a loved one is always devastating for a family. However, it is even more difficult and traumatic when the circumstances are brutal, savage and cruel. Paul Quinn's murder was all those things. It was dreadful and reprehensible.

The local community and people across the island were rightly shocked and horrified by the barbarity of that murder. I extend my sincerest condolences to Paul's father, Stephen, his mother, Briege, and the family circle. I want to tell them —

Mr Campbell: Will the Member give way?

Mr McLaughlin: The Member's party will have ample opportunities to speak. Does the Member have the manners to listen?

Mr Campbell: Will the Member give way?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should not persist.

Mr McLaughlin: I wish to tell the family that republicans everywhere are appalled by what happened and that our sympathy and solidarity is with them. Those who carried out the murder of Paul Quinn are criminals. They deserve the strongest condemnation and they must be brought to justice. There is a responsibility on every citizen to co-operate fully with An Garda Síochána and the PSNI. No one should seek to shield or hide the murderers of Paul Quinn.

Anyone with any information, however tangential, should bring that information to An Garda Síochána and the PSNI. Those are the law-enforcement agencies, and they are the only agencies responsible for tracking down and bringing before a court those responsible for Paul Quinn's murder. Sinn Féin totally supports their efforts, and I again urge anyone with information to make it available.

3.30 pm

In the aftermath of Paul Quinn's murder, there have been claims and allegations of republican involvement. I am not from the immediate area, although I know many people there. I have studied the reports closely. None of those who has levelled allegations has

produced a scintilla of evidence to back them up. I do not believe that republicans were involved in, or responsible for, the shameful murder of that young man. I do believe, however, that some who are opposed to Sinn Féin's project or to a new beginning to policing, or who seek party political advantage, have tried cynically to exploit that murder in order to further their own interests.

In my view, those baseless allegations have made the job of the police and the prosecution agencies even more difficult. A criminal investigation has been politicised by those who seek to use it for political advantage. Worse, in the community around Cullyhanna, their words have created a climate of fear and suspicion that has resulted in some local people being injured and their property being attacked. That also should be condemned by all, although Dominic Bradley ignored it in both his motion and his speech. I repeat: any Members of this House who have any information about Paul Quinn's murder, let them bring it to the proper authorities. If they do not, they do a grave disservice to the Quinn family, who rightly want the perpetrators brought to justice.

Dominic Bradley indulged his usual fixation with Conor Murphy MP. When he did eventually deal with the substance of his motion, he referred directly to the IMC's John Grieve, who said:

"Despite the fact that we are saying it is a local dispute, we do believe that those who were involved in the attack on him — in his brutal murder — included people who are members or former members or have associations with members or former members of the Provisional IRA."

That could mean every person within a 20-mile radius, including, for that matter, Dominic Bradley. It is of such a generalised nature as to be particularly useless in establishing the truth.

Mr Bradley further claimed unnamed Garda Síochána members as a source for those unsubstantiated allegations, yet, as recently as last week, the Irish —

Mr D Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You asked Members earlier not to name names, particularly concerning this case, yet two Members have done so, the latter's having done so in circumstances that are, at best, dubious. I ask you to ask that Member to withdraw his remark.

Mr Speaker: I certainly did guide Members at the start of the debate as to how they might handle themselves. However, I do not see a problem with anything that Mr McLaughlin has said. It is important that I say that, and it is important that Members take care in what they say. In this instance, what Mr McLaughlin has said is the cut and thrust of debate.

Mr D Bradley: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, Mr McLaughlin, in his speech —

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not taking any further points of order on the issue.

Mr D Bradley: Then, I shall write to you about it.

Mr Speaker: I shall be happy to talk to the Member about the issue.

Mr McLaughlin: I stopped counting after the sixth reference to Conor Murphy in Mr Bradley's contribution.

Brian Lenihan said that the gardai have no information to show that the IRA was involved in the murder of Paul Quinn in Monaghan. I presume that Mr Lenihan is more privy to the evidence that the gardai are dealing with than Mr Bradley is. Likewise, I would hazard a guess that the PSNI is also well briefed. Some in this House are more concerned about the political mileage that they can achieve than about establishing the truth.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McLaughlin: Given Mr Bradley's interruption, I want to make it clear that those who carried out the murder of Paul Quinn are criminals who deserve our strongest condemnation, and they must be brought to justice. Go raibh maith agat.

Lord Morrow: I have just learned that the Quinn family are in the Public Gallery. It is proper that I say that I and my party feel for them. I express my sincere and heartfelt sympathy and that of my party to the family on the loss of someone who was very precious to them — their son.

I commend Dominic Bradley for bringing the motion to the House. I say to him directly that it took courage to do so. It is gratifying that he, as the proposer of the motion, lives in the constituency in which this awful atrocity took place. We thought that Northern Ireland was moving forward; but it seems that some things are not going to change. Sadly, it seems that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Today, the Quinn family could take that sentiment to heart and say that, for them, very little has changed.

I have read much about the case, and I have heard many things said about the incident on television, radio and elsewhere. I have heard Paul Quinn branded as this or that. I say directly to Sinn Féin Members: if you believe any of those allegations, why have you not taken that information to the PSNI? You say that you support the PSNI and that it is the only legitimate agency for law and order in Northern Ireland: why then did you not give all of the information to the police? Quite frankly, I think the whole thing is a smokescreen.

Paul Quinn was taken aside and treated worse than a dog — he was brutally done to death. My words and those of any other Member will fall far short of what should be said to graphically illustrate what happened to Paul Quinn. Sadly, he was not the only person to suffer at the hands of brutal animals: I am also thinking

of Robert McCartney and the two policemen who were shot in Dungannon and Londonderry respectively.

We are told that things are moving on: Sinn Féin representatives said today that they recognise that the PSNI is the only legitimate agency for law and order. I say to them that it is not that long since Gerry Adams said that he was never a member of the Provisional IRA — and we are supposed to believe that. Similarly, it is not that long since the Minister of Education was in Columbia making preparations to get the Columbia Three home. Of course, when Sinn Féin representatives were asked about the Columbia Three, they said that they have never heard tell of them and did not know them from Adam. Their protests continued until television pictures emerged, which showed Martin McGuinness — I think — talking to the Columbia Three.

Sinn Féin has a job to do: not only does it have to convince the nationalist community that it is for real, it must also convince the unionist community because many of us are sceptical and do not believe that the “war” — as Sinn Féin calls it — is over.

It seems that Sinn Féin reserves the right to take someone like Paul Quinn and batter him to death if it is expedient to do so. The law of the jungle is not acceptable in any democracy; and that is something which the Shinnars may have a lot of difficulty getting their heads around. Their days of skulking behind hedgerows should be over, but, alas, they are not. It used to be that they took their violence out on the security forces and on Protestants, but now they are turning on their own community. Because they deemed it necessary to take out someone like Paul Quinn, they brought him to a barn and, instead of shooting him, battered him to death. His pleas and cries were heard across the countryside.

What sort of society do those people think they are directing us into? I have no hesitation in supporting the motion, and I commend the Member who proposed it.

Mr B McCrea: I am reluctant to get involved in the issue, because Conor Murphy said that there was a danger of hijacking it for political ends. There is a fundamental question at stake: how can we ask others to speak about the issue if we are not prepared to speak about it? If we do not speak about it, others will allege criminality, make excuses, and come up with some form of spin that will say that they were not responsible.

I tried to intervene several times, and it is a pity that Conor Murphy is not in the Chamber. Through you, Mr Speaker, I would have liked to ask him a question. I will read a quote from Mr Stephen Quinn that relates to comments by Members who said that criminals carried out the murder and that the republican movement had no part in it. Those Members did not respond to Mr Stephen Quinn's challenge.

Mr Quinn said:

“Conor Murphy has repeated the criminality story. If he has a shred of evidence that Paul was involved in anything, I challenge him today to put it in the paper — or else to do the decent thing and publicly withdraw it.”

I give the opportunity here and now to any Member of Sinn Féin to intervene and declare that Paul Quinn was not a criminal.

Silence speaks louder than words. There was no justification — absolutely none — for that brutal murder, and those who allege criminality should hang their heads in shame.

I spoke to the family today, and I regret that I did not speak to them earlier; I was worried about how it might look. I spoke earlier this week to a family in my constituency whose son had also been murdered. I sat on that poor boy's bed and I listened to his mother and father and his brothers and sisters tell me of the total distress that they felt. I can only imagine the trauma that the Quinn family has gone through. I offer them my sincere and heartfelt condolences.

The murder of Paul Quinn has political implications. I do not know whether his murder was sanctioned or not. Frankly, I am not sure that it makes any difference. Will the Assembly trundle on, will it go about its business and hide the matter under the carpet, or will it start to talk about real issues to provide a vision for the future of the Assembly?

Some people allege that a cosy cabal runs matters; that the end justifies the means; that there is no principle that is not worth sacrificing on the altar of expediency; and that the process must be protected at all costs. I disagree. I do not want the Assembly to fall. I have heard what Members said. I want us to succeed, but what is the point of having an Assembly if we do not tackle real issues? If we are open, honest and transparent, if we try to move matters forward and deal with the hard issues, I can face down the critics. However, I cannot defend the indefensible.

The Quinn family, Paul Quinn himself, the wider community and the whole of Northern Ireland deserves justice and proper policing. It is time that the Assembly collectively got its act together and started to deal with those issues. I am appalled that some Members will not speak out on behalf of people. In the strongest possible terms, I ask the entire House to unite behind the motion moved by Mr Dominic Bradley.

3.45 pm

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. First, I offer my deepest condolences to the entire Quinn family on the brutal murder of Paul Quinn.

Mr Lunn: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No, I will not.

No words that can be spoken in the Chamber will fully express the emotions felt by any family that had

its son taken in the way in which Paul Quinn was taken. There is a sombre mood in the Chamber today — and rightly so. I have not felt such an atmosphere in the Chamber before, but it is right that such an atmosphere can be felt today.

The Quinn murder has produced a set of circumstances that are not unique but that require a response because of their political implications. That is why Sinn Féin proposes an alternative view to that stated by other parties. In other circumstances, my party would not have made any comment. However, the situation is being used by those who wish to bring down the political institutions. Therefore, Sinn Féin has submitted a scenario, or an option, that the killing might be related to something else.

We are not calling on the Assembly or other political parties to investigate all the circumstances that led to the murder of Paul Quinn but on the PSNI and the Garda Síochána to do so. If these institutions fall on the basis of statements that were made publicly by elected representatives and other individuals — I do not mean members of the Quinn family, because they are entitled to say anything that they wish, although it does not make them right — another crime will have been committed. The hopes and aspirations of hundreds of thousands of people will have been dashed on misinformation.

I wish to present Members with another example. In November 2006, several heavily armed men burst into a house in Keady. They beat the two occupants of the house with hammers, doused them in petrol and burnt them alive. The following morning, on radio and on television, senior political representatives of the SDLP and the Democratic Unionist Party said that republicans were involved and that republicans — Sinn Féin, in particular — had questions to answer.

As the day progressed, it became apparent that the assailants had been severely injured in the attack and had been admitted to hospital in Monaghan. As events rolled on, it became clear that there was no republican involvement whatsoever in that attack. However, if those brutal, murderous assailants had made good their escape, would we be debating those two murders today? Would the finger of blame be pointing at republicans? I suspect that the answer is yes, because blaming republicans suited the political agendas of some of the people who spoke on the radio that morning.

Perhaps we would not even be here, because this institution would not have gotten onto its feet. It would not have gotten onto its feet because of two brutal murders in which republicans were not involved. The finger of blame was pointed at republicans for one reason only — the attack happened in south Armagh. Apparently, it could not have happened in south Armagh unless republicans had sanctioned it. That is

the belief of the political opponents across the Chamber, and that is why they believe that the IRA murdered Paul Quinn — it happened in south Armagh, and nothing like that can happen in south Armagh without the IRA's permission.

I appeal to people to allow the Garda Síochána and the PSNI to bring the murderers of Paul Quinn, regardless of who they are, to justice. Stephen Farry said that only the courts can decide, but he went on to make his own decision on the matter. Let the courts and the police decide on that murder, and let the killers be brought to justice.

Mr Irwin: I thank Mr Dominic Bradley for tabling the motion. As a Member for Newry and Armagh, I wish to convey my sympathy to the Quinn family.

It has been only four months since the tragic event, but I am sure that the family still feels the hurt. The murder of Paul Quinn last October remains a chilling reminder of the depths to which man will stoop to inflict harm on a fellow human being. Unfortunately, that is not new to Northern Ireland and, for many years, such actions have been commonly associated with the republican movement in South Armagh. It is also a stark reminder of the work which must still be done within the minds of those in Northern Ireland who see summary justice as acceptable. They say that murder is acceptable; I say that murder is murder — it is totally unacceptable and must be condemned by all right-thinking people.

Interestingly, on 28 October 2007, shortly after the murder, the leader of Sinn Féin stated in 'The Independent':

"The people involved are criminals. They need to be brought to justice and it is fairly obvious to me that this is linked to fuel smuggling and to criminal activity. There's no republican involvement whatsoever in this man's murder."

Mr Adams is the very same man who said that he was never a member of the IRA. For someone who was always very quick to warn against forming opinions on the detailed motives and suspects involved in republican crimes in the past, Mr Adams's publicised and sudden insight into the murder of Paul Quinn is extraordinary. I ask him to clarify how he arrived at that conclusion.

The motion refers to the matter of whether Paul Quinn was involved in criminality. The SDLP contend that he was not, yet the mere reference unintentionally sends out a confusing signal.

Mr Spratt: Does the Member agree that, irrespective of whether Paul Quinn was involved in crime, no man has the right to hand out justice such as was given to him? No man has the right to beat anyone to death. Only the courts can deal with such incidents.

Mr Irwin: I agree with the Member for South Belfast. The bottom line of this debate is that the beating to

death of a human being is, in any case, futile, wrong and abhorrent. The argument cannot be diverted, even for a second, to the issue of Paul Quinn's activities. The argument must centre on recognition of the rule of law, support for the structures through which law can be enforced, and the process by which those responsible for the death are imprisoned.

It has not gone unnoticed that a sizeable number of people in the community from which Paul Quinn originated clearly and publicly endorse the efforts of the PSNI in trying to bring to justice those responsible. That represents a noticeable shift in the minds of people who formerly did not recognise the PSNI, and the police have confirmed that the community has been co-operative in the investigation. If there remains in that community even the slightest fear whereby people feel unable to provide a key piece of information that could lead to a conviction, those who carried out the murder will remain at large. That information is out there, and it is a massive test for that community to ensure that the police are assisted in bringing the killers of Paul Quinn to justice.

I support the motion.

Mr Elliott: I offer my condolences to the Quinn family circle on the brutal murder of Paul. I assure Members, and those outside the House, that I have no personal or political incentive or motive for speaking in the debate. I thank the Member for Newry and Armagh Mr Dominic Bradley for having the courage to propose the motion.

The murder of Paul Quinn sent shock waves throughout Northern Ireland. No matter in what part of the country or Province we live, it was clear that people thought that such dark days were over. The previous months had seen an almost dream-like atmosphere sweep across Northern Ireland, and the establishment of the Assembly was the beginning of that.

However, there was to be a sharp reminder of the continuing presence of the bloodthirsty people in this society, and it came via the brutal mutilation and murder of Paul Quinn. I wonder whether Mr O'Dowd is suggesting, on behalf of the IRA, that it did not carry out the murder of Paul Quinn. If he is, I do not believe him.

Neither I nor the people that I represent in Fermanagh and South Tyrone are strangers to the evil acts of republican terrorism. For almost 40 years, the border with the Republic of Ireland has suffered as an area of death, harassment, intimidation and fear. Border activities have been perpetrated against Catholics and Protestants, nationalists and unionists alike by the IRA, which does not want to recognise real democracy but is happy to use that democracy to meet its own private ends. Sadly, Paul Quinn was just one more innocent civilian to the IRA, to add to its list of thousands.

The organisational skill of the people who murdered Paul Quinn was clear for everyone to see. We are told that up to 12 perpetrators with boiler suits and surgical gloves beat Paul Quinn with iron bars and nail-studded cudgels. His death was brought about in a cold and calculated manner, the like of which was the hallmark of the IRA campaign throughout the Troubles. The Independent Monitoring Commission, Sir Hugh Orde, the Secretary of State and every person in every corner of Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland know that that barbaric act was carried out by the IRA.

The IRA and its army council — and I have to wonder if members of the army council sit in this Chamber — would have us believe that no organisational direction or power was issued to the murderers for the act to be committed. Given the prowess with which the beatings and killings were delivered, and the estimated number of people who took part in the act, everything points to the organisational governance having a strong say in the running of the events and their tragic end.

The news of the murder of Paul Quinn left me and, I assume, the majority of people in Northern Ireland, angry. It left me to wonder why such a young and promising life had to be taken. We now know that Paul had stood up to the chiefs of the south Armagh brigade of the IRA. Like so many who faced the IRA in days gone by, he paid for that with his life. I hope that his family will continue to fight for justice for their son, and they would be right to do so. His killers must be brought to justice and pay the penalty for their crime.

Years ago, a certain man and Member of the Assembly said:

“They haven't gone away, you know.”

We all knew that he was telling the truth, and his statement is true today. The IRA, which we have been told in the past is inextricably linked to Sinn Féin, continues to use the structures that have allowed it to mutilate, kill and intimidate for decades. The campaign may have slowed down, but it has not disappeared. Therefore, the onus is on Sinn Féin to explain to the Quinn family, the community in south Armagh and the people of Northern Ireland why those structures and the army council have not disappeared.

Mr Ford: I express my sympathy to the family and friends of Paul Quinn. It is deeply regrettable that we have to have a debate on a topic such as this. An interesting reference has been made by Sinn Féin Members, and not by other Members, about the attacks on houses, property and cars — and perhaps people — in the wake of the murder of Paul Quinn. It is right that any such attacks be condemned. Sinn Féin Members have every right to highlight those attacks and to expect that other Members would want the full rule of law to be observed. Without any reservation, I

condemn any such attack, but the principal reason for this debate is not because of graffiti being painted on houses, but because a young man was murdered in a most brutal, cowardly and callous fashion.

After his murder, he was subject to character assassination by Sinn Féin representatives, not just in the Newry and Armagh area, but in the wider area. The three leading Members of Sinn Féin who have spoken so far — Mr Murphy the local MP and Minister, Mr McLaughlin and Mr O'Dowd — all expressed their sympathy, but none of them managed to find it in his heart to apologise for the slurs that were made about Paul Quinn.

4.00 pm

Basil McCrea made an offer to Members of Sinn Féin, but perhaps it takes them a while to get the message, so I will make that offer again. I will happily give way to any Member of Sinn Féin who wishes to take the opportunity to apologise for the slur that was cast on Paul Quinn's character.

Once again, the silence from the Sinn Féin Members is the most eloquent thing that we have heard from them this afternoon.

Our party has not laid the blame on any organisation. We talked about the rule of law, the role of the police — whether it be the PSNI or the gardaí — and the role of the courts in determining guilt, yet, even in those contexts, Sinn Féin Members cannot find it in their hearts to acknowledge that their statements, led by Conor Murphy in the wake of the murder, were utterly wrong. They stand condemned for their inability to recognise those simple facts. It was not only the assault and the murder that were wrong, it was the character assassination.

The Quinn family, and the memory of Paul Quinn, deserve an apology. However, it appears clear that no apology will be forthcoming from Sinn Féin. Indeed, it is not simply an apology that is required — there should be a full-scale retraction of the allegations.

The Alliance Party offered sympathy to the Quinn family's campaign, along with Ulster Unionist Members, SDLP Members and some former Members of Sinn Féin, in conjunction with others who are non-political, and today we heard sympathy from DUP Members. That does not make it a political campaign — it shows the level of backing across the community for the concerns raised by the Quinn support group. Those voices must be heard, because the politicisation has been the assault by Sinn Féin on the integrity of Paul Quinn's memory. For Sinn Féin to accuse others of politicising the issue is a little rich, to put it mildly.

The Alliance Party wants a new beginning for this society. We want to move to a society that is powered by totally peaceful and solely democratic means. When

we look back at the murder of Paul Quinn, it is clear that some people do not wish to move to such a society. When we talk about these issues, it is not because we seek to bring down the institutions; it is because we seek to have institutions that are built on integrity, justice and the rule of law, and not on covering up awkward facts because they do not suit the needs of certain parties. If Mr O'Dowd expects other Members of the House to put the interests of the supposed greater good of stability secondary to the interests of getting justice and a full hearing for everyone, he will have to think again.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ford: Unlike Mr O'Dowd, I will give way.

Mr O'Dowd: Mr Ford is doing himself and this debate a great disservice. I have not asked for anyone to put the murder of Paul Quinn above these institutions.

Mr Ford: Most Members in the Chamber heard a suggestion that there was a threat to the stability of the institutions because we debate these issues. That is fundamentally wrong and immoral, and we do not accept it.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Quinn family here today, but I am sorry that they are here under such circumstances.

Paul Quinn was murdered in a violent and brutal way. The murder was carried out in a pre-planned and well-organised manner. Paul knew that he was going to be attacked, and he knew who was going to attack him. Let us be clear about that. Any attempt to criminalise Paul, to blacken his name and to create a smokescreen to cover the circumstances around his murder will not detract from that murder. No amount of character assassination or political posturing will make Paul's murder acceptable or justify any murder in this democratic society. I call on Gerry Adams to publicly retract the label of criminal that his party has put on Paul Quinn and I would ask why they felt it necessary to do so.

As a member of the power-sharing Executive, Conor Murphy should have shown leadership and encouraged those with any knowledge of the murder to go to the PSNI or the Garda Síochána. He should not have questioned those who he believed had carried out Paul's murder and then stated that they had nothing to do with it. He is in a position of power and authority, and he should take seriously the responsibilities that go with that position.

This killing must not be treated or dealt with as anything other than what it was — a brutal, savage murder. The truth cannot be suppressed — whatever the political consequences. Anybody who colludes in the suppression of the truth undermines the principles of justice. Go raibh maith agat. I support the motion.

Mr Attwood: I join other Members in thanking Dominic Bradley for the powerful way in which he told the story of this horror and family trauma. Most of all, I thank the Quinn family for the dignity that they have shown in the conduct of their campaign.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Attwood: Their dignity is in stark contrast to the comments of Mr McLaughlin, whose speech was categorised by narrow, petty, divisive points that ill serve the debate, and which contrast remarkably with the campaign for justice that is being waged by the family.

Paul Quinn's murder was not the first of its kind. There are startling parallels with what happened to Robert McCartney and others. The evidence confirms that there was a strategy to mislead, to create a fog and to lay down false trails. After the murder of Paul Quinn, Gerry Adams said:

"it is fairly obvious to me that this is linked to fuel smuggling and to criminal activity."

Following the murder of Robert McCartney, Alex Maskey said that:

"there is a growing violent knife culture ... this incident is an extension of that."

Both those responses were deliberately misleading on the nature of the crimes that were committed.

Following the murder of Paul Quinn, Gerry Adams said:

"There is no republican involvement whatsoever ... all of us should be careful that we don't end up playing politics with what is a dreadful, criminal action."

In the aftermath of the murder of Robert McCartney, Alex Maskey said that:

"what has ... been disturbing has been the shameful attempts to ... score political points."

Today, Conor Murphy and Mitchel McLaughlin informed the House that other parties are playing politics with murders in the community in the North, when it is clear that it is they who have been most active in doing so. They have played politics in the most grievous circumstances that have arisen from the murders of innocent people.

Even after all that, when Sinn Féin's strategy was not working, the MP Conor Murphy claimed that he was reluctant to drag Paul Quinn's name through the mud. However, he subsequently did precisely that. Catherine McCartney reported in her book, 'Walls of Silence', which she wrote following the murder of her brother, that the Provos circulated rumours about their victims and justified their murders by demonising the victims.

The parallels between what happened to Robert McCartney and what happened to Paul Quinn are stark

and obvious: a strategy to mislead, create a fog and lay down false trails.

The second parallel between the murder of Paul Quinn and that of Robert McCartney is shown in Sinn Féin's attitude to dealing with the police. Sinn Féin shares power in this building and shares responsibility for policing on the Policing Board, but, although it has had several meetings with the police and said that it would consider encouraging witnesses to come forward in the McCartney murder, the police have confirmed on three occasions — including last week — that no new witnesses have come forward.

Compare that with the killing of Paul Quinn, about which the MP for Newry and Armagh gave the world a solid assurance from the IRA that it was not involved. Mitchel McLaughlin said:

"Anyone with any information, however tangential, should bring that information to An Garda Síochána and the PSNI."

Has Mr Murphy gone to An Garda Síochána or the PSNI with his evidence about the people to whom he spoke and who gave him those substantial, alleged reassurances? If he does not tell the police about who he spoke to and what they said, he will have failed to co-operate with a murder inquiry and will not have given the gardaí and the PSNI the opportunity to rule in or rule out the people that he spoke to. By not going to the PSNI and An Garda Síochána, he will have done precisely what Sinn Féin did in the Robert McCartney case, which resulted in no new witnesses coming forward.

The third aspect of the Paul Quinn murder is a question: how can we ensure that the worst that happened to the families of Robert McCartney and Paul Quinn will not happen to anybody else?

Members have rightly said that the disbandment of the IRA's army council, the UDA's inner command and whatever command structure the UVF may have is part of the solution. However, it is not the whole answer. In 2003, Monsignor Denis Faul said of the murder of Gareth O'Connor in south Armagh:

"I've believed from the start that he was taken away by members of the IRA in south Armagh, though they may not have been acting under orders from HQ."

That may also be the case in the Quinn murder. Even if the army council were taken out of the picture, the residue of IRA authority would not be removed from our communities. It will take more than the ending of the army council to ensure that such incidents do not happen again.

As Dominic Bradley said in the Chamber on 4 February, no one else must be summoned to a cattle mart in Crossmaglen in order to receive their ASBO. We must ensure that never again in Ballymurphy will the so-called IRA officer commanding for the area assault and disfigure a young person who is alleged to be involved in crime, while members of that

community are not encouraged to go to the police as they would have been in relation to other crimes over the past six or nine months. Those are the tests of whether republican civil administration has been purged from communities once and for all.

The issue is about much more than the disbandment of the army council; it is about republican structures continuing to impose their will on communities. That is what the murders of Robert McCartney and Paul Quinn and the assault on the young man in Ballymurphy were about.

Two weeks ago, the two Prime Ministers issued a statement:

“Having seen the huge progress made, we are convinced that the time is right for the parties to move forward and take the final steps towards full devolution and full normality.”

The SDLP agrees that it is time to move towards full devolution, because if people can share power in this building and share policing responsibilities in other buildings, we can share responsibility for justice as well. In this phase of the political process, at the highest levels in the two Governments, it is deeply worrying that in a 200-word statement calling for the devolution of justice and policing powers, neither the Taoiseach nor the British Prime Minister has a single word to say about the residue, or otherwise, of the IRA's authority in parts of the North. They should think again.

4.15 pm

I wish to finish by responding to one or two comments that were made by John O'Dowd. I want to correct his memory. No one in the SDLP made statements to the effect that there was IRA involvement in the tragic killings of two people several months ago. On the contrary, three members of the SDLP made statements that were very cautious about the circumstances of those incidents. I ask John O'Dowd to check the record, and, if he is in error, he should correct what he said.

Dominic Bradley mentioned Conor Murphy six times during the debate. Dominic should have mentioned him 66 times, because of all people, Conor Murphy has personal, political and ministerial responsibility on this issue — a responsibility, that even today, in front of the Quinn family, he continued to abuse.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly condemns the murder of Mr Paul Quinn; notes the clarification by the British and Irish Governments that they do not hold the view that the victim was involved in criminality of any kind; further notes the assessments of Sir Hugh Orde and the Independent Monitoring Commission regarding the involvement in this crime of persons who are current or former members of the Provisional IRA, or who have associations with members or former members of the Provisional IRA; and calls upon everyone to encourage people to come forward and assist the police investigations being carried out by the PSNI and an Garda Síochána.

Conductive Education

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

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

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly supports conductive education and commends the Buddy Bear School, Dungannon, to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Minister of Education for financial support and assistance.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Caithfidh mé a rá go bhfuil an-áthas orm an rún a mholadh.

I am pleased to propose this cross-party motion. Conductive education is a form of special education and rehabilitation for children and adults with motor disorders. It is appropriate for conditions whereby disease or damage to the nervous system affects a person's ability to control movement. In childhood, those conditions include cerebral palsy and dyspraxia, and, in adulthood, Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis and cerebral palsy. Conductive education is also beneficial to those who have had a stroke or a head injury.

Conductive education began in Hungary in the late 1940s. It was originated by a Hungarian doctor named Andras Peto, and is now widely established in Hungary, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Germany, Australia, Israel and many other countries. Newry and Mourne District Council welcomed the director of the Peto Institute, Dr Maria Hari, to Newry, before she opened the Buddy Bear School in Dungannon.

Newry has seen the benefits of conductive education. In fact, one of my young constituents, Daniel Murphy, is a shining example of how conductive education can shape a young person's life. Daniel was born with cerebral palsy, and his parents were advised that he would always be dependent on others, and would face a life of limited possibilities. Daniel, however, had the benefit of conductive education at the Buddy Bear School, and he had the unique experience of being nursed by none other than the First Minister when he visited the Buddy Bear School a number of years ago. Many Members know Daniel's story: they have met him here, and he is a frequent visitor to Parliament Buildings. Daniel now attends college and is on a work experience programme for two days a week.

The Buddy Bear Trust is an outstanding organisation, and the school that it operates in Dungannon provides an excellent service to the whole community in Northern Ireland by offering an imaginative conductive

form of education. The trust has been operating since 1988, and it opened its independent school in 1994 to offer conductive education to children with cerebral palsy.

Over 900 children and young people from Northern Ireland suffer from cerebral palsy, yet the deplorable fact remains that there is no centrally funded special provision for children who suffer from that illness. Conductive education is a learning process; it is not a treatment, cure or therapy, but it offers a lifeline to those who suffer from cerebral palsy and to their families. The issue before the House today is the uncertainty over funding for the school in Dungannon. If we fail to provide the very modest funding that is required to keep the Buddy Bear school open, we run the risk of losing the expertise that liberated Daniel Murphy from a lifetime of absolute dependency.

I was part of the cross-party delegation that met with children and parents here on 23 January. That meeting marked a turning point for many Members. We had the opportunity to hear first-hand about parents' experiences. We heard about their frustrations and stresses and about the difficulties that the school had experienced with the education and library boards. One young mother described in detail how her world and her hopes changed when she was told that her child had cerebral palsy. There was no helping hand of support from the agencies that have responsibility for those matters. The parents descended into a deep, dark world of depression, stress, frustration and worry. We heard about the mother's tears and about the father's silent and secret tears and his hidden worries about his wife and child. It was a very moving story.

However, we saw the mother brighten as she told us about the first rays of hope as Ms Veres, the principal and a trained conductor in the school, showed her how to work with her child at home. Progress was soon evident. The little girl began to move around the floor, and she is now trying to walk. However, she needs more time and help.

We can easily understand why parents want the Assembly to support and develop the Buddy Bear school. I hope that the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Minister of Education will establish an interim funding arrangement for the school. I ask them to set up a review with a view to exploring how best the needs of children such as Daniel Murphy can be met and how the school might be developed in the near future as a centre of excellence, not just for Northern Ireland, but for all the border counties.

There must be co-operation between the Department of Education, its education and library boards and OFMDFM. Let us not bat the issue from pillar to post. Let us show that devolution means something to the people of Northern Ireland by making decisions that

will ensure the future of this wonderful school in our community. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is my pleasure to support this cross-party motion that presents us with an important opportunity to show what this Assembly can deliver for a local area and for this special-needs school in particular.

The Buddy Bear school and the Buddy Bear Trust have existed for some time and provide an important resource for children with cerebral palsy who need special attention and support. The school also gives the families of those children some light at the end of the tunnel by giving them the belief that their children can live normal lives through being able to get to school and get involved in conductive education. The children can then build a life for themselves and gain independence, which will enable them to deal with issues in the same way as any other child.

It is important to remember that children with cerebral palsy are as entitled to a place in a school as any other child. Education and library boards make allowances for every child as regards how much it costs to put them through school. Children with cerebral palsy are entitled to the same allowance.

Unfortunately, the education and library boards have not been making parents aware that the Buddy Bear school exists; that children can be accepted into it, or that conductive education can be beneficial to their children. Therefore, the boards have sidestepped their responsibility to deliver a quality education service to children with cerebral palsy.

The educational needs of the children are important, and the amount of money required to keep the Buddy Bear school in Dungannon open is not massive. Like other situations in which children have to travel to school, some children with cerebral palsy may have to travel a distance to get to the school, and they may require more intensive attention than other children. However, like every other child, they are entitled to an education.

The main role that the Assembly can play is to ask the education and library boards — through the Minister of Education — to make parents aware that the school exists and that their children can attend it. The Assembly should also encourage the funding of the school to enable it to remain open. If the school does not receive funding, it will cease to exist. Unfortunately, to date, the trust has been able to deliver the service only because people have begged throughout the country in an attempt to get sponsorship, support and finance for the school. Therefore, it is important that the Department of Education, and, in particular, the education and library boards, take responsibility and deal with the funding issue.

The school requires around £200,000 a year, which is a small amount of money. It could be made available if the Department of Education did not hire a consultant for a couple of months of the year. Therefore, there are ways of creating the required funding. The education and library boards already have the funding available to ensure that every child has access to schools and to education. It is important that the Buddy Bear school remains open.

People may say that conductive education is not the only means of dealing with cerebral palsy; that is correct. Others may say that some children with cerebral palsy can attend mainstream education; that is also correct. However, for some children, that is not an option; the only way that they can have a life and build independence is by attending the Buddy Bear school and getting conductive education, which will ensure that they have an opportunity to develop.

The motion calls on the Minister of Education and OFMDFM to give financial support and assistance to the Buddy Bear school. That support will enable the school to provide its important service to children who have been deprived of educational benefits for too long. It will also enable the parents of those children to see some light at the end of the tunnel by giving them the belief that their children can perform and become the same as every other child.

I support the motion, and I ask Members to do likewise.

Mr Savage: This debate is as timely as it is important. As a lifelong supporter of the Buddy Bear Trust, I am committed to doing my utmost to ensure that the Buddy Bear Trust Conductive Education Independent School in Dungannon can continue to operate and carry out its most valuable and highly-skilled work.

4.30 pm

In the recently agreed Budget, the Assembly earmarked more than £1.7 billion to educate children with special needs, whether they be in preschool, primary school or post-primary school. We have the power to make a lifetime of difference to a child with cerebral palsy, to that child's family and, indeed, to the entire community if we agree to set aside around £200,000 — the figure that our honourable friend Mr Molloy has just mentioned — to protect and enhance the Buddy Bear Trust Conductive Education Independent School until the Department of Education, supported by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, has completed a full appraisal of the needs of children with cerebral palsy, parental support and staff training needs.

We all have high hopes for our children. We hope that they will be safe and well, and that they will succeed at school. We hope that they will avail

themselves of education opportunities in our colleges and universities, as well as in our many apprentice schemes, so that they might enjoy a good lifestyle as they continue their journey through life. Consider, however, the hopes of the young couple who realise, or are told, that their precious child has cerebral palsy. How deep is their despair? How empty does that hurt and anxiety make them feel? Their celebration at the birth of a son or a daughter is shattered. What pain does a mother feel when she realises that her twins have cerebral palsy? Despair, anger, blame, guilt and utter helplessness are merely some of the feelings that come to mind.

Let me make it clear, Mr Deputy Speaker, that the Buddy Bear Trust is willing to be flexible in its attempts to find a long-term solution to educating children with cerebral palsy. The trust has made it clear — as it has done over the years — that it will work in the interests of children with cerebral palsy with the Minister, the Department of Education, the proposed education and skills authority, the education and library boards, and others. The Assembly must not allow the enforcers of red tape, of which there are plenty, to bring more despair to parents who have enough to do in looking after their children.

Its founder and chairman, Brendan McConville, is not paid, as is no one else who works for it. The trust has helped children since 1988, and we must help it now.

We are not here to score political points but to give peace of mind to parents by assuring them that we will protect and develop the Buddy Bear Trust Conductive Education Independent School until a full appraisal has been carried out to determine the real needs, including training requirements, of children with cerebral palsy.

Parents are convinced that the education and library boards' refusal to give information to parents of children with cerebral palsy has caused the present crisis. Boards may argue that they do not have to inform parents about non-grant-aided schools, but surely they have a moral duty to give them as much information as possible, particularly as three boards have been paying the fees of children to attend the Buddy Bear school since 1993.

The boards also know that the Buddy Bear School is recognised and regularly inspected by the Department of Education. Whatever has happened up until now, we must move on. We have a crisis; we have distressed parents; and we have children who are benefiting from conductive education. Members have the power to make a lifetime of difference in exchange for a very small amount from the public purse.

To the best of my knowledge, no special training is provided to equip teachers to educate children with cerebral palsy. I know that the Minister is currently

reviewing special education and the training of teachers, but, whatever the outcome of that review, it will be too late, should the Assembly not financially support the Buddy Bear Trust and its children now.

The Buddy Bear School is not in competition with other special schools. It must be viewed as an additional resource to assist children, parents and teachers. The Assembly must do all that it can to safeguard our only conductive education school for children with cerebral palsy. We have pledged our support for children who, up until now, have had no voice and have had to depend on charity. We have the power, the authority and the resources to make a lifetime of difference to children and their families, now and in future, so, for their sake, we must act.

I shall end with an interesting story, if you will allow me, Mr Deputy Speaker. Before the most recent Assembly election, I visited the Buddy Bear School in Dungannon. A young mother came in with triplets. Into my arms, I was handed a young child — a lovely child. I had to hand that child back to its mother, knowing that I could do nothing for it. I vowed that, if some day the Assembly were back up and running, we would do something to help that mother and the many like her. Our opportunity is now.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Lunn: I support the motion, as, I am sure, will every other Member. I confess that conductive education was new to me before Brendan McConville and his team visited Lisburn City Council before Christmas to make a presentation, at which we learned something about it. Those of us who were privileged enough to attend the more recent presentation in this Building would have found it very difficult not to be moved by what we saw.

Dominic Bradley has already mentioned Daniel Murphy, who may represent the most classic case of what can be done for a child who, 30 years ago, would probably have been regarded as a hopeless case — a wheelchair case. Without the influence of the Buddy Bear Trust and its school, that is exactly what would have happened. I have been told that, recently, Daniel managed to leave his house, get on a bus, go to Newry, visit the Buttercrane Shopping Centre, and go home again on the bus, all under his own steam. That is some achievement for a young fellow of about 16 years of age. He is not the only child who came to Stormont that day; there were others who were equally impressive in their own way. However, Daniel stands out as an example of what can be achieved.

The conductive-education system is recognised worldwide, and it is used extensively in Hungary, and across the rest of mainland Europe, the UK and America. The Buddy Bear School is the only one of its type on the island of Ireland. It is vital that its work be

allowed to continue. The school has managed, since its foundation in 1988, to continue its good work, but it has existed from hand to mouth every year, never sure of future funding. Unless there is some proper support from the Department of Education, it may be that the school will have to fold. That would be a crying shame for the sake of £200,000, which appears to be the school's total running costs.

The issue of referrals from education and library boards was mentioned earlier in the debate. I am perplexed as to why there are not more referrals, and why there does not seem to have ever been a referral from the South Eastern Education and Library Board or the Belfast Education and Library Board.

I am told that there are about 900 children in the Province with varying degrees of cerebral palsy and related illnesses. There must be some of them who could be assessed in a manner that would direct the authorities to point them towards the Buddy Bear School as their best chance of improvement.

It is good that the school is quite happy to take referrals from across the border. A parallel can be drawn with the Middletown Centre for Autism, which is an all-Ireland centre of excellence. I hope that the Buddy Bear School in Dungannon can become an all-Ireland centre of excellence in its field. I also hope that, just as the Executive are being asked to provide funding, perhaps the Republic's Government could be asked the same question.

In the meantime, I plead with the education and library boards to make referrals to the school. If they did that, and pay for those school places, the funding crisis would be partially cured straight away. That would not take very many referrals, and that is from where the finance should come.

I plead with the Minister to give our case a sympathetic hearing and to see what can be done. The Buddy Bear School is a very worthy cause, and I am glad to see its being supported by everyone in the Chamber.

Lord Morrow: I am pleased to support the motion and to associate myself with the work and efforts of the white knights of the Buddy Bear Trust Conductive Education Independent School, which is based in Dungannon. Dungannon is my home town, and the town that I have represented on Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council for some 35 years. I have some knowledge of the school, and I am determined to see it continue with its excellent record of achievement. As a public representative, both at an Assembly and local level, I will give it all the support that I possibly can and in all the ways in which I can.

The Buddy Bear School delivers a unique service to children suffering from severe cerebral palsy, using techniques pioneered by the world-famous Peto Institute

in Hungary. Indeed, the school's principal worked at the Peto Institute, and brought her experience to the children of Northern Ireland.

Conductive education is possibly the most important sphere of learning, as children are taught the basics elements of life. Their education is not just academic; the children learn the basic skills that most of us take for granted — such as sitting up, walking, and communicating — before being set up to lead a productive and independent life. The Buddy Bear Trust has literally put children on their feet.

A fine example of that has already been referred to by others, but I would like to mention 16-year-old Daniel Murphy, whom I had the tremendous pleasure of meeting. When he was a baby, Daniel's parents were told that he would never walk or be able to fend for himself; he was, to use everyday terms, effectively written off. However, because — and only because — of the Buddy Bear Trust, Daniel is now a fine young man who travels by bus three days a week to his part-time work in Newry. He is happy, contented, independent, and is very much looking forward to the future, and that is thanks to the Buddy Bear School. Daniel is just one example of the miraculous work that is carried out at that facility, and he is a far cry from the helpless little individual for whom the prognosis was very poor.

No one would disagree that every child is precious, whatever his or her individual circumstances may be. That is why I am delighted that the Minister of Education has often stated that she believes that every child has a right to an education. Sadly for the Minister, that is where my praise ends, because there are some matters on which I want to challenge her.

Last month, the Buddy Bear staff, along with children and parents, arrived at Stormont for a much-anticipated audience with the Education Minister and a cross-party delegation of MLAs, including her party colleague Francie Molloy, who will be able to contradict me if I am inaccurate. Given the long journey that they faced, particularly with a disabled child, the parents set off early, and I understand that some may have travelled to Belfast the previous night. However, not only did the Minister claim to have no knowledge of their scheduled visit — which had been organised and confirmed on paper some time in advance — she baulked when faced with the fact that the MLAs were waiting to join the meeting. She will have a chance to answer that, and I look forward to that.

The Minister refused outright to meet the MLAs, and only after much ado did she agree to meet parents, children, and Buddy Bear staff — she condescended to do that, at least. The trust chairman was bluntly informed by a member of staff from the Department of Education that there could be no photograph of the

visit, because it was claimed that it could look as though the Minister was supporting the school. What would be wrong with the Minister being identified with — or with her supporting — that school?

I thought that the whole intention of the visit was for the Minister to see at first hand the much-needed work that the Buddy Bear Trust is doing and the services that it is providing, but it seems that the Minister had other ideas. The trust chairman was then tackled as to why Ms Ruane appears on the Buddy Bear Trust website, only to be informed that she had visited the school in her former capacity, before she was a Minister. That is amazing. Such visits seem to be acceptable when made as a mere MLA or as a private individual who is representing a political party or grouping, because one cannot do anything, but it is a different story when the individual is in a position to be able to affect the situation.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I see that you are going to ask me to sit down. There is much more that I could have said, but I would like the Minister to address the issues that I have mentioned.

Mr K Robinson: Whenever Northern Ireland possesses a centre of excellence in any sphere, it is our duty to sustain and to nurture it, particularly if that centre of excellence is related to health, welfare, or education. The Buddy Bear School in Dungannon has been a bright light in delivering conductive education for those with cerebral palsy, which affects one in every 400 children.

The Buddy Bear Trust deserves our support, and, at the very least, it should be given the financial protection that it needs until a cross-border centre of excellence can be developed for cerebral palsy, along the same lines as the autism centre in Middletown, County Armagh.

That centre should then gain from whatever economies of scale are available and funded jointly by the Northern Ireland Executive and the Government of the Republic of Ireland. Needless to say, that eventual solution needs to draw heavily on the considerable expertise and good practice built up in the Buddy Bear School in Dungannon since its inception in 1994. The Ulster Unionist Party strongly supports the work of the Buddy Bear Trust and its school, and we want to see progress made on that issue.

4.45 pm

There must be concerns regarding the nature of the relationships between the education and library boards and the school. I have to say, at the outset, that systems should never become a barrier to giving a child in need the life chances he or she deserves. Systems do not exist for their own benefit, or to justify the employment of officials administering them. They exist to address real educational, health and social issues, and they

deserve to exist only for as long as they do that. If a system ever gets in the way of delivering that need, then it must be scrapped, and we must go back to the drawing board.

At present, over 900 children and young people from Northern Ireland suffer from cerebral palsy, and yet there is no centrally funded specialist provision made for those children. It should not be left up to an independent voluntary organisation to raise funds to provide the financial support for conductive education. This is a public need, and conductive education is the way to meet that need. That should be the starting point for the system's design. We must not become hung up on what was the direct rule Minister's way of doing things.

For the last 10 years, three education and library boards have sent children to the school. However, in recent years, the number of pupils has decreased, and it has now emerged that the education and library boards have failed to inform parents of children with cerebral palsy that the conductive education school is an alternative to the existing statutory provision. Failure by any public body to do that is, in my mind, a serious omission from its primary duty to the welfare of the children in its area.

In January 2007, only two pupils were enrolled at the school. There were further concerns when it was revealed that an education and library board was preventing a six-year-old cerebral palsy sufferer from attending the school, because of red tape.

The lack of pupils has had a serious effect on the funding arrangements for the school, as the Buddy Bear Trust relies, for its normal day-to-day operation, on the fees provided by the boards. Fund-raising has been scaled down and remained in place only for the purchase of some extra items, such as specialised equipment and furniture.

As long ago as 1996, the then Secretary of State, in response to a Parliamentary Question, said:

"Under article 31(3) of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986, a proposal by an education and library board to arrange for the special educational provision for a child to be made otherwise than at a grant-aided school is subject to the approval of my Department. My Department considers each proposal made under this legislation on its merits, taking into account the professional advice, parental representations, proposed costs and any other circumstances relevant to each case. There are, however, proposals currently before Parliament to change this legislation: under these proposals, my Department's approval role in individual placements would be replaced by a power to approve institutions other than grant-aided schools as suitable for the placement by boards of children with special educational needs."

We do not want to hear any more excuses from officialdom about why children are not directed to Buddy Bear School, Dungannon—we want to see action.

The school in Dungannon is what they call in the United States, heavily credentialised. In 1994, the director of the Peto Institute in Budapest, the world's first and primary centre of excellence for conductive education, was actively involved in setting up the school, which was subsequently inspected and recognised by the Department of Education. This meant that the education and library boards were able to fund the school, by paying the fees of statemented children.

Since its establishment, the Buddy Bear School has helped over 200 children, and a recent inspection report has commended the school, and recommended that the Buddy Bear Trust and the board should work together to maintain the valuable resource for children with cerebral palsy. Let us, therefore, see an intervention by the Minister of Education to sustain this excellent institution in the interim, and let us see some concrete proposals coming from the Executive.

Mrs M Bradley: I support the motion. There is a blatant need for that organisation to be supported, to whatever level possible, and by whatever purse available to this Government and their branches. That support is essential for children who suffer from many of the diseases and conditions that mainly affect their motor skills. As those children grow into adults, they will need continuous care and assistance.

Surely, whatever skills that organisations such as the Buddy Bear Trust can help to develop—however minor they may seem compared with those that are developed by children in the mainstream-education system—are major developments in a sufferer's life. Is such a development not a huge milestone for a child who would simply have been left to flounder his or her way through life prior to the publication of the work of practitioners such as the renowned Dr Peto of Budapest?

I am aware of the Buddy Bear Trust's work, because as mayor of Derry in 1991, I visited the school in Dungannon in order to examine its work. At that time, a quadriplegic boy from Derry was a pupil at the school. Eventually, the young lad was able to develop sufficient motor skills to enable him to move a motorised wheelchair without help and to attend a mainstream school in Derry, although he needed care during school hours. Nonetheless, he did it, and I am pleased to say that he is now in further education. His name is Kevin O'Donnell.

When the Buddy Bear Trust visited the Building to promote its cause, mothers told me that they want nothing more than to see their children enact the smallest of improvements. In order to do that, those children need the help and professionalism of people who work in conductive education. The papers have played host to photographs of the First Minister and the Education Minister pledging their support for the

school. Therefore, I trust that they will live up to their promises and do what they can to retain the school.

I sincerely ask the Minister of Education to ensure that the education boards inform parents of the existence of the Buddy Bear School. Until now, they have not done so. That is a disservice to parents and to the school. It is an insult to children who suffer from those conditions. The school is faced with closure, which, again, is an insult, particularly when the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have, in this very Chamber, declared that a better future for all is enshrined in the Programme for Government. There is no better future for those children or for their school.

I support the motion. I hope that the Minister, and anyone who can help, will keep the Buddy Bear School open in order to provide a good service for those children whom we all call special.

Mr Storey: I support the motion. At the outset of my remarks, I pay tribute to the staff, parents and all who are associated with the Buddy Bear School in Dungannon for the fortitude that they have shown over the years. In spite of all the difficulties and problems that they have had, they have maintained their stance and have continued to provide a service to the school's children.

I want to pick up on Lord Morrow's point about the meeting between MLAs and the Education Minister that did not take place. I was extremely disappointed. I have been accused of bullying and all sorts of wrongs against the Minister. However, I want to make a serious point to her. I do not want to use the debate as a means to score political points, as has been done in previous debates. My point is sincere and genuine. I welcome the fact that the Minister is present in the House. I trust that she will listen.

The Minister has told the Assembly that equality is central to all of her policies; indeed, it is the bedrock of her beliefs. She has said that she has an interest in all of Northern Ireland's children. Surely, if that is the case, the children who Members have heard about in the debate, who suffer from cerebral palsy and who are associated with the Buddy Bear Trust, also deserve equality. They deserve to have the same rights as all other children.

It was extremely disappointing that the Minister did not attend the meeting in question. Through my experience in the political world, I am big enough to be able to take rebuff, rejection and exclusion. However, her absence was an insult to those families and children. Why did the Minister refuse to attend the meeting in the terms that were requested?

I am sure that her colleague, Mr Molloy, was disappointed that the scheduled meeting, of which everyone was aware, did not take place. Subsequently, I tabled a question to the Minister. However, when the

question fell and went unanswered, I had to ask the Speaker for a ruling on the matter.

That leads me to conclude that there was an attempt to hide something. I welcome the fact that the Minister is here today and that she will be able to provide clarity and answers. The meeting was not intended to be a hard sell, but an open and frank discussion. As a cross-party delegation, we wanted to put the case for those children.

It is rare for an issue raised in the Assembly to attract simultaneous support from all parties. Perhaps today's motion has done so because cerebral palsy does not discriminate on religion, politics, gender or ethnic background. Any individual or family can be affected. However, the Minister refused not only to meet the delegation but to clarify why. I am confident that Members have argued a sufficiently strong case for supporting the school.

In the short time that is available to me, I want to ask the Minister why the situation has been allowed to develop over several years and why, as has been mentioned in the House, education and library boards have not been referring children to the school. What is the Department of Education's position on children with cerebral palsy and what provision does it make for them? Why is there no directive — perhaps there is — on the referral of children with cerebral palsy? I trust that, in contrast with previous occasions, the Assembly will receive answers from the Minister today, not prevarication.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Equality is the bedrock of all my policies; I am pleased to say that every policy is equality-proofed. I also put the child at the centre of all policies and will continue to do so. As I wanted to meet representatives of the Buddy Bear Trust and the families involved, that was the basis on which the meeting was organised. People may claim otherwise, and I will not get into that discussion today, but that was the point of the meeting and the basis on which I agreed to it. It went ahead, as planned, on 23 January 2008.

Provision for children with special education needs in schools is of particular interest to me, and I take it seriously as part of my ministerial responsibilities. My concern is that all children receive special education provision that meets their needs. I want to ensure that they are given the best chances at school so that they can maximise their opportunities in later life.

I am committed to improving the special needs framework and the way in which children with special needs are supported in schools and at preschool.

Le deireannas, d'aontaigh mé dréacht-mholtaí don chreatlach riachtanais speisialta oideachais a cuireadh le chéile ag foireann athbhreithniú cuimsithe i mo Roinn, agus beidh mé ag cur na moltaí seo faoi bhráid

an Choiste Oideachais. Tá súil agam go gcuirfear na moltaí faoi chomhairliúchán i lár na bliana 2008.

Recently, I agreed draft proposals for changes to the special education needs framework. Those proposals were drawn together by the special education needs and inclusion review team in my Department, and I will bring them to the Committee for Education shortly. I hope that the proposals will be issued for formal consultation in mid-2008. The need for such a review reflects the bureaucracy attached to the special education needs framework, the year-on-year increase in the number of children with statements of special needs and the inconsistency and delays in assessment and provision. Clear accountability on how resources can be best used is also required.

The review aims to formulate comprehensive and cost-effective recommendations for special educational needs and inclusion, and it pays particular attention to the continuity and quality of provision, equality of access, the consistency of assessment and provision, and affordability.

5.00 pm

Recently, I met Brendan McConville and Stanley Anthony from the Buddy Bear Trust, along with a group of parents and children. Contrary to what some Members said, I have never visited the Buddy Bear School. Instead, I met representatives from the school at other events, such as teachers' conferences, and I met the pupils when they visited the Assembly.

Is mian leo oideachas den scoth a bheith ag a gcuid páistí, agus tugann siad lán tacaíochta don teagasc agus don teiripe a fhaigheann na páistí agus iad ar scoil.

The parents of all children, including those at the Buddy Bear School, want the best standard of education that suits the needs of their children. The parents of pupils at the Buddy Bear School are highly supportive of the teaching and therapy that their children receive.

The Buddy Bear Trust is a registered charity, which opened a conductive education school in Dungannon in 1993 to provide for children with conditions such as cerebral palsy. The school is an independent special school and is approved by the Department of Education as an institution suitable for the admission of children with special educational needs under article 26 of The Education Order 1996. There are many independent schools in the North of Ireland, none of which are entitled to funding direct from the Department of Education. However, when an education and library board places a special-needs child in an independent school, it will have already decided that the placement meets the needs of that child. The board will also be satisfied that the arrangements are compatible with the efficient use of resources.

Má chuireann bord páiste go scoil neamhspleách, thig leis an bhord sin na táillí a dhíol don oideachas a chuirtear ar fáil don pháiste. Chuir boird an deiscirt, an iarthair agus an tuaiscirt páistí go dtí an scoil.

After a board has decided to place a child in an independent school, it is able to pay the necessary fees. Historically, the Southern, Western and North Eastern Education and Library Boards have placed children in the Buddy Bear School.

Conductive education embraces learning and therapeutic development of movement, speech and mental ability simultaneously — not separately or consecutively — and is based on the theory that motor-disabled children develop and learn in the same way as their peers.

It is important that Members recognise that, under special education legislation, the education and library boards are responsible for identifying, assessing and making special education provision for children with special educational needs in their respective areas. The legislation does not give me, or the Department of Education, any role in the identification and assessment of a child's special educational needs. Neither does it give me any power to intervene in the process, which should be conducted among parents, schools and the education and library boards. The boards are entirely responsible for considering the most appropriate placement for a child, within the constraints of the legislative framework. That framework ensures that the boards and schools make special education provision that matches the assessed needs of each child. That provision may be made in special schools, in special units attached to mainstream schools, or in mainstream classes.

Ar an chéad dul síos, tá dualgas reachtúil ar bhoird riachtanais speisialta oideachais a chur ar fáil i scoileanna a fhaigheann deontas; ach má shíleann bord nach féidir leis riar ar riachtanais speisialta páiste, cuireann an reachtaíocht atá luaite agam ar chumas an bhoird sin páiste a chur go scoil neamhspleách mar Buddy Bear.

First and foremost, boards have a statutory responsibility to make special education provision in schools in the grant-aided sector. However, if a board does not think that it can meet the special needs of a child in a grant-aided school, the legislation that I mentioned, which is already in place, enables it to make provision through an independent school such as the Buddy Bear School.

In recent years, the number of children in the school has dwindled. When the district inspector visited the school in February 2007, she found that there were three pupils. The boards have told me that one child receives statutory funding to attend the school.

It is not the responsibility of the education and library boards or the Department to promote any school in the

independent sector. That is a matter entirely for the school's own management. I am aware that the trust has recently conducted a significant campaign to raise the profile of the school.

The Department surveyed those education and library boards that have historically placed children in the Buddy Bear School. According to the latest available school census information, the boards are making special educational provision for almost 500 children with cerebral palsy in a range of special schools and mainstream settings. Moreover, many other children are being supported by provision in their schools. The boards maintain that, given the greatly varying disabilities of that group of children, the needs of one child with cerebral palsy can be very different from the needs of others and, therefore, a range of placements is required.

Gabh mo leithscéal.

The key to the decisions about placement and therapeutic interventions is the fact that the education and library boards must rely on advice from local health trusts to assist in the assessment of pupils with cerebral palsy, and the trust seldom recommends conductive therapy as a requirement to meet the needs of such pupils. Should a parent express a preference for the Buddy Bear School to be named in a child's statement of special needs, the board has a duty to consider an appropriate placement in the grant-aided sector. If the board feels that the provision of the Buddy Bear School is required, it must satisfy itself that it is in the best interests of the child that such arrangements be made, taking into account the relevant professional advice and the wishes of the parents. Such arrangements must be compatible with the efficient use of resources.

If a board decides not to name the Buddy Bear School in a child's statement, the parent has a right of appeal against that decision to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal (SENDIST), which would then consider whether the appeal should be heard.

I shall conclude by summarising my position on direct funding for the Buddy Bear School. Neither I, nor the Department of Education, has a role in determining the special educational placement needed for children with special needs. The Buddy Bear School is an independent school and is, therefore, not eligible for grant aid directly from the Department of Education. The proprietors of an independent school must make parents aware of their school, not the education and library board.

Nuair a bhíonn cinntí a ndéanamh faoi shocrúithe agus idirghabhálacha teiripeacha, braitheann boird oideachais agus leabharlainne ar chomhairle ón iontaobhas sláinte áitiúil agus iad ag déanamh measúnú ar dhaltai a bhfuil pairilis cheiribreach orthu; ach is

annamh a mholfadh an t-iontaobhas sláinte gur gá le teiripe stiúrtha le riar ar riachtanais an pháiste.

The first duty of education and library boards is to make suitable placements for children with special educational needs in schools in the grant-aided sector. The necessary legislative base is already in place for boards to decide whether the special educational needs of children with cerebral palsy should be met at the Buddy Bear School. It is then the board's responsibility to fully fund the placements. The education and library boards seek advice from the local health trusts about the necessary therapeutic interventions to meet the needs of children with cerebral palsy. The boards report that the trusts seldom advise that conductive therapy is necessary to meet a child's needs.

Is é chéad dualgas na mbord oideachais agus leabharlainne socruithe oiriúnacha a dhéanamh do pháistí le riachtanais speisialta oideachais i scoileanna a fhaigheann deontas.

Mr B McCrea: I am somewhat weary and disappointed after that response. Rarely have I seen such a clear example of defeat ripped from the jaws of victory. We are debating a cross-party motion. Everyone agreed that it is a very worthy cause. This is incredible.

Mr Storey: It is normal.

Mr B McCrea: I think that it is abnormal. I will outline the situation, just to record the support of the House. I commend Mr Dominic Bradley for proposing the motion with the support of other Members who are present. He provided a very good outline of the benefits of conductive education, and how the school started.

I was very pleased to hear from Francie Molloy, with whom I have had the pleasure of discussing this situation. He pointed out that the school needs only £200,000. He asked —quite reasonably— whether it would be a good idea to let parents know that that educational facility was available, and, if so, why could it not have modest funding.

Mr George Savage, who has been involved in the project for more than 15 years —

Mr Savage: I have been involved for 18 years.

Mr B McCrea: Yes, 18 years. He mentioned the absence of red tape. My colleague the Member for Lagan Valley Mr Trevor Lunn made an excellent point in developing that issue. He mentioned that, as far as he is aware, 900 people require some sort of assistance. It is not as though we have to find people to fill the school.

As he also said, one could not fail to be moved by the plight of the people. I was moved by those children — they were an inspiration — and my heart went out to their parents. Members talked about Daniel Murphy, Kevin O'Donnell and other children.

Lord Morrow mentioned that, as a local man, he knows about the school. He asked why the Minister was so reluctant to embrace the cross-party delegation. I can accept that, perhaps, there was some confusion about who would be there. However, if she was prepared to meet six people, she might as well have met 12 people. We were not there to be anything other than friendly and supportive, and to say that we thought that the school was a good idea.

My colleague Ken Robinson made a strong point about our duty to develop centres of excellence. To build on another well-made point, systems are not an end in themselves. No matter what their legislative basis — no matter what Orders dictate or what direction is given — systems should not prevent a child from receiving the very best support. The Minister said that the child should be at the centre.

Mr Storey: At the centre of what?

Mr B McCrea: Exactly. Where is the equality in this? The Minister said that we must not become rule-bound in this matter. She is making a fundamental mistake.

Mr Molloy: If the Assembly is to mean anything to the people of this area, surely it must change legislation that is wrong and make it fit our circumstances?

Mr B McCrea: I accept that point absolutely. I was about to talk about that. If Orders that were made by direct rule Ministers, or previous Administrations, are not right, surely the Minister is obliged to bring new legislation to the House. That is entirely the responsibility of the Minister and the Department of Education. Judging by what I have heard today, I can assure her that she would have the wholehearted support of most people. The tail should not be wagging the dog. It is not up to the education and library boards to tell the Assembly what to do; it is up to the Assembly to tell them. That is the point. I am really fed up of hearing, "We seem to have some politicians around, but let us ignore them and carry on." We must sort out this issue.

I valued Mary Bradley's contribution — as I always do. She talked about her experience in the north-west and what conductive education means to her and the people whom she encounters. Those are the sorts of good-news stories that we want to hear.

Mervin Storey finished his contribution with a pertinent question about why the education and library boards are not referring children to the Buddy Bear School. If health is an issue, why is it not being dealt with? Is there a directive? Is there a vacuum in policy, or is there a policy that is dead set against the school? Whatever the situation —

Mr Storey: The House has once again seen the Minister try the Pontius Pilate exercise, in which she is now an expert, of washing her hands of all responsibility.

We have seen all that before. She is blaming the education and library boards, but she also referred to the fact that there were circumstances in which the education and library boards could make referrals.

5.15 pm

Therefore, it is not just about the inadequacies of the legislation: this is a case of where there is a will, there is a way. Members should remember that the Minister said that there were only three pupils in the school. If I am not mistaken, this Minister of Education, and her predecessor, had no difficulty in funding smaller schools in another sector — but perhaps the Minister operates only partial equality.

Mr B McCrea: I welcome the intervention, but in two parts. The real questions are: why do we have a Minister of Education and what is his or her role? Does the Minister of Education merely open schools, accept credit when good things happen and pass the buck when bad things happen? Surely, the role is bigger than that; it is to provide leadership and direction. In previous statements on different issues, the Minister challenged Members to provide vision, use imagination and show some compassion. I heard none of that from her today.

This is a small matter of £200,000 for a very worthy cause. If there are problems about how to deal with that, the Assembly, the Minister and her Department need to — and I am sure that the phrase is not unparliamentary — get the finger out and get things sorted.

The Assembly is the sovereign body. I am telling the Minister — as politely as possible — that her response is not satisfactory and will not be accepted. Her Department and her officials need to find a way of solving this particular problem. Children with cerebral palsy, their families, and the people of Northern Ireland are looking to her to provide solutions. If she cannot do that, we have a serious problem.

Equality, child-centred education, speaking in Irish — none of those things present a problem for me. However, there is a danger when people use language that is divisive. There is no need to be divisive on this subject: it is picking a fight where no fight is called for. I am told that it is bad manners to use language that puts people ill at ease. Whereas I absolutely respect the Minister's right to use the language for part of her speech, it is a calculated act, which does not help.

Mrs M Bradley: Throughout the debates on the Programme for Government, Members heard that Ministers would be acting for the sake of our children, for the good of our children, and would be providing a quality of life for the children who are our future. Those children face an uncertain future.

It is not good enough that we, as elected representatives, have to tell parents that we are sorry, but we

are unable to help their paraplegic children. No one, except the mother who has such a child, knows how that feels.

Mr B McCrea: I could not agree more with the Member. Mary Bradley has shown more eloquence than I could. I conclude on that point.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly supports conductive education and commends the Buddy Bear School, Dungannon, to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Minister of Education for financial support and assistance.

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In an earlier debate today, mention was made by several Members that a Minister — Mr Conor Murphy — had met with the IRA regarding the brutal murder of Paul Quinn. The Assembly has a ministerial code and Pledge of Office in place, and the latter includes a pledge to support the police, the courts and the rule of law. Given that this Minister, we believe, has met with an outlawed, illegal, terrorist organisation, which is in direct opposition to the legitimate security forces of the state, that the Minister in question knows that to be the case, and that he knew it to be the case before he went to meet with them, and that he went to discuss with that illegal, terrorist organisation its possible involvement in that brutal murder, I ask you, Mr Deputy Speaker, either for a ruling on the possible breach of the ministerial code and Pledge of Office, or that you take the matter to the Speaker as a matter of urgency, so that a full report on it can be made to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Storey's remarks have been noted, and I have no doubt that the Speaker will report back to the House as appropriate.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Health Provision in Larne

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic for debate will have 15 minutes in which to speak; all other Members who wish to speak will have approximately five minutes.

Mr Ross: I am pleased that the Adjournment debate has been secured, and I thank the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his attendance.

I do not intend to speak for my full 15 minutes, because it is important that all Members who wish to speak are afforded the opportunity to do so. I am also conscious that enough time must be left for the Minister to reply to some of the points that will be raised.

5.30 pm

It is pleasing that all six MLAs who represent East Antrim are able to work together on the issues such as public transport and, in this case, health provision, which affect everyone in the constituency. It is important that we work together for the benefit of our constituents. That point is highlighted by the fact that all three parties that represent East Antrim in the Assembly proposed similar subjects for debate. A series of meetings on the matter has been held, involving members of the public, clergymen, GPs, hospital staff, councillors, the MLAs and the MP for the area. I have written to the Minister about the issue, and I am sure that other Members from East Antrim have done likewise. Indeed, I know from written correspondence that since the Minister took office in May, he has had some 64 representations from various individuals and groups about Inver House and health provision in Larne.

I am sure that the other constituency Members have also been inundated with letters, emails and phone calls from members of the public in East Antrim who are anxious about the future of Inver House and about medical care there. I have received hundreds of pieces of correspondence in the two offices that I use. It is a very important issue, not only to us as representatives, but to the people whom we represent. That is highlighted by the fact that a meeting has been arranged for next week with the Minister, and another has been arranged with the trust for the beginning of March.

The issue of adequate health provision for Larne has been ongoing for some time, and I know that my predecessor, the late George Dawson, was also involved

in the matter. We do not have a romantic notion of Inver House; we have a genuine concern about the healthcare that is available in Larne. Larne is one of the biggest towns in Northern Ireland, with a population of over 30,000. It is a growing town that every year attracts more and more people, especially given the new developments that are being built on its fringes.

On average, Larne also has a higher elderly population than anywhere else in the Province. The most recent figures show that, at 20%, the proportion of over 60s is the highest. It also has the highest mortality rate, and it has a lone-pensioner-household rate of almost 14%. Larne is over 20 miles from the nearest acute hospital, which is in Antrim. People who live in Carnlough, in the north of the constituency, must travel some 35 miles, or for over an hour, to get to Antrim Hospital. Larne is the only town that is covered by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust that is more than 10 miles from the nearest acute hospital.

As a town with a major port, it also has a sizeable transient population, adding additional pressure to local services above and beyond that which should be expected for a town of a similar population. Much of the current road infrastructure is insufficient to cope with the frequency of traffic, particularly given the heavy ferry traffic, freight traffic and increasing numbers of people who travel on the route from Moira to Larne in order to bypass the Westlink.

Constituents must go to Whiteabbey Hospital or Antrim Area Hospital, but the public transport to take them there is limited. That has an impact on visitors, particularly elderly people, who may not have access to their own cars. I have spoken to elderly people whose loved ones are in hospital in Antrim, and they cannot visit them as much as they wish because the public transport is poor. They have particular problems travelling on Sundays, and they cannot afford to travel in taxis.

People in Larne do not want, or expect, any more than any other area of Northern Ireland. They simply want equity of health provision. They want a higher-quality service in which patients are treated with dignity and respect and are not institutionalised. Since Moyle Hospital was closed over a decade ago, health provision has not been as good as it is in other towns in Northern Ireland. If Inver House were also closed, the population of Larne would be further marginalised.

It is extremely frustrating for my constituents to hear of hospital facilities being upgraded or enhanced, as is the case in Whiteabbey or Magherafelt, when that is not happening in Larne, despite the many valid reasons for doing so.

Questions must be answered about palliative care, as in recent years there has been a need for palliative care facilities in Larne. Home-care packages are fine

for those who have someone at home who is capable of looking after them, but that is simply not an option for many elderly constituents. Larne has a high proportion of elderly people who need a facility nearby, and that is why Inver House is so important. It is a local facility that is held in high regard by local people. The expertise in Inver House cannot be provided in ordinary nursing homes, nor is it expected to be. Palliative care is a specialist medical discipline that requires specialist skills and training. Inver House has also built up a reputation for providing rehabilitation for patients who have been released from hospital but who are too frail to return home.

It is worth pointing out the volume of correspondence that our constituency offices received on the proposed closure of Inver House. Some people have written that their elderly relatives felt more comfortable in Inver House than in hospital in Belfast, because they felt closer to friends, family and their community roots. Others wrote about the exceptional nursing and cleanliness at Inver House. Those letters and emails did not just come from local people — I received a letter from a lady in Harrogate whose father had been nursed in Inver House in recent years. In fact, Inver House is the definition of care in the community. It is, therefore, disappointing that the Northern Health and Social Services Board seems to be following a policy of reducing the number of beds in Inver House, irrespective of demand or of the views of the local community. I know that the Minister is reluctant to engage in matters directly relating to Inver House, but I would like to know why beds were removed when the consultation was ongoing.

I am taking note of the length of time that I have spoken, as I would like all Members who wish to speak to have an opportunity to do so. I have outlined some of the reasons that people in Larne feel that they do not have adequate healthcare. Although I do not want to go into too much detail on matters that the Minister will be reluctant to address today, I hope that he understands the importance of Inver House to the people of Larne and East Antrim. I would like a fundamental review of health services and provision in the area, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments at the end of the debate.

Mr Beggs: I congratulate Mr Ross for securing the debate. I, too, proposed a similar topic for debate several weeks before him, but clearly he has more allies on the Business Committee than I do.

I am pleased that this important topic is being debated. I am also pleased that the Health Minister has agreed to meet all the Members from East Antrim on this important issue. Health provision and the future of Inver House are of immense importance to the people of Larne. The issue raises great passion and emotion, as was demonstrated at the public consultation meeting

that I attended in the Highways Hotel in the latter part of 2006.

That meeting was part of the consultation process on the Northern Health and Social Services Board's document, with the less-than-catchy title of 'Consultation on a policy of improvement in health and social services to support the replacement of Braid Valley Hospital, Ballymena, and Inver House, Larne, with new high quality services and facilities in Ballymena and Larne'. No one at that packed meeting was in any doubt about the complete lack of public confidence in the board's proposals. That lack of confidence has its origins in the downgrading of the Moyle Hospital some 15 years ago.

There is a strong local perception that health officials made promises to the people of Larne regarding alternative hospital and community care provision that have not been kept. Many people are adamant that promises that were made about the provision of a new cottage hospital or minor injuries unit in Larne have not been delivered. Acute services, including the accident and emergency and maternity units at the Moyle Hospital, were removed in 1994. The new Antrim Area Hospital 22 miles away was said to be the answer to all our health needs.

Wards one and two of Inver House contain the last remaining National Health Service beds in Larne and, indeed, in the East Antrim constituency. Inver House provides 43 beds, a small palliative care unit and other beds for rehabilitation and support. My family has reason to be thankful for the care and attention that the staff in Inver House have given in recent years, particularly in the palliative care unit.

Increased specialisation has caused medical practices to change. I accept that modern acute hospitals cannot be built in every town, but in other areas in which acute services have been removed, new services and facilities have been provided as replacements. Significant investment has been earmarked for the new local hospital in Omagh and the Downe Hospital. The people of Larne, therefore, are asking why they are not receiving similar investment.

Only two constituencies in Northern Ireland do not have an acute hospital, a minor injuries unit or a primary health and care centre — North Antrim and East Antrim. Funding for a Ballymena health and care centre has been promised in the strategic investment plan, so East Antrim will be the only area in which there is no investment in local health facilities. Will the Minister address that underinvestment by lobbying for further funding from the capital realisation proposals, or from other funding from the Minister of Finance and Personnel?

The Northern Health and Social Services Board area has been historically underfunded, and it has a higher

proportion of elderly patients than other board areas. However, after four years, the fourth capitation formula review has yet to be implemented fully. Some £8·4 million annually is overdue to people in the Northern Board area, and that money could help to deliver additional services to the people of Larne. When will we receive our fair proportion of funding?

The consultation document held out the prospect of new purpose-built primary-care facilities, but that hope has been removed. There is a promise of a new health and care centre in Larne, a new rehabilitation ward in Whiteabbey and a new specialist palliative-care unit in Antrim Area Hospital. However, none of those has been budgeted for. An independent review of health provision in Larne is required.

I contend that insufficient public support exists in the Larne borough for the board's proposal. There is an ongoing need for quality local palliative care so that families and friends can visit their loved ones frequently at sensitive times. There is a widespread belief that Inver House is being closed by stealth, because patients who are in the acute hospital are being offered community-care packages.

Local GPs and clergy have expressed their concern at the proposals for Larne. I urge the Minister, the health board and the health trust to consider Inver House as a palliative care and rehabilitation centre that will replace the capital facilities that have not been delivered in their plan. In future, I want to see a health and care centre that has a GP-led palliative-care and rehabilitation ward, in which people can be treated locally. The people of East Antrim deserve the health services that have been provided elsewhere, and those inequalities must be addressed.

Mr Neeson: I welcome the opportunity to debate this important issue. I also tabled a similar topic for debate, but I am happy that the opportunity has been provided to debate health provision in Larne. This Adjournment debate shows, once again, that the six elected MLAs for a constituency can come together when an important issue arises. We have come together in the past to deal with important constituency issues.

The uncertain future of Inver House was the catalyst for this debate. In recent years, we have seen the erosion of health services throughout Larne and the rest of East Antrim. It is not only the people in Larne who benefit from the services that Inver House offers but the rest of East Antrim and beyond.

Moyle Hospital in Larne was closed, despite elected representatives' strong intervention. Larne Borough Council and the local community are making huge efforts to prevent the closure of Inver House. It would be helpful were the Minister to outline the possible timescale for the development of the new health and care centre in Larne. Roy Beggs has mentioned that, but that develop-

ment would be an indication of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's commitment to the Larne area. The issue may become clearer when the six East Antrim MLAs meet the Minister next week. We shall approach him with a united voice.

We must also remember the responsibility that lies with the Northern Health and Social Services Board and the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. It is time for them to wake up to the health needs of people in Larne and the surrounding areas.

Furthermore, I share many people's concerns about problems with the Ambulance Service in the Larne area, particularly for those who live in Glenarm and Carnlough. However, I congratulate the people in Island Magee who have been trained to provide local community help for those with cardiac problems.

Although Inver House has been the focus of attention, it is important that other health issues relevant to Larne and the whole of East Antrim are addressed. Hopefully, the Minister will be able to provide some answers when we meet him next week.

Mr S Wilson: I did not table a topic for the Adjournment debate before, after or at the same time as my colleague; however, I am happy to tag onto the subject he tabled for tonight and discuss some of the health issues in East Antrim.

I will not spend too much time on the matter as it has been well aired by the previous three Members who spoke, but I will re-emphasise the great concern and anger that is felt by people in the Larne area about the historical running down of the Moyle Hospital and the current threat to Inver House.

Although I am always happy to engage in a bit of Minister bashing, it would be unfair to echo the criticisms that have been levelled at him by some Larne councillors — some of whom are from his own party — who seem to think that the Inver House decision rests in his hands. If he were to blame, I would blame him with relish. However, by the end of the debate, I want the Minister to assure Members that, when the trust eventually decides what it wishes to do in Larne and brings those proposals to him, he will not accept any that do not include the provision of palliative and rehabilitation beds either in Inver House, in a new medical centre attached to it, or in some other place. Given the points made by other Members and that so many promises have been broken in the past, it is important that such provision is maintained.

I wish to highlight too the general lack of capital investment planned for East Antrim. There is a need for a medical centre in Larne, which must include, or at least service, some of the beds described by other Members. In addition, there is a great opportunity to provide services on the Taylor's Avenue site in Carrickfergus, which would fit totally with the plan to

bring a range of services, such as fire, ambulance, police and medical services, together on a single site. Such economies of scale would produce long-term savings. The site is there, and the council, the football club and the Health Service are willing to work together. Therefore, although such a development is not in the next three-year investment plan, if money becomes available through capital realisation, I hope that the Minister will give a commitment to prioritise that scheme.

There are grave concerns also about inconsistencies in the Newtownabbey part of the constituency. For example, if I were injured and taken by ambulance to Whiteabbey Hospital, the casualty department could not accept me and would insist that I was driven to the Belfast City Hospital. However, if the ambulance driver dropped me at the gate and told me to walk in, the hospital would deal with me. Either we have an accident and emergency service for the increasing population of the Newtownabbey area or we do not.

Recently, the doctors on night duty in the east Antrim area have been shifted from Whiteabbey to Antrim, adding another 20 minutes to their journey time if there is a call-out in east Antrim. As other Members have said, there is no logic in that decision, other than a seeming desire to increasingly centralise services in some of the major hospitals in the area. I ask the Minister to look into that issue.

There is a fear — not simply based on perception, but fact — that, per head, there is less expenditure in the east Antrim area on the Health Service than in any other part of Northern Ireland. An equality assessment and review of spending must be carried out. I do not know whether that is the responsibility of the Minister or of the local trust. However, if people are to be assured that they are being treated equally, that issue must be addressed.

Mr K Robinson: I am grateful to Sammy Wilson because he has covered so many points that the meeting with the Minister could be called off. However, I am grateful to my East Antrim colleagues who have continually sought to see this issue raised in an Adjournment debate. Today, at last, we have been successful in bringing the issue of health provision in the Larne area before the Assembly, and specifically highlighting the role of Inver House.

There is no doubt, judging by the size of my mailbag, that the people of Larne hold Inver House in the highest esteem. Its staff, quality of care and high standards of cleanliness have received universal praise. I wish to make it crystal clear that I entirely share those sentiments. I also wish to place on record that, during Question Time to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on 20 January, I sought to encourage Mr McGimpsey to transfer those patients

from Antrim Area Hospital who were awaiting their care packages and who were completely unaffected by either MRSA or clostridium difficile into vacant and available beds at Inver House. Such patients would have been reassured that they would not become embroiled in the hospital-acquired infection problems that were present in the Antrim area at that time. The twin advantage of such a move would have been to reduce the pressure and concerns at Antrim Area Hospital, while ensuring that the unaffected patients awaiting discharge would benefit from the high standards of hygiene that pertain, but are sadly underused, at Inver House.

The central thrust of this debate is to make the Minister and the Northern Health and Social Care Trust and its board aware of the massive and widespread distrust that surrounds the future of health provision in the Larne area and, as Sammy Wilson said, right across East Antrim — but specifically at Inver House. Previous contributors from all parties who represent East Antrim have given details of the issues that the Minister will note. I hope that he will also note that all six MLAs from East Antrim are speaking with one voice on this matter. We demand that any previous promises or undertakings that were given by officials be honoured.

Such is the breakdown of trust in respect of this issue that people are demanding an independent review into the level of health provision in the Larne area. Two mayors of the borough have written to the Minister in order to voice those concerns. Along with my Assembly colleagues, I attended a meeting in the council chamber in Larne to hear the opinions of councillors, doctors, clergy, health staff and others, all of whom want to have a clear understanding of the future health plans for the Larne area.

As this issue drags on, facts are becoming blurred by other considerations and fears. The perception in Larne is that the local trust, its board and the Department are encouraging and allowing Inver House to be phased out by stealth. That situation must be addressed urgently. In medical terms, the boil must be lanced.

The demand for an independent review is a symptom of the deep distrust that is felt by the population at large. Larne needs to know that it is getting, and will get, a fair share of health provision and investment. It needs to know that the decline in health provision in the district is at last over, and to see parity of healthcare and health resources. It needs to see a bright future and the provision of services that respect its unique geographical location. I certainly support that demand.

5.45 pm

Mr Hilditch: I, too, thank Mr Ross for securing this debate today, which provides an important opportunity to consider the need for improvement in health

services in the Larne area in particular, and in East Antrim in general.

As has already been stated, the Moyle Hospital in Larne closed almost 15 years ago, and now the threat of closure hangs over Inver House, which, at present, is Larne's only provider of rehabilitative and palliative care. Larne's nearest accident and emergency base is at Antrim Area Hospital, and the Ambulance Service has experienced cutback after cutback, with the result that, at times, one ambulance is expected to cover three towns. I hear many complaints from constituents about ambulance response times.

On 1 April, the area boards may be abolished and could well be replaced by a new health and social services authority. There may also be five local commissioning groups (LCGs), and the fear is that Larne would fall under the north-eastern LCG, which would include Ballymena, Ballymoney, Moyle and Coleraine. As we know, the Causeway Hospital in Coleraine has a very small catchment area. There is always a fear that if it is allowed to stay open, resources and funding may be cut from services in towns such as Larne.

The services at Whiteabbey Hospital have been cut over the years, and it has been under threat of closure for some time. There is a strong possibility that, under the new northern LCG, it might receive even less funding and services might be removed completely. There is further concern that Inver House nursing home faces the threat of closure. I understand that the Minister has assured us that no decision has yet been reached, but the fact remains that the number of beds has been reduced in recent months. If it closes, people from Larne town — which has a population of 30,000 — will have to travel to Antrim Area Hospital, which, as other Members have pointed out, is 22 miles away. Furthermore, there is practically no form of public transport to that hospital. That will make it virtually impossible for the elderly to access the hospital.

The experience of past years has demonstrated that there is undoubtedly a need for inpatient palliative care facilities in the Larne area. Although I recognise that care-support packages for the terminally ill at home can be most helpful, they are packages of support and do not provide for those situations wherein family members are capable of taking the lead role themselves. Sammy Wilson highlighted the uncertainty of the situation in Carrickfergus, and there is a real fear that the constituency will soon be stripped of all healthcare facilities.

The Minister announced that, over the next three years, the budget will increase from £145 million to £300 million. I hope that that extra money will lead to an improvement in basic healthcare services, and that we can add years to people's lives, prevent disease and

eradicate the inequalities that cause ill-health. There seems to be constant cutbacks in accident and emergency units, healthcare centres and Ambulance Service provision, yet the Department has told us that it is committed to putting patients first. How can patients' needs come first when they have to travel over 20 miles to reach the nearest hospital?

A local doctor from the Inver surgery recently informed me that, three years ago, three on-call doctors covered the area from Glenarm to Fortwilliam, but now there is only one. How can one doctor possibly cover that vast area? We must ask why services are being cut back and patients' lives put at risk.

I welcome the Minister's statement yesterday on the reorganisation of the health and social care structures, and I ask that his Department make the provision of a high-quality healthcare service across Northern Ireland its top priority. I further ask the Department to carry out a review of the healthcare facilities and resources in Larne town and East Antrim in general. I ask all Members and Departments to support that request.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I am committed to the continued provision of high-quality health and social care services for the Larne area, as I am committed to the provision of such services for those who live elsewhere in Northern Ireland. We must have health services that deliver the best treatment and care, both in hospitals, when needed, and, increasingly, in local communities and in people's own homes. The way in which our health services are delivered is changing, and must change, if we are to meet the expectations of the public and the challenges faced by a growing elderly population.

In recognition of the growing number of older people in our communities, an additional £35 million will be invested over the next three years in providing more community-care support.

Although there will always be a need for residential and nursing-home care, as well as hospital care, my Department's focus is increasingly aimed at providing the support that older people need to continue to live independently in their own homes.

In addition to that support, significant additional resources will also be made available over the next three years to provide the additional community-based nursing and technological support that is needed to ensure that the most vulnerable elderly people with chronic conditions are not admitted unnecessarily to hospital.

To help to deliver my goal of a world-class Health Service, investment in facilities and the construction of modern, state-of-the-art buildings is required. Too many of our hospitals and other facilities are old, rundown and costly to maintain. A capital programme has been

implemented to progress the construction and redevelopment of a number of hospitals. We also have a major programme to construct new health and care centres, which will act as one-stop health centres and provide care that is tailored to meet the needs of local communities.

However, in light of the need to find 3% efficiency savings and meet challenging targets, the Health Service must become more effective at delivering services, and every penny must be spent wisely. Therefore, it is also important that our health facilities are focused on developing rapid, accessible and tailored care to meet the needs of the communities that they serve.

I will take a few minutes to discuss the particular issues about service provision in the Larne area. I have received many letters from concerned members of the community about proposals that would change the services provided at Inver House. Having heard local people's concerns, I am fully aware of the desire for the continuation of local services that have been in place for many years.

The Northern Health and Social Services Board has issued for consultation its proposals for improving health and social care services in the Larne and Ballymena areas. That consultation process is continuing, although no final decision has been taken by the board. I do not want to interfere with the public consultation process; therefore, Members will understand that I am not in a position to discuss in detail the ongoing work of the board.

However, I reassure Members that I will examine carefully the board's proposals on the way forward when I receive them in April. I want to make it clear that no decisions will be taken without my approval. When I receive the board's final proposals, I will be content to meet the groups that have concerns. As has been said, I will also be meeting the six MLAs from East Antrim to discuss health service provision in that area.

I encourage anyone who has concerns or who wishes to voice an opinion — whether it is members of the public, local politicians or other key stakeholders — to respond to the consultation and make his or her views known.

Mr S Wilson: I thank the Minister for giving way. I understand the Minister's reticence about getting involved in the detail of the proposals. Like other Members, I am sure that all the letters that he has received have indicated that the main concern is the provision of beds for people who are receiving palliative care and rehabilitation. Will the Minister at least assure Members that he will ensure that any proposals retain some beds in the Larne area?

Mr McGimpsey: As I understand it, the proposed model of care for the area includes a unit with eight beds for people who are convalescing and four beds for those receiving palliative care. As I said, when the

consultation process is completed, I am happy to discuss the proposals with concerned groups, Members — including Mr Wilson — and anyone else. I have views on what I think needs to be provided in the Larne and Carrickfergus areas. I encourage anyone with a concern to voice his or her opinion.

I can inform Members that the Northern Board has proposed that the services that are currently provided in Moyle Hospital, Braid Valley Hospital and in Carrickfergus will be redesigned to deliver a new and improved model of care, part of which will be provided from new health and care centres.

I am aware that a model was developed by a focus group that comprised members of the Northern Board, the Northern Trust and local GPs. It was set up specifically to identify a suitable model for the provision of rehabilitation and palliative-care services.

Regardless of the outcome of the Northern Board's proposals, I want the services that people need to be provided in the East Antrim area.

Let me provide a picture of how services may look. A key element will involve providing health and care centres and an extensive range of treatment and care services. The northern area business case identified five priority projects in the first phase of developing health and care centres: Ballymena, Carrickfergus, Ballycastle, Coleraine, and Larne. The Northern Health and Social Services Board and the Northern Health and Social Care Trust decided that the greatest service need is in Ballymena, so that scheme is the first to be progressed for approval; the remaining four will be progressed as soon as funding becomes available.

I understand that draft proposals are being examined to develop a health and care centre for Carrickfergus, which would provide accommodation for local GPs and several multi-disciplinary health teams. Mr Wilson referred to that, and a few months ago I had an on-site meeting with David Hilditch in pursuit of that scheme. A key element of the plans is the potential to integrate health and care facilities with the local council's plans for the delivery of leisure services. The plans will also take account of future services for the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, and, potentially, the coastguard service. I believe that the plans can create an exciting new healthcare village for the borough of Carrickfergus.

There are plans to develop a new health and care centre that will provide integrated primary care services for the community of Larne, as well as plans for a new fire and rescue station in the town. The community also needs access to locally provided palliative care and rehabilitation services, and I know that the board and the trust are examining proposals to ensure that that happens.

It is important that those who need acute services can continue to access an acute hospital within a reasonable time. Indeed, Members can take comfort from the fact that travel time from Larne to Whiteabbey Hospital and Antrim Area Hospital is under 30 minutes; from Larne to the Mater Hospital it is 32 minutes; and from Larne to the Royal group of hospitals it is 34 minutes. Although I see the Member screwing his eyes up, I think —

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McGimpsey: May I just finish the point? Members need to take account of the fact that those times are calculated on the basis of travelling in an ambulance with a blue light.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister appreciate that the most northern part of the East Antrim constituency — Carnlough — is approximately one hour from an acute hospital. We are not just talking about the town of Larne, but the entire hinterland. Indeed, there are other areas in the Glens where travel times are even longer.

Mr McGimpsey: I am aware that Mr Beggs's constituency extends beyond Larne. The rule is that patients should be able to reach an acute hospital from wherever they live within the golden hour. That is why hospitals are sited where they are, and that is a rule that we endeavour to ensure is always followed. We developed the first responder service to allow more inaccessible communities to get help immediately, before an ambulance arrives. As I understand it, that also applies in Island Magee.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McGimpsey: Why not? *[Laughter.]*

Mr K Robinson: The Minister said that “we” provided the first responder service. May I correct him? The public in Island Magee provided that service. One of your predecessors in the role of Minister of Health was informed of that service — she thought that it was a wonderful idea, but there was a distinct silence when we asked her or the Northern Health and Social Services Board for funding.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank Mr Robinson for that information. When I said “we” I was not referring to the royal we; I understand “we” as referring to society as well. The first responder service is one that the Ambulance Service uses.

In relation to —

Mr Neeson: So does the Queen.

Mr McGimpsey: Yes. *[Laughter.]* Of course, all the plans are subject to the availability of capital funding, and the Department of Health's bid for capital was considerably reduced in the recent Budget.

I said that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has enough revenue to cover the

capital for building; however, the capital is severely restricted. Therefore, the plans of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust and the Northern Health and Social Services Board are constrained by those restrictions on capital — as is the case in other areas.

6.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can the Minister bring his remarks to a close?

Mr McGimpsey: Difficult decisions need to be made in order to meet challenging efficiency-savings targets. It is clear that the Health Service must change if it is to be world-class. However, there will only be change if it is change for the better. I look forward to working with the Members for East Antrim and discussing the health needs of the people of the area. That will ensure that those people — and the people in the rest of Northern Ireland — receive the Health Service that they require and merit.

Adjourned at 6.01 pm.

Committee Stages

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

7 February 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
Mr Fra McCann
Mrs Claire McGill
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Alban Maginness

Witnesses:

Ms Jennifer Ebbage	}	Cleaver Fulton Rankin Solicitors
Mr Alastair Rankin		
Ms Joy Scott		

The Chairperson (Mr Campbell): Good morning. I welcome Ms Jennifer Ebbage, Ms Joy Scott, and Mr Alastair Rankin from Cleaver Fulton Rankin Solicitors to the Committee. I think that you were present when I gave my now customary warning to turn off mobile phones because the session is being recorded. Mr Rankin, if you begin, your colleagues can make their contributions after you. At the conclusion of your presentation the Committee will ask questions.

Mr Alastair Rankin (Cleaver Fulton Rankin Solicitors): Thank you for inviting us to submit evidence. We are one of the largest firms of solicitors in Northern Ireland, and we act for many national and local charities that come under every category in the Charities Bill. We have a charity unit, which is cross-disciplinary because there are various aspects to charity law; I specialise in trusts, my partner Jenny Ebbage specialises in company work, and Joy Scott specialises in property work. However, we all deal with charities where those disciplines come together.

As head of the charity unit, Jenny will take the Committee through our presentation.

Ms Jennifer Ebbage (Cleaver Fulton Rankin Solicitors): I thank the Committee for the invitation to give evidence. Since it was established in 1893, our firm has kept an eye on the development of charity law here — some of our clients have been with us for more than 100 years.

The Chairperson: Good grief — what age are they?

Ms Ebbage: I see one of them at the back of the room.

The Chairperson: He is remarkably fresh for his age.

Ms Ebbage: I will give Bryson Charitable Group a plug.

We engaged in the consultation process and have produced a response to the draft Charities (Northern Ireland) Order 2007. We are practitioners of law and have approached the Bill from an operational point of view to understand how the Bill will affect our clients and determine the advice that we give them. I will focus on practical points that we feel must be clarified, and I hope that the Committee finds our evidence useful.

In parts 1, 4 and 14 of the Bill the theme is registration of charities. Northern Ireland is unique in aspiring to register every charity that is involved here so that there is clarity and transparency and a good idea of the size and structure of the sector. The definition of a charity is set out in the Bill as a body or institution that is: “established for charitable purposes only” and is subject to the control of our High Court. There is a two-fold test for a purpose to be classed as charitable: it must satisfy one of the 12 purposes set out in clause 2 and pass the “public benefit” test set out in clause 3. Clause 16 makes it clear that if an organisation meets those requirements it must register as a charity.

The draft Order stated that every charity established in Northern Ireland or that operates here must be registered, which is different from the provisions of the Bill. At first, I did not see the difference, but it becomes clear in part 14 and clause 167 of the Bill, which had not been in the draft Order; it deals with charities that are from the Republic of Ireland, England or Wales, for example, but which operate for charitable purposes in Northern Ireland.

Mrs McGill: I am sorry to interrupt, but it would be helpful if you indicated the page in your submission that you are referring to.

Ms Ebbage: I hope that everyone has a copy of the submissions; I thought that they may help members to keep pace with my presentation.

The point that I am making about non-Northern Ireland charities is that clause 167, which refers to

“section 167 institutions”, states that the Department “may” require the commission to keep a register. However, there is no requirement for those bodies to register, even though it is essential that we have clarity and transparency about who is carrying out charitable works in Northern Ireland. One of my recommendations is that we have a compulsory register of section 167 institutions.

I have also recommended that the term “operates” be clearly defined. Does it mean that one engages in fund-raising? Does it mean, for example, that one comes across from Dundalk to Newry one Saturday a year and raises funds by rattling tins in a shopping centre? Is that what is meant by “operates”; or does it mean that one has premises here, employs staff here and provides services here? It would be useful if the Bill clarified what is meant by “operates”. Many of Cleaver Fulton Rankin’s clients are large national organisations that have a branch, office or base here. We also have clients who are based in Northern Ireland and who operate in the Republic of Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales and elsewhere.

Clause 167(3) requires trustees of section 167 institutions to prepare a statement of their Northern Ireland operations and activities and a financial statement. However, it simply requires them to prepare those documents; they could prepare them and put them in a drawer. They should be required to submit such documents to the commission so that they can be made available for public inspection; that way, we would know what those bodies are doing in our jurisdiction.

Under company law, if a company that has been registered in England establishes a place of business in Northern Ireland, it has to register with our companies registry. That is a more limited formal registration than that required for English incorporation. Nevertheless, it provides the basic information on accounts, the body’s constitution, what it does, and the names of its directors. Perhaps a similar registration would be appropriate for a body that is recognised and registered as a charity elsewhere. That might provide a practical solution. I hope that I have explained the matter clearly.

I will now turn to charitable purposes and tax exemptions, which is not, strictly speaking, in the Bill, although the Bill will have implications for it.

At present, if a Northern Ireland charity wants tax exemptions, it makes an application to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs in Bootle (HMRC). HMRC considers whether, for tax purposes, a body is a charity — that is, whether a body or trust has been established for charitable purposes only. If a body is eligible, it gets all the tax breaks, which is one of the reasons that people set up charities. We want to ensure that, in considering the definition of charitable purposes when assessing a tax application, HM Revenue and

Customs is mindful that there are differences in the charitable purposes definitions in the three main jurisdictions in the UK. For example, the definition “advancement of peace and community relations” is exclusive to Northern Ireland’s legislation. Promotion of the efficiency of the armed forces, and so forth, is not included in our legislation but is in that of Scotland and England. The advancement of religion, including analogous philosophical beliefs, is in Northern Ireland’s and Scotland’s legislation but is not in that of England.

We do not want a different test to apply. We recommend that dialogue be started with HM Revenue and Customs, if that has not already been done, to ensure that each jurisdiction is assessed and that each charity — provided that it is a charity in its own jurisdiction — has the tax breaks and that one law does not take precedence over another. I hope that someone will know who the appropriate person is to take that matter forward.

Part 2 of the Bill deals with public benefit guidance. The Charity Commission for England and Wales has just produced a very detailed public benefit guidance paper, which includes a practical summary of the law. Under legislation, our commission would be required to produce guidance, but it would not be required to consult when revising the guidance. We suggest that it should be at the discretion of the commission to make minor changes to the guidance, but that it should consult on any major revision rather than being able to make changes that it believes do not require consultation. Because the proposals are so new, we are keen for charities to be involved, particularly given that a change to the public benefit guidance could result in a charity losing its status at some point. That issue must be addressed.

Part 6 of the Bill relates to taxation of a solicitor’s costs. I am sure that the Committee did not expect us to let this part slip by unnoticed. For those among us who are not familiar with what this part involves, I shall explain briefly. There is a process under the Solicitors (Northern Ireland) Order 1976 and the High Court’s jurisdiction whereby if a client is not happy with the bill that a solicitor has charged for services, he or she can challenge it. It is a balanced process that allows a solicitor to make representations. A determination is then made as to whether the fee being charged is proper and appropriate. If it is determined that it is, it must be paid.

The Chairperson: By whom?

Ms Ebbage: Do you mean who makes the assessment?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Ms Ebbage: The taxing master makes the assessment. Professional costs drawers look through a file, consider the work that has been done, and allocate

a value to it. The order for taxation comes at court level. I believe that that is correct.

Mr Rankin: The taxing master is a master of the High Court.

Ms Ebbage: Our concern about clause 52 is that it mirrors a provision of the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 1964 (Chapter 33), whereby the Department had the power to make an order for a solicitor's costs to be taxed by the taxing master. However, we believe that a provision in the Solicitors (Northern Ireland) Order 1976 has superseded that provision. The original provision might have slipped into the Charities Bill when, in fact, it may not be necessary because of that intervening legislation. It is a very complicated area, and we have spoken to a costs drawer about the matter. We are not convinced about the need for clause 52, and we are concerned that it may conflict with the processes under the Solicitors (Northern Ireland) Order 1976, particularly because the Bill does not expressly set out a right for a solicitor to be heard.

We do not profess to be experts on this subject, so we recommend that there should be consultation with an appropriate costs drawer or taxing master, if appropriate, to ensure that clause 52 does not cause confusion. I want to make it absolutely clear: there should be taxation of solicitors' costs, but we are simply not sure whether this is the right way to do it.

Part 8 deals with charity accounts, reports and returns. As the Committee knows, this provision will introduce a radical change. To date, only charities that have been companies have had to make their accounts publicly available. We are concerned about the effect that that change will have on many small charities, particularly small family trusts and charitable trusts, which, in many cases, have gross incomes of less than £100,000 a year. We are concerned that the cost of an audit, even a limited one, could be disproportionate to a charity's income. Therefore the Bill should clarify that trustees can, acting reasonably, pick an appropriate person to scrutinise their accounts. We would simply like the wording to be clarified, and we are happy to submit a suggested wording if that would be helpful.

We were also concerned about the effect of a legacy — perhaps a one-off donation — that took a charity up to the next threshold for auditing purposes. Such a donation cannot be planned for and may mean that a full audit is necessary where previously an independent examination was sufficient.

People who are involved in auditing charities have told me about the proportionately increased cost of preparing an audit as opposed to an independent examination. Therefore we recommend an exception in the case of a legacy that triggers a movement into the next threshold.

We have also been made aware, particularly by our colleagues in the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA), of an anomaly relating to small company charities. At the moment, under the Companies (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, a company charity with an income of less than £90,000 a year is exempt from audit. Certain provisions of the Companies Act 2006 — the largest piece of legislation ever to be passed by Parliament — which will come into force in April of this year will remove that exemption. However, there seems to be a gap between company law and charity law as to who will regulate small company charities. We recommend that a small company charity with an income of less than £100,000 should be subject to the same audit requirements that apply to small unincorporated charities. We note that the charity commission for Northern Ireland will be able to order an audit of a charitable company in any event under clause 103, which we welcome. However, that gap must be plugged.

I will now move on to the subject of charitable incorporated organisations (CIOs). As Alastair said at the beginning of our presentation, I am a company lawyer and most of my charity clients are companies limited by guarantee. Many of them have been asking me about charitable incorporated organisations and have aspirations to become such an organisation. We examined some practicalities around clauses 119 and 122, which relate to the ability to transfer the property of an unincorporated charity to a charitable incorporated organisation.

It seems to be the case that a small unincorporated charity or trust that possesses "designated land" — land set aside for specific purposes, such as a building left by someone who has stipulated that it should be used only as a school or a mission hall or church hall — cannot be converted into a CIO. However, I have not been able to find anything that says that it cannot be converted into a company limited by guarantee. That is strange. I have spoken to the Department about it. By and large, the same provision is in place in the equivalent English legislation, but we felt that an exception should be made or further explanation given as to why designated land has been carved out of the equation, because it stops people from using charitable incorporated organisation status in instances in which it would be more suitable than conversion to a company limited by guarantee. Where the designated land was of very low value we can use *cy-près*, but we felt that it would be useful to have an exception where the land was of minimal value and of no great use to anyone.

Designated religious status is a new provision of the Bill, which was not in the draft Order. We have spent a great deal of time examining that provision and are mindful that similar provision exists in Scotland and that there are changes afoot in England and Wales

in relation to the treatment of religious charities. I wanted to make it clear from the outset that a charity for the advancement of religion — as it will be defined in the Bill — is required to register and to submit appropriate accounts. What is missing from part 14 is that the register should contain a statement if a body has applied for and been granted designated religious charity status. That should be clear from the register. The register should also indicate whether such a designation has been withdrawn for any reason.

The Chairperson: Should the register state whether designated religious status has been withdrawn or simply the reason for its withdrawal?

Ms Ebbage: It may be sufficient simply to record the withdrawal; however, I was suggesting that one should be able to find out why status was withdrawn.

It is not a matter for me to pronounce on. However, at least the withdrawal of such status should be on the register.

I picked up on another point, although it may be only a technical, drafting matter. There is provision in clause 165(3) that allows the Department, by order, to modify any provisions of the Bill with regard to designated religious charities. A change to allow a further concession for a designated religious charity, for example, should not just require an order but should be approved by resolution of the Assembly. Perhaps it is just that the technical wording is missing, because those words are used elsewhere in the legislation. However, it is important that the Assembly have the final say on whether a change is made.

My final main comment on the substantive part of the Bill relates to mergers of charities, which are referred to at part 14. I have been involved in several charity mergers during the past year or so. In 2007, Ms Scott assisted me with one that was quite large and involved many complicated issues. Mergers of charities are difficult; particularly maintaining the ethos of different organisations, securing the buy-in of staff and volunteers, and ensuring that services are not disrupted. I welcome the Bill's provisions because they will greatly simplify the merger process, particularly with regard to one particular problem: when, for example, charity A merges with charity B and charity A receives a legacy or bequest. What do we do when a legacy pops up after charity A has disappeared? We have had to keep charity A alive for the purpose of receiving legacies and passing them on under a trust arrangement. The change proposed in clause 164 will mean that any gift that is made will automatically transfer to charity B without our having to keep charity A alive.

The only issue that we have with that is one of timing, because clause 164(2)(b) states that a gift that: "takes effect on or after the date of registration of the merger"

will pass across. We are concerned that there may be a gap between the date that the charities' merger takes place and the date that it is registered. A gift could fall through the gap. Therefore we propose an amendment to the clause that will render the gift effective from the date of transfer. I appreciate that there may be a knowledge gap unless mergers are registered quickly or are required to register within a set time — it will be up to the commission's processes to get the registration on the public register so that people can see that the legacy to charity A now goes to charity B. That is a matter of process. Our recommendation would ensure that such gifts are not lost.

Finally, I have some general comments on costs. I am aware that funding is an issue and that the Budget has just been finalised. However, we believe that the commission is so important to Northern Ireland that it must be properly resourced and that compliance with the requirements must always be affordable and proportionate, particularly bearing in mind the range of charities — from small family trusts to multinational and international bodies.

We also want to flag up possible conflict, or perception of conflict, in the commission's role both as advisor and regulator, particularly when, for example, a charity phones the commission for advice and is told that it must do X, Y and Z — which it does — only to have the other branch of the commission come down on it like a ton of bricks because it has not complied. It goes without saying that when a charity relies on advice from the commission, it should not be hauled up for complying with advice that turns out to be incorrect. I hope that that will never be the case; however, the right safeguards must be put in place so that the commission can perform both of its roles.

I noticed that in the Bill there is a suggestion that the commission be staffed through secondments from the Civil Service, and I understand the rationale behind that. However, there must also be a balance, in that staff should also be independently recruited to get people into the commission who have experience of working in the sector and who understand the issues for charities. A blend of the two would be worthwhile in order to ensure the integrity of the commission in the sector's eyes.

We also want the commission to be directly accountable to the Executive.

The commissioners will have a great deal of work to do and will have many responsibilities. Those posts need to be valued; and fully remunerating the commissioners will underline the importance and value of their role in Northern Ireland.

Thank you for bearing with me; I know that I raised many points. Despite being lawyers, we hope that our

submission was not overly technical. We are happy to take questions.

The Chairperson: It was not too technical at all; it was very helpful. Like many others who have given evidence to the Committee, you support the principles of the Bill. Ninety-nine point nine per cent of charities do tremendous work. However, there is a concern that a tiny percentage has, in the past, taken advantage of the total lack of legislation and regulation of the industry and has acquired funds from the general public under the guise of being a charity. One presumes, with the introduction of legislation and regulations, that that will be more difficult.

Are you aware of any apparent loopholes in the legislation that will enable people to get away with acquiring money illegally or will the legislation stop them?

Ms Ebbage: It is hard to know whether that will be the case. The commission will have wide powers to conduct investigations, and the sanctions that are available to it seem to have teeth. The police will deal with certain criminal matters such as fraud and deception; but the Bill will go some way to addressing those issues, although it is difficult when drafting legislation to predict every circumstance.

The media have played an important role in getting the message about unscrupulous charities to the public. Several locally produced, good high-profile television documentaries have exposed people committing fraud under the guise of charity.

The legislation will give the commission the power to make the results of its investigations public if it sees fit to do so, and that should be borne in mind.

The Chairperson: Are you reasonably content that the Bill will be tight enough to ensure — as much as is possible — that people will be prevented from acting illegally?

Ms Ebbage: It will make it much harder for them as there will be more accountability and charities will be required to produce accounts for independent audit or inspection. In producing such accounts, it will become public knowledge as to who is behind an organisation.

The Chairperson: You mentioned designated religious status. Are any of your clients — I am not interested in individuals — small religious charities that may fall just outside the criteria that entitles them to designated religious status?

Ms Ebbage: Yes.

The Chairperson: Have they made representations to you or do you have any concerns about how the Bill will affect them?

Ms Joy Scott (Cleaver Fulton Rankin Solicitors): We have had no representations from our clients as

such, but we represent several small religious organisations that will be affected; many of them have been established for a long time in Northern Ireland.

The criteria that are set out in the Bill will create difficulties for them because some of them have fewer than 1,000 members.

We have concerns about those criteria. They do not seem to create a level playing field for the smaller religious charities. The larger charities will come under the criteria and will have the freedom to govern their organisations. There are important criteria, such as the supervision of the charity over its component elements; but the Committee may need to re-examine the criteria relating to numbers and the length of time that a charity has been established. There may be other issues.

The Chairperson: The numbers issue has come up, as has the length of time that charities have been established. Will those be an issue?

Ms Scott: They will.

Mr Rankin: It may be an issue only as a result of ignorance of what is being proposed because the criteria, such as those relating to the 1,000-member designation, will simply mean that the charity commission will not have certain direct powers. The Bill does not mean that small religious charities will be at any disadvantage with regard to the Inland Revenue, for example; it simply means that if they do not operate properly, the commission has the power to investigate them. The commission will not be able to investigate the larger Churches directly, as they have internal structures. That is the difference between the two procedures.

The Chairperson: Although the smaller Churches could say that that very difference means that they are being treated differently. If the books of a Church given small religious designation are not audited properly, for instance, any anomaly will be treated in a different manner. That will always be the case whether the benchmark is 1,000 members, 500, or 50.

Mr Rankin: That is the case.

Mrs McGill: Thank you for your briefing. I am interested in the makeup of the commission. I have concerns, which I articulated earlier, that it could grow and grow. We have received information over time about the number of people that would be employed by the commission, and I note that you are keen to ensure that it would be properly resourced and staffed. How many staff would the commission employ?

Ms Ebbage: It is difficult for us to make an assessment. Having spoken to colleagues in the Charity Law Association, I know that the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) now employs more than 45 staff. We will have to see what will be needed as we go along.

The Chairperson: Do you know how many staff OSCR employed at the beginning?

Ms Ebbage: No.

The Chairperson: You said that it has a staff complement of 45 now.

Ms Ebbage: I know that it has grown. Perhaps it would be useful to speak to the charity commissions in England, Wales and Scotland to establish what roles staff play and how many are employed in each function. I am afraid that I do not know what the optimum number would be.

Ms Scott: We are entering uncharted territory in this regard because we have never had a commission before. Charities have never previously had to deal with the amount of legislation that is being introduced. The commission can be as big or as small as you wish.

If a great deal of regulation follows the introduction of the Bill, charities would need more staff to cope. I urge a little caution: charities, particularly the smaller ones, will find it difficult to cope with too many regulations, and it may cause them to breach regulations unintentionally. There may be an argument for a phased introduction of regulations and for some control over costs for that period; but we cannot say how much will be spent.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that.

Mrs McGill: You said that civil servants could be seconded. Where is that provided for in the Bill?

Ms Ebbage: Paragraph 5 of schedule 1 on page 144 states that:

“The Commission may make arrangements with the Department for persons employed in the Northern Ireland civil service to be seconded to the Commission.”

The Chairperson: There it is in black and white.

Mrs McGill: Who will the official custodian be?

Ms Ebbage: Clause 11(1) states that the custodian will act as trustee for charities and that:

“the official custodian shall be by that name a corporation sole having perpetual succession and using an official seal which shall be officially and judicially noticed.”

An individual may be designated to carry out that role, and the duties are set out in clause 11.

Mrs McGill: Could that person be outside the commission? Could they be appointed by the Attorney General?

Ms Scott: The official custodian will have a trustee role in that he or she will hold property. Charities have the option to hold property in their own name if they are a charitable company or to put the property in the name of their trustees. This clause provides another alternative by enabling charities to appoint the official custodian to hold their property. It will be for that

function alone. The charity commission will have the regulatory functions, but the custodian will look after the property.

Mr Craig: I am interested in the comments in your written submission on the designated religious status issues for smaller religious organisations. Paragraph 7.7 outlines your thoughts on that. Clause 34 is entitled “Power to suspend or remove trustees, etc. from membership of charity”. The trustee of many religious charities will be a minister, a priest, an elder or a committee member. When I realised that someone could be suspended or excluded, I pictured a Big Brother scenario whereby a Government organisation could demand the removal of an elder or a minister from a church organisation. Do you have similar fears about that provision?

Ms Ebbage: No one who is acting properly as a trustee should have any cause to fear. A balance must be struck. There is always the risk of someone setting up a Church for less than honourable purposes and perhaps influencing vulnerable or young people.

It is a comfort to legitimate organisations that anyone who set up a cult within a religious framework would be subject to the scrutiny of a commission that could remove individuals and install interim managers or trustees and exercise sanctions against someone acting improperly. When someone is operating a charity they are a trustee, and those in small organisations who do that job properly have nothing to fear from not being eligible for designated religious status.

The Chairperson: Mr Craig’s concern is about a situation when two different Churches are charities and one has designated religious status because of its size and length of time in operation; and the other does not because it is small and relatively new. However, if someone in each group acts improperly, the law will take its course in different ways. Might the smaller Church feel that the person who grievously erred in their Church was treated differently from their counterpart in the larger Church?

Ms Ebbage: There could be a difference in how the two groups were treated, but ultimately the commission has the power to withdraw designated religious charity status. If it carried out an investigation and found cause for concern, the commission could remove trustees, install an interim manager and exercise the powers that it has over non-designated religious groups.

The Chairperson: The commission cannot do that to the small groups that do not have designated religious status.

Ms Ebbage: The commission can already do that to small groups. The only benefit of a charity having designated religious status is that it removes the first challenge for the commission. Designated religious

status is not acquired because of a charity's size or how long it has been established: clause 166 sets out five criteria that must be met, including being able to show that there is already governance in the organisation. The key requirement is 166(3)(e)(i), which stipulates that a charity exercises "supervisory and disciplinary functions" and is already regulated by an established body of good reputation.

In Scotland, nine bodies have applied for — and been granted — designated religious status, and Scottish legislation mirrors ours apart from slightly different numbers and a few other small differences. The bodies that have been accepted in Scotland include ones at diocesan level in the Roman Catholic Church; others include the Church of Scotland, the Free Church of Scotland and the United Free Church of Scotland. Those bodies are long-established organisations rather than individual parishes or small organisations and have satisfied the Scottish regulator that they have the required governance and have met the other four criteria. The only benefit of being accorded designated religious status is that the commission cannot directly exercise all its powers. However, it can still withdraw that status and exercise its powers if an investigation shows evidence of wrongdoing. For example, the commission in Scotland can investigate the Church of Scotland and withdraw its designation if there is cause for concern, and the same would apply here. Therefore the benefits of the designation of religious status must be kept in proportion.

Mr Craig: The important difference is that designation gives a religious organisation some self-governance. If there is an issue, the commission will contact the organisation, and its internal governance will deal with the problem under due legal process. You are right in not wanting to think that a religious organisation would want to cheat the system; therefore if anything was uncovered, it would be dealt with internally. Under the opt-out clause there would be no reason to remove designated religious status.

However, you are right that a safeguard can be used if required.

That is OK for large religious organisations; however, smaller organisations will not have the same cover. The legislation means that the internal governance of a small Church or a small religious organisation will not be recognised. That is dangerous territory for any Government to move into; historically, it has been a disaster.

Ms Ebbage: I would be concerned if a small religious charity had no governance in place. Perhaps the numbers and the length of time outlined in the legislation need to be considered. However, as I say, the key aspect is the provision in clause 166(2)(e) that a Church can exercise supervisory and disciplinary functions to deal with its own problems. An exemption

for bodies that do not have such governance would concern me because that would leave individuals at the mercy of someone who may be unscrupulous, and the commission would be unable to intervene.

It is important that the commission can oversee all charities. Church bodies should be granted designated religious status only when the commission is satisfied that they have appropriate governance and can police themselves. That will be a hard test to pass.

However, I do not think that a small religious organisation will be at a disadvantage by not attaining designated religious status. Such organisations should have nothing to fear from the commission if they are properly managed. The commission should not need to take those organisations under its notice, apart from making sure that they are registered and that they file their accounts, annual returns and annual reports on time.

Mr Rankin: That issue is not really a legal point. A comparison could be made between the RSPCA and the USPCA, both of which operate here. It is a political decision as to whether the RSPCA, which is a large organisation, should get special treatment as opposed to the USPCA, which is a local organisation. Therefore whether the Presbyterian Church in Ireland should be treated differently from a small gospel hall that is a single entity is not really a legal issue.

Mr Burns: How does the Bill facilitate small sports groups and community groups that need charitable status in order to survive?

Mr Rankin: As charitable incorporated organisations they will be able to have their sports field or their property in what is, in effect, a body corporate. They will not have the problem of having to change or appoint new trustees. Many sports clubs have individual trustees and perhaps half a dozen members. When two or three of those trustees die or leave, the club has to go through the complicated process of appointing new people to those positions. They often forget to do that and suddenly find that they have no trustees left because they have all died. Therefore executors — who may have no connection with the club — have to intervene to appoint new trustees.

If such clubs become charitable incorporated organisations, they will carry on in perpetuity and will not have to appoint new trustees every few years.

Mr Burns: Would there be any need for trustees if a charity was a corporate body?

Mr Rankin: No. There would be no need for individual trustees, but the property would be held in the name of the charitable incorporated organisation.

Ms Ebbage: In effect, the trustees would probably become the directors of the company of the charitable incorporated organisation. Individuals would still deal with the running of the sports club, for example, but

they would be doing it through the corporate body instead of having personal liability. The personal liability of individuals has always been an issue for unincorporated organisations, particularly when land is held or people are employed or for insurance in sports clubs. Insurance policies could be held in the name of the company of the charitable incorporated organisation; trainers or facilitators could be employees of the organisation rather than be employed by the trustees individually. That puts the trustees at one remove from liability, which is an advantage for them.

Mr Burns: The more I hear about the Charities Bill, the more I recognise my ignorance of it. I did not understand it. I was concentrating on community groups. I understand the points that were made about sports clubs, but many small community groups meet the criteria set out in the Bill. How will the Bill affect them?

Ms Scott: They will have to comply with the provisions of the legislation in relation to their accounts, and they will have to ensure that they have proper governance structures in place. They must be properly organised; they cannot just get together as a group of well-meaning individuals, which is often what happened in the past. They may have to deal with more regulation, but that applies to all charities and not just to community groups. That is why we must proceed slowly with regulation and not overburden people.

Ms Ebbage: I deal with many community groups through a funding body that is a client of mine. The community groups are often organised as companies limited by guarantee. Many of the directors and members of those groups do not really understand what that means. A company limited by guarantee has a legalistic and cumbersome constitution and has to deal with the companies registry. However, converting such bodies into charitable incorporated organisations, which are supposed to be simpler to run, would mean that a body would only have to deal with one regulator — the commission — rather than with the companies registry and the commission.

The charitable incorporated organisation will be a key vehicle for community groups and will suit what they are doing. A community group can increase its credibility if it is set up with a proper structure, including reporting structures. The main aim for community groups is to get people with professional expertise on their boards who can give help and guidance. Community groups' strength is knowing what is needed and taking action — identifying a need, getting funding and addressing the problem — however, they will need help, and it is to be hoped that the commission will be able to help with red tape and paperwork.

Mr Burns: Many people involved in community groups see themselves as committee members rather than directors of a charity.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome your written submission, which was particularly helpful about the Bill. However, the main concern that arises is the standing of charities outside Northern Ireland that are not registered under the law here. They are referred to in the Bill as section 167 institutions.

Under the Bill, there seems to be a danger that rogue charities that are based in Britain or elsewhere would operate in Northern Ireland without being subject to regulation. Would it be practical to register such charities? What are the dangers if that provision is left unamended?

Ms Ebbage: You make a very important point. The issue is one of identifying those bodies. As the public become more aware that legitimate charities must have a registration number and be recognised, they can go online and look up the basic details about a charity and see whether it is legitimately recognised by our register, and that will help. However, there is a danger in relation to the sanctions that can be applied to section 167 institutions. That is not absolutely clear. At the moment, it seems that Orders will be made as to which statutory provisions will apply to section 167 institutions and which will not.

When I attended the Department's initial presentations on the draft Order, as it was then, it seemed clear that Northern Ireland would opt for a regime of absolute registration. There would be no exceptions. Under article 18(2) every charity that was established or operated here would have to be registered. That seemed to mean full registration. I am not sure that that is still the case, given the provisions of clause 167. We must have proper scrutiny of such organisations.

If a charity that is registered in England was operating here, there would have to be co-operation between our regulator and the English regulator. There is provision in the Charities Act 2006 for the exchange of information if something unscrupulous is going on in another jurisdiction so that an organisation will not get away with dubious activity just because it happens to be registered in one area but not in another. I do not know whether that is of help to the Committee.

Mr A Maginness: The drafting of clause 167 suggests that it is not mandatory for a charity that is registered outside Northern Ireland to be registered here.

Ms Ebbage: That is right. We recommend compulsory registration.

The Chairperson: No other members have indicated their desire to ask questions. Thank you very much for taking time out of your schedules. The meeting has been very informative and helpful to the Committee in developing its approach to the Bill.

Ms Ebbage: Thank you, Mr Chairperson.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR CULTURE ARTS AND LEISURE

7 February 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 Francie Brolly
Lord Browne
Mr Nelson McCausland
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Ken Robinson
Mr Jim Shannon

The Chairperson (Mr McElduff): I direct members' attention to the Committee's draft report on the Libraries Bill. The Principal Clerk of Bills has had an opportunity to read the executive summary and the draft report. Do you wish to say anything, Mr Wilson?

The Principal Clerk of Bills: The wording in paragraph 19 needs to be tweaked, but the Committee can deal with it when it reaches that point. The Committee will need to indicate whether it is satisfied with the drafting of each paragraph or whether it wishes to make amendments.

The Chairperson: I suggest we go through each paragraph, after which I will ask members whether they are content with the paragraph as drafted.

The Committee should satisfy itself that it is content with the executive summary and the main report. After we have considered both, I will ask the Committee if it is content with the report as drafted, and order that it be printed. We will begin with the executive summary.

Executive Summary

Paragraphs 1 to 5 agreed to.

Main report

Paragraphs 1 to 4 agreed to.

Paragraph 5

The Principal Clerk of Bills: Paragraph 5 includes a list of dates spanning 2007-08. I suggest that for

clarity, "2007" is added after "13 December", because "2008" is already included after the list of dates in January.

The Chairperson: Are members content with the paragraph as amended?

Members indicated assent.

Paragraph 5, as amended, agreed to.

Paragraphs 6 to 9 agreed to.

Paragraph 10

The Principal Clerk of Bills: I suggest that "2007" be added after the dates listed in paragraph 10.

The Chairperson: Are members content with the paragraph as amended?

Members indicated assent.

Paragraph 10, as amended, agreed to.

Paragraph 11 agreed to.

Paragraph 12

Mr Brolly: I suggest that "2008" be added after "24 January" in paragraph 12.

The Chairperson: Are members content with the paragraph as amended?

Members indicated assent.

Paragraph 12, as amended, agreed to.

Paragraphs 13 to 19 agreed

Paragraph 20

The Chairperson: Paragraph 20 is wrongly listed as a second paragraph 19. The second "19" in the draft report should be replaced with "20".

The Principal Clerk of Bills: The paragraph states:

"The Department proposed a number of technical amendments to Schedule 3...and to Schedule 4 (Repeals)".

However, as the Department did not propose amendments to schedule 4, I suggest that the words "and to Schedule 4 (Repeals)" be deleted. As schedule 4 was not amended, I also suggest that the next sentence be amended to read:

"The Committee agreed Schedule 3 as amended and Schedule 4 as drafted."

The entire paragraph would then read as follows:

"The Department proposed a number of technical amendments to Schedule 3 (consequential changes to other schedules). The Committee agreed Schedule 3 as amended and Schedule 4 as drafted."

The Chairperson: Are members content with the paragraph as amended?

Members indicated assent.

Paragraph 20, as amended, agreed to.

Paragraph 21

The Chairperson: As regards paragraph 21, we will be replacing the “X” with today’s date. The paragraph will therefore read as follows:

“At its meeting of 7 February 2008, the Committee agreed its report on the Bill and agreed that it should be printed.”

Are members content with the paragraph as amended?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: The Committee has now reached agreement and is content with the report. The Committee orders that the report be printed. I thank members, the Principal Clerk of Bills and the Committee Clerk for their assistance during the process.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

14 February 2008

CHARITIES BILL (NIA 9/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr David Hilditch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Mickey Brady
Mr Thomas Burns
Mr Fra McCann
Mrs Claire McGill
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Alban Maginness

Witnesses:

Inspector Gary Atkinson Superintendent David Boyd Mr John Conner	}	Police Service of Northern Ireland
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The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Hilditch): Good morning. Representatives of the Police Service of Northern Ireland are present to give evidence on the Charities Bill. They are Superintendent David Boyd of the operations, policy and support service; Mr John Conner, who is head of social legislation; and Inspector Gary Atkinson of the social legislation service. You are welcome, gentlemen. I remind everyone to ensure that mobile phones are switched off so that there is no interference with the session's recording.

Superintendent David Boyd (Police Service of Northern Ireland): Good morning. With your permission, Deputy Chairman, I will read the Police Service's prepared response and take questions afterwards.

First, thank you for giving the PSNI the opportunity to brief the Committee on the Charities Bill. The PSNI was included in the advisory panel that was established in 2004 to consider the existing system of charities legislation and administration in Northern Ireland and to make recommendations on how that should be developed.

The Police Service welcomes the proposals contained in the Bill, particularly those that relate to

a charities commission for Northern Ireland and a Northern Ireland register of charities, which will bring Northern Ireland broadly into line with England, Wales and Scotland.

From a policing perspective, the main change is that the new charity commission will be responsible for the issue of public-collection certificates, which will allow approved charities to conduct collections. In addition, the commission would be empowered to issue permits authorising specific collections in a public place, without which such collections could not be undertaken. It is more appropriate to have a centralised point for charitable collections than for each police district to issue certificates for collections, as currently happens. Furthermore, the draft Bill provides the necessary powers and provisions needed to ensure proper regulation and registration.

It is not clear from the Bill whether, when a permit or certificate has been issued, there is a requirement for the charity commissioner to inform the police commander of the local district or area of a collection in his or her area; that is, the date of the collection, times, days, organising body, et cetera. As it may be necessary to police such a collection, it is recommended that the Bill include a provision that the charity commission should advise the local district or area commander in whose area the collection is to take place.

It is noted that persons who are convicted of any offence that involves dishonesty or deception shall be disqualified from being a charity trustee or a trustee for a charity. New controls to prevent criminal exploitation of charities are welcomed, and those will ensure that public confidence in charitable organisations is not undermined.

The PSNI welcomes the commission's powers to institute inquiries, request documents and search records. In addition, the Bill requires every charity to prepare annual returns to the commission for each financial year. The Police Service believes that the opportunity for abuse of charitable benefits or mock charities by criminal elements will be restricted by greater scrutiny and control. The service suggests that a formal memorandum of understanding, which includes an information-sharing agreement, be drawn up between the PSNI and the newly formed charity commission to provide a framework for closer working arrangements on issues of mutual interest, for example, vetting arrangements for applicants, trustees, etc.

In conclusion, the Police Service fully supports the proposals that are outlined in the Bill.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you very much, Superintendent Boyd. You have made useful comments on the Bill. Of course, as the Committee takes the Bill through each of its Stages, its primary focus is to protect the public.

In your submission, you mentioned that to have a centralised point for charitable collections is more appropriate than the current system. Other witnesses were not convinced that the commission should issue permits as well as certificates, the main reason being that the commission would have limited local geographical knowledge, and that it would, therefore, be best that local authorities issued permits. What is your view on the matter?

Superintendent Boyd: In my opening remarks, I said that the Police Service wants there to be a memorandum of understanding with the new commission. Basically, that would set out the stall for information-sharing. If the commission wished to seek local views before issuing such permits or certificates, it could seek the views of the PSNI area commander. Currently, the Association of Chief Police Officers in England and Wales is looking at drawing up a memorandum of understanding with the Charity Commission for England and Wales. Hopefully, that will include information-sharing.

The Deputy Chairperson: You also said that greater scrutiny and control will lessen opportunities for criminals to abuse charitable benefits or set up mock charities. Two of the conditions that must be satisfied to obtain designated religious charitable status are a membership of at least 1,000 and to have been established in Northern Ireland for at least 10 years. Will the need to satisfy those conditions lessen the opportunities for fraud and other criminal activity?

Superintendent Boyd: I have examined the draft Bill, and it will reduce the opportunity for criminal elements to use charities for fraudulent purposes, such as laundering money obtained through drug-dealing, etc.

Miss McIlveen: Thank you for your presentation. The Bill refers to the disqualification of trustees who have been removed from office in England, Scotland and Wales. As you will be aware, several charities in Northern Ireland also operate in the Republic of Ireland. Moreover, people who live in the Republic of Ireland sit on the boards of charities in Northern Ireland. In the light of that, should the Bill also disqualify those who have been removed from office from acting as trustees in the Irish Republic?

Mr John Conner (Police Service of Northern Ireland): We have not had many dealings with trustees. However, I imagine that we would work with the proposed charity commissioner and the guidelines that will be set up. The commissioner will draw up processes and procedures and decide how the system will operate, and we will feed into that system at that time. We must wait to see how the charity commission will be set up and how it will operate.

Miss McIlveen: It seems bizarre that the other regions are included in the Bill and the Republic of

Ireland is not, because we have a land border, and it is easy for people to move from one jurisdiction to another.

Mr Conner: We have not given much thought to that issue; however, we are aware it. When the charity commission is set up, we will be available to sit down with the commissioners and discuss it with them.

Mr F McCann: Michelle touched on an issue that I was going to raise. The Bill, several times, mentions potential fraud. Is fraud a big problem? Do people fraudulently collect money in the names of charities?

Superintendent Boyd: Before I came to the Committee, I did some background reading on that subject. I noted that the Organised Crime Task Force report of 2007 refers to an Association of Chief Police Officers of England, Wales and Northern Ireland (ACPO) report of 2007 on the nature, extent and economic impact of fraud in the UK. That report says that fraud takes a wide variety of behaviours, and it lists the main types that operate in the UK, one of which is charity fraud. From PSNI's perspective, however, charity fraud is rare, and we have not detected many cases of it, although the ACPO report lists it as one of the main types of fraud or scams operating in the UK.

Hopefully the Bill, or the commission, will put in place safeguards that will protect the public. Hopefully, that will reduce the incidence of fraud, such as the bogus collections that Mr McCann mentioned.

In my opening remarks I said that commissioners should contact local area commanders to make them aware of when collections will take place. Thus, police officers on patrol will be briefed on what charities are collecting money and where the collections are taking place. That should have an impact on bogus collections.

Mr F McCann: When issuing permits, would it be beneficial to issue collectors with a single piece of identification that stands out clearly and cannot easily be replicated?

Superintendent Boyd: It is wise for collectors to have some sort of identification that links them to their charity. However, the majority of identifications can be downloaded from the Internet; therefore, although identifications can help, the system can be abused.

The Deputy Chairperson: There being no further questions, that concludes this morning's Committee session. Thank you, gentlemen, for your attendance.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

21 February 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 Jonathan Craig
Ms Anna Lo
Mr Fra McCann
Mrs Claire McGill
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Alban Maginness

Witnesses:

Rev Norman Hamilton	} Evangelical Alliance Northern Ireland
Ms Karen Jardine	

The Chairperson (Mr Campbell): The Committee is delighted to welcome Ms Karen Jardine and Rev Norman Hamilton of Evangelical Alliance Northern Ireland. I ask everyone to switch off their mobile phones, as even on standby they interfere with the Hansard recording.

You kindly provided the Committee with a written briefing on the Charities Bill. Karen, do you wish to start with an opening contribution? Members may then wish to ask questions.

Ms Karen Jardine (Evangelical Alliance Northern Ireland): Thank you for your invitation, Chairman. I will begin by telling the Committee a little about Evangelical Alliance, as I am not sure how many of you are familiar with it. Evangelical Alliance was formed in 1846, and it is the largest body serving evangelical Christians in the UK. Its membership includes denominations, churches and individuals, ministers and laypeople. Our mission is to unite evangelicals to present Christ credibly as good news for spiritual and social transformation. Our Northern

Ireland office opened in 1987, so the organisation has been here for 21 years.

As well as providing support and advice to its members, Evangelical Alliance co-ordinates the work of the Missions Agencies Partnership, which is a group of 35 mission agencies that work together to promote the challenge of world mission.

I am particularly pleased to be here this morning because my colleagues in London worked closely and effectively with the Cabinet Office and the Charity Commission for England and Wales in the run-up to the Charities Act in 2006 and on the subsequent guidance that the Charity Commission issued. We welcome this opportunity to contribute constructively to the legislation here.

We raised several issues in our written submission that we sent to the Committee a couple of weeks ago, and I will cover those briefly. The first is about clause 2, “meaning of charitable purpose”. We are pleased that “the advancement of religion” is still included in the list of purposes. We would like missionary work at home and overseas to be included or be seen to be an important part of the advancement of religion. The legislation is unclear about whether public benefit must be gained in Northern Ireland or whether it can be gained overseas. Many mission organisations, especially those in the Mission Agencies Partnership, are more concerned with benefit overseas than locally.

We have no problem with religious organisations having to face a public benefit test, especially where many charitable organisations have a religious motive or emerged out of religious organisations. We are concerned that the test should not be restricted to tangible outcomes that can be quantified and measured. Religious organisations provide many intangible benefits, one of which is spiritual benefit, and that is very hard to quantify.

Rev Norman Hamilton (Evangelical Alliance Northern Ireland): I must point out that if Members see me at a future date, I may be wearing a different hat. For the record, I am here today as a member of the Evangelical Alliance rather than in any other capacity. Members will know — and Alban will certainly now — that there has been a high suicide rate in north Belfast over the past couple of years, not unlike Bridgend. The alliance argues that in the care of families and communities that have suffered a high incidence of suicide, the term “spiritual benefit” has some meaning. Addressing the issue is not simply a matter of creating a suicide prevention strategy; it also involves caring for people in an holistic way. That is an example of spiritual benefit to a community in particular personal circumstances, yet it is very hard to quantify.

We do not remotely want to confine the definition of spiritual benefit to cover only Christian activity; it is

about caring for people in mind, spirit and soul, just as people can be cared for in more quantifiable ways that involve healthcare, and so on.

Ms Jardine: We expressed concern about the term “disbenefit”, as people do not really know what it means. Therefore perhaps the word “harm” would be better in that instance.

I now turn to the registration of charities. Clauses 165 and 166 deal with exemptions for designated religious organisations. We appreciate that that recognises the accountability structures of many religious organisations in Northern Ireland, but it leaves out parachurch organisations, mission organisations, smaller churches, newer churches and so on. I appreciate that that exemption is there and we know that one of the roles of the charity commission will be to ensure financial accountability and proper financial management; however, there may be an issue with that definition.

The Chairperson: Have your counterparts in England and Wales encountered any difficulties following the introduction of similar legislation there?

Ms Jardine: The public-benefit test was introduced in the Charities Act 2006. The idea of “disbenefit” is not part of the Charities Act 2006; it was mooted as part of a consultation with the Charity Commission for England and Wales. “Disbenefit” was changed to “harm” in the guidance in England and Wales. The guidance from the Charity Commission shows that public benefit covers intangible benefits as well as quantifiable and measurable ones. The Charity Commission extended that by saying that one cannot measure the benefits that can be gained from looking at an area of conservation or an area of beauty, but that such views have intangible benefits to society.

The Chairperson: What is your view of designated religious status? What do you think about the 10-year rule and the 1,000-member rule?

Ms Jardine: We recognise the need to balance investigation into financial mismanagement against respecting the ethos of religious organisations. However, there is no designation of religious charities in the Charities Act 2006, so the issue has not come up. Nevertheless, it excludes many organisations that might be concerned that trustees — who will not understand the ethos of the organisation — will be put in place if an issue arises.

There is also a question about how the definition of a designated religious charity might be used in future. Will it be used in other legislation to define what charities or organisations will be exempt from legislation or be affected by it? That does not relate to the Charities Bill, but one must consider how the use of a definition of a designated religious charity in legislation might affect issues in future.

The Chairperson: Are you content with that, Rev Hamilton?

Rev Norman Hamilton: This may be a sideways point, but it is relevant. There is at times aggravated debate, some of it among academics, on whether the religious sector is part of the community and voluntary sector or constitutes a third sector. That ambivalence has implications for the Charities Bill. There is a distinctive ethos in the faith-based sector that the governance of charities legislation ought to recognise. Some of the major denominations have made representation to the Committee on that issue. If charities legislation treats faith-based and religious organisations in the same way as, for instance, the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) or the big players in the community sector but fails to recognise the different ethos involved, there will be a problem about how the religious sector stands in relation to wider society. Although it may be an abstruse point, the ethos, value base and standing of faith-based organisations in the charities sector must be described carefully so that we do not run into difficulties in future or exacerbate existing problems.

Mr Hilditch: Karen, your submission refers to the fact that the commission will not be required to consult before revising guidance. Will you expand on that?

Ms Jardine: Our written submission contained our comments on the guidance that the charity commission must issue under clause 4. However, the clause suggests that the commission will not necessarily be under obligation to consult before revising any guidance that it issues.

I appreciate that if a minor revision has to be made, 8 to 12 weeks’ consultation may not be the most efficient way to go about it, but I am concerned that it could develop into a loophole whereby major revisions of the guidance would take place without consultation.

Mr Brady: Thank you for your presentation. You made the point well that spirituality is not always tangible when discussing mental health and general well-being. Do you regard faith-based organisations as a third sector or in some way separate? Would you like to see that being addressed in the Bill?

Rev Norman Hamilton: I am not sure that we would want to argue for a special position or dispensation. There is ambiguity about whether the faith sector is part of the community and voluntary sector, and we are simply saying that that must be consciously acknowledged or addressed in the legislation so that it is not made worse. For example, Ballysillan Presbyterian church cannot be a member of NICVA, but our youth club can.

I do not want to overstate this, but why is it that the local expression of the Presbyterian Church in an area, which seeks to involve itself in the community

and which is itself a charitable organisation, cannot join an umbrella charitable organisation? I know the history and the reasons for that situation; however, the legislation should strive not to make that ambiguity worse — if anything, could it be clarified a wee bit?

Mr Brady: That issue must be addressed.

Rev Norman Hamilton: I agree.

Ms Jardine: There has never been a quantifiable record of the contribution of the faith sector to the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland. Research into formal youth activities in Northern Ireland showed that most volunteers for the formal activities that are registered with the education and library boards came from a faith-based background. However, the contributions of churches, faith-based communities and other organisations to the community and voluntary sector have never been quantified.

Miss McIlveen: Thank you for your presentation. Has the legislation in England, Scotland and Wales dealt with missionary work being considered as an integral part of the charitable purpose?

Ms Jardine: Not specifically. Some charitable purposes have been expanded on, but overseas missionary work has not been specifically included in legislation covering England, Scotland or Wales, despite representations by the Catholic Bishops' Conference in Scotland and the Scottish Churches Committee, which sought that protection in the legislation. Its inclusion in the legislation would give greater protection, although even including it in the guidance of the charity commission would be helpful.

Mr A Maginness: The public-benefit test is an important issue that Evangelical Alliance, the Catholic bishops and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland quite properly raised.

Rev Norman Hamilton: That is a relief.

Mr A Maginness: You are not alone; you are in good company.

Clause 2 states:

“(1) For the purposes of the law of Northern Ireland, a charitable purpose is a purpose which —

falls within subsection (2) and
is for the public benefit”.

It is important to emphasise “and is”. It is not enough for a charitable purpose to fall within a description such as the prevention or relief of poverty or the advancement of education or religion: it must show a public benefit. Otherwise, a Church could carry out purely spiritual activity that has no tangible benefit and claim charitable purpose, and that could disadvantage all religious organisations. It is an important point, and it was raised in other submissions.

In order to meet the Churches' legitimate concerns, criteria are required for the public-benefit test. I do not wish to put the witnesses on the spot — I am not asking for draft proposals — but it would be useful if Evangelical Alliance could suggest a formula to address what is a substantive problem in the Bill.

Ms Jardine: I will air our concerns about the word “disbenefit”, which is vague and has never been tested in law. The Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator produced a consultation document, ‘Meeting the Charity Test’, in which it stated that:

“The concept of ‘disbenefit’ reflects social circumstances and values and at present is primarily a philosophical and ethical concept rather than a conventional legal concept.”

The nuances are in whether people construe some of the faith organisations' activities as “disbenefit”, which is a term that reflects social circumstances and values rather than the more usual and better known word “harm”. Three years on, the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator still has not produced a final document about meeting the charity test, although the consultation is due to finish in April. However, the regulator's guidance for applicants and existing charities states that:

“Disbenefit is more than the mere absence of benefit, and our view is that it is equivalent to harm.”

In order to avoid ambiguity in our legislation, I wonder whether the concept of “harm” might be introduced at this stage rather than being left to guidance later.

Mr A Maginness: That is a useful suggestion.

Rev Norman Hamilton: My background is as an economist, and if I may I will introduce an analogy. We are all familiar with the concept of the opportunity/cost relationship: no matter how good something is, it always involves cost. Having to endure talking to us costs you time doing constituency work — everything has a cost. Therefore the concept of “disbenefit” is part and parcel of something good and desirable; the concept of “harm” is quite different. We argue that “disbenefit” is a dangerous and almost meaningless word because one can point to the downside of anything. If there is a cost to everything, one might say instead that there is a disbenefit. However, that is different from saying that there is harm in someone's activities. The word “disbenefit” is profoundly unhelpful because it can be used in every circumstance, and we argue forcibly for the use of the word “harm”.

The Chairperson: You make the point clearly. Thank you both for your informative contributions; the debate will continue as we scrutinise the Charities Bill stage by laborious stage.

Rev Norman Hamilton: Your words, not ours.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

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 01 February 2008

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Strategic Investment Board

Mr Attwood asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the role of the Strategic Investment Board in the preparation of the Executive's spending plans. (AQO 1492/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley and Mr M McGuinness): The Strategic Investment Board (SIB) has made a significant contribution towards the preparation of the Executive's spending plans through its work in developing the Investment Strategy. Working in conjunction with departments on their capital investment plans the SIB has advised the Executive on the most appropriate programmes of capital investment needed over the longer-term to support the priorities set out within the Programme for Government, making best use of available resources.

The SIB's advice has been informed by a programme of detailed research and analysis, including engagement with key stakeholders, to help ensure the strategy meets the needs of the region.

This work of the SIB has enabled the Executive to take a holistic view of infrastructure needs enabling more joined up thinking in the planning and delivery of projects and move beyond the traditional three-year budget planning process.

Expenditure Pressures

Mr McNarry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what representations it has received from the Minister of Finance and Personnel in relation to securing additional money from HM Treasury

to ease expenditure pressures arising from the draft Budget. (AQW 2791/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We held a number of meetings and discussions with the Finance Minister in relation to easing budgetary pressures for the NI Executive and given the importance of the matter the meetings continue on a regular basis.

A number of budgetary issues have been resolved including securing access to our full stock of "End Year Flexibility" over the next 3 years. In terms of resource this represents £190 million over the next period. We also obtained an improved Comprehensive Spending Review resulting in £440 million more being made available than reached in the context of the Chancellor's Package in 2007.

A particular focus for our meetings was the Varney Report. Ministers made a robust case for reform of the corporation tax but were disappointed at the outcome. We have pressed the Chief Secretary that a further review is required over the next few months, involving and including direct input from our officials.

In addition, as is normal practice, on behalf of the Executive and following discussion and agreement with us, the Finance Minister and his officials continue to directly press the case for additional resources for Northern Ireland from HM Treasury on a range of issues.

Irish Language

Mr McNarry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the proportion of time that is set aside at Executive meetings, for translations of the Irish language into English. (AQW 2828/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: No time is set aside at Executive meetings for translations of the Irish language into English.

Maze Prison

Mr McCausland asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the number of visits to the former prison buildings at the Maze that took place in (i) 2005; (ii) 2006; and (iii) 2007; and to detail the dates on which such visits took place. (AQW 2916/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Limited access by elected officials, the media, key stakeholders, potential developers and those with an interest in the regeneration of the Maze/Long Kesh site, which includes a number of former prison buildings which are listed and the World War II aircraft hangars

which are scheduled as historic monuments, has been available since the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister took ownership in 2004.

The number of visits during the calendar years 2005, 2006 and 2007 was as follows:

2005	2006	2007
164	549	639

Details of the dates on which these visits took place have been placed in the library.

EU Gender Directive

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the discussions that took place within the Executive in relation to the decision to leave action on the EU Gender Directive on Goods and Services to Westminster. (AQW 2921/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: When we were advised that UK Ministers had decided to legislate to implement the EU Gender Directive on a UK-wide basis, we wrote to Ministerial colleagues on 19 December 2007 to advise them of this decision. To date, there has been no discussion within the Executive on this matter.

EU Gender Directive

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail at what level of government the decision was taken to refer the EU Gender Directive on Goods and Services to Westminster. (AQW 2922/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Once it had been confirmed that the First Minister had concerns about the content of the Regulations and, in particular, the explicit inclusion of reference to transgender or gender reassignment, we agreed that officials should inform the Government Equalities Office and the Northern Ireland Office that there was high risk that Northern Ireland would not be able to meet the Directive's deadline for implementation by 21 December 2007. When UK Ministers were made aware of this, they decided to legislate to implement the Directive on a UK-wide basis.

Sexual Orientation Strategy

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it will give a timescale within which a final Sexual Orientation Strategy and Action Plan will be produced. (AQW 2923/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

Work on the Sexual Orientation Strategy and Action Plan was undertaken in line with commitments by previous Direct Rule Ministers. It will be a matter for the Executive to consider and decide on the future direction of policy.

Programme of Cohesion and Integration

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to its answer to AQW 2306/08, to provide an update on the timetable for producing detailed proposals for a programme of cohesion and integration. (AQW 2925/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: OFMDFM are fully committed to building a shared and better future. As previously stated, we will bring forward proposals in the immediate future for a programme of cohesion and integration for a shared and better future to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

In the meantime, work is currently ongoing funding a wide range of projects aimed at increasing cohesion and integration.

Commissioner for Victims

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the number of applicants, for the post of Commissioner for Victims and Survivors, that had also submitted applications for this post when previously advertised earlier in the year. (AQW 2940/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Four people submitted applications in response to both the original advertisement of the post in January 2007 and the extended process announced in October 2007. There were therefore 38 new applicants in the second process in October 2007.

Commissioner for Victims

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail, in relation to the first recruitment campaign, the dates on which candidates were interviewed for the post of Commissioner for Victims and Survivors. (AQW 2944/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Those called to interview following the original advertisement for the post of Commissioner for Victims and Survivors were interviewed on 12, 13 and 20 March 2007.

Sustainability Development Strategy

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to the answer to AQW 2499/08, and in relation to Sustainability Development Strategy targets, to detail (i) the targets that were met on time by the end of 2007; (ii) the targets expected to be met during 2008 and their completion dates; (iii) the targets that are subject to a longer timescale, stating the original target date for completion and the current expected completion date; (iv) the targets that are the subject of delays, and by how long; and (v) the targets that have measurement difficulties.

(AQW 2962/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: A review of progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Strategy targets was completed in October 2007. Based on information gathered during the progress review, this written answer encloses details of:

- Table 1 - targets that were achieved/are on track to be achieved by the end of 2007;
- Table 2 - targets expected to be achieved during 2008;
- Table 3 - targets that are subject to a longer timescale, outlining the original target date for completion and the current expected completion date;
- Table 4 - targets that are the subject of delays and by how long (where new dates are known); and
- Table 5 - targets that have measurement difficulties.

TABLE 1: TARGETS ACHIEVED/ON TRACK TO BE ACHIEVED BY END 2007

No	Target
13	Develop a policy and legislative framework for protecting the marine environment by 2007.
42	Prepare an Northern Ireland specific Climate Change Impacts report by February 2007 and update every 5 years.
44	SD to be formally incorporated into the Northern Ireland school curriculum from 2007.
45	Trainee Educators to be trained in SD by 2007.
46	Promote the use of the ESD Good Practice Guidance to schools by 2006.
48	To support by 2007 the implementation of agreed action points as defined by the HEFCE SD publication across the Higher Education Sector.
51	Develop a SD Communications Strategy by 2007.
54	By 2007 introduce a statutory duty on relevant public bodies to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development.
55	By 2007 ensure that all policy development actively considers sustainable development.

No	Target
56	By 2007 link sustainable development objectives to the Priorities and Budgets and CSR Processes.
57	By 2007 ensure all Departments have a sustainable development Action Plan in place.
62	Agree the way forward on the review of environmental governance in respect of sustainable development by Summer 2007.

TABLE 2: TARGETS EXPECTED TO BE ACHIEVED DURING 2008

No	Target
3	By 2008 ensure that all public sector procurement is channelled through recognised Centres of Procurement Expertise (CoPE's).
4	By 2008 ensure that SD principles guide capital investment decisions on all major publicly funded building and infrastructure projects.
5	By 2008 produce a Sustainable Procurement Action Plan for NI.
6	By 2008 produce a Sustainable Consumption Action Plan for NI.
7	By 2008 put in place measures which optimise the flexibility of retained and refurbished public buildings.
37	By 2008 establish a renewables centre of excellence (Agri Food and Biosciences Institute) at Hillsborough.
38	By 2008 provide an exemplar of biomass Combined Heat and Power in Stormont estate.
39	By 2008 complete research into grid constraints and investment needs to support 2020 vision for renewables.
40	By 2008 research potential of NI geology to store energy / underpin renewables.
47	By 2008 school development plans should incorporate the promotion of ESD.
49	By 2008 implement revised guidance for the restructured FE Sector that embraces all aspects of Sustainable Development including the estate and curriculum.
59	By 2008 strengthen and modernise environmental regulation.

TABLE 3: LONG TERM TARGETS (OUTLINING ORIGINAL TARGET COMPLETION DATE AND CURRENT EXPECTED COMPLETION DATE)

Target	Original Target Date	Expected Completion Date
Target 2 - Stabilise Northern Ireland ecological footprint by 2015 and reduce it thereafter.	2015	2015

Target	Original Target Date	Expected Completion Date
Target 8 - Complete the review of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and programme of designation by 2016.	2016	2016 - Those designated closer to the 2016 deadline are likely to have implementation periods that extend the 2016 deadline.
Target 11 - Meet the environmental objectives of the Water Framework Directive by 2015	2015	2015
Target 12 - 90% compliance with Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 consent standards.	N/a	2009
Target 14 - Minimise the number of properties at risk from flooding.	N/a	N/a
Target 15 - Complete permitting of existing installations subject to the current Northern Ireland Pollution Prevention and Control Regulations.	N/a	N/a
Target 16 - Meet the health based objectives for the seven key pollutants in the Air Quality Strategy by 2010.	2010	2010
Target 17 - Advance the Second Survey of Buildings of Architectural and Historic Interest: to increase our knowledge of the built environment and to identify structures worthy of protection by listing by 2016.	2016	2016
Target 18 - Rescue at least 200 structures on the Built Heritage at Risk in Northern Ireland Register by 2016.	2016	2016
Target 19 - Complete survey records of 1500 historic monuments by 2010.	2010	2010
Target 20 - Significantly reduce biodiversity loss by 2010.	2010	2010
Target 21 - Halt biodiversity loss by 2016.	2016	2016

Target	Original Target Date	Expected Completion Date
Target 24 - Invest in modern infrastructure to support the needs of the people of Northern Ireland.	N/a	N/a
Target 25 - By 2009 ensure planning policy and guidance fully reflects the sustainable communities approach, integrates health objectives, incorporates greater consideration of crime prevention and permits development only within local environmental capacity.	2009	2009
Target 26 - By 2010 implement the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy – People and Place.	2010	2010
Target 27 - By 2020 all major towns and cities in Northern Ireland to have developed regeneration master plans based on sustainable development principles.	2020	2020
Target 28 - Address the demand for housing in line with the Regional Development Strategy targets to 2015.	2015	2015
Target 29 - Ensure that all social housing meets the Decent Homes Standard by 2009.	2009	2009
Target 30 - Improve health and life expectancy of the population overall, and reduce health inequalities.	N/a	N/a
Target 31 - Work in partnership to achieve improvements in health and reduction in neighbourhood crime and antisocial behaviour by developing and implementing a “Cleaner, Safer, Greener Communities” agenda.	N/a	N/a
Target 32 - By 2009 strengthen the involvement of communities and better reflect local views through community planning powers.	2009	2009

Target	Original Target Date	Expected Completion Date
Target 33 - Modernise the voluntary and community sector to strengthen the service delivery role of organisations.	N/a	N/a
Target 34 - Build capacity in disadvantaged communities to develop the active participation of local people in achieving positive change.	N/a	N/a
Target 35 - Reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25% below 1990 levels by 2025.	2025	2025
Target 36 - Make the Government estate carbon neutral by 2015.	2015	2015
Target 43 - Develop and implement changes to Government policies and strategies to address adaptation issues.	N/a	N/a
Target 50 - By 2009 25% of NI schools to achieve Eco-Schools accreditation.	2009	2009
Target 52 - Use current research into behavioural change to identify short and long-term behavioural targets and appropriate indicators by 2009.	2009	2009
Target 53 - Determine the barriers to behavioural change for sustainability and identify opportunities for appropriate drivers for change by 2009.	2009	2009
Target 58 - By 2009 ensure that community planning is implanted within the revised local authority system.	2009	2009
Target 63 - By 2009 build capacity to enable meaningful civic participation and identify participatory mechanisms for decision-making.	2009	2009

TABLE 4: TARGETS THAT ARE SUBJECT TO DELAYS

No.	Target	Status	Revised Target Date
9	Introduce enabling legislation for the designation of national parks by 2009.	2009 target for introducing enabling legislation is no longer achievable.	To be determined
41	By 2008 complete a pilot assessment of tidal stream turbines in Strangford Lough.	2008 target date for competing pilot assessment is no longer achievable.	To be determined - work ongoing
60	By 2006 finalise appropriate monitoring and reporting arrangements for sustainable development and establish an implementation role for the Ministerial- Led Group.	2006 target date has not been met.	2008
61	Agree the role of a Sustainable Development Forum by 2006.	2006 target date has not been met.	To be determined

TABLE 5: TARGETS THAT HAVE MEASUREMENT DIFFICULTIES

No	Target
1	Northern Ireland economy will achieve 85% resource efficiency by 2025.
10	Increase Northern Ireland's forested area by at least 500 hectares per annum in line with Northern Ireland Forestry Strategy – A Strategy for Sustainability and Growth.
22	Reduce the productivity gap (1) between Northern Ireland and other UK regions; and (2) between the Northern Ireland average and the most deprived communities.
23	Reduce the skills gap between Northern Ireland and other UK regions and between the Northern Ireland average and the most deprived communities.

Bill of Rights

Mr I McCrea asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what consideration it has given to moving the deadline for community engagement on the Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland from March 2008 to 2009, to ensure effective engagement and consultation with the Protestant community.

(AQW 3095/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Responsibility for the Bill of Rights rests with the NIO. The Bill of Rights Forum will make recommendations on a Bill of Rights to the Northern Ireland Human Rights

Commission and it in turn will make recommendations to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has no direct role in the development of proposals on a Bill of Rights.

Assets Transferred

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the estimated value of additional assets transferred from the Northern Ireland Office to the Executive in each year since 1998. (AQW 3164/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The following table sets out the value of additional assets transferred from the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) to the Executive in each financial year of transfer since 1998. The figures provided relate to the value of the asset at the time of transfer to OFMDFM.

Description	2003/04 (£m)	2004/05 (£m)	2006/07 (£m)
Crumlin Road Gaol	1.3		
Maze Prison		6.2	
Crisis Management Centre			0.2

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Red Meat Taskforce Report

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what progress has been made by her department in responding to the Red Meat Taskforce report. (AQW 2817/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Implementing the strategy will have major implications for the industry as a whole, requiring the main players to take on increasingly important roles for the industry. The Report identified actions for each of the main players and DARD is actively playing its part in implementing the Report's recommendations.

I recently met with Commissioner Fischer Boel and took the opportunity to bring the findings of the Red Meat Task Force report to her attention. The difficulties facing the North's red meat industry make it all the more important that we have a level playing field when it comes to competition by ensuring full decoupling of support across the EU and by ensuring that imports meet the same high standards as domestic production.

I have met with the three of the major retailers with plans to meet another very soon, and wrote to them about the issue of rising costs for producers. I have no direct influence over retail prices, however I believe that lower prices for consumers should not mean lower prices for local producers.

The Report identifies models of production that could form the basis of sustainable production. The Task Force recently established two Working Groups, both led by DARD officials to consider (a) how best to target efforts to develop commercially viable models of beef production and (b) to scope practical options, linked to broader social and environmental considerations, which might support suckler beef and hill sheep farmers.

My Department is also looking at ways of assisting processors in identifying new and niche markets and working with them to identify and secure efficiency savings which can be passed along the supply chain to benefit all involved, including producers.

We will continue to play an active role in the work of the Task Force in developing more constructive relationships within the supply chain and I will continue to engage fully with all parts of that chain. The continuation of the Task Force work is vital in developing a cohesive plan for the future sustainability of our industry.

Consultants Employed

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the number of consultants employed by her department; (ii) the names of consultants employed; (iii) the purpose of the employment of consultants; and (iv) the fees charged by consultants, in each of the last 4 years.

(AQW 2820/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The information requested has been placed in the Assembly library.

Staff Illness

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 2325/08, what comparison she has made of (i) the totality of disciplinary cases resulting from unacceptable sickness records across all Government departments, including Executive agencies; and (ii) the percentages of total staff across all departments, including Executive agencies, who fall within the scope of her reply.

(AQW 2850/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department of Agriculture and Rural

Development does not routinely make comparisons across all Government Departments in respect of either (i) the totality of disciplinary cases resulting from unacceptable sickness absence records, including Executive agencies or (ii) the percentages of total staff across all departments including Executive agencies. However, the Department does closely monitor its own level of disciplinary action.

Advertising Spend

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the amount her department has spent on advertising in each of the last five years. (AQW 2854/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The following table details the amount spent on advertising by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in each of the last five years.

2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
£121,907	£223,820	£352,974	£226,541	£198,766

APHIS Database

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to comment on the APHIS database; and to explain how the database benefits the Northern Ireland agriculture industry. (AQW 2860/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Animal and Public Health Information System (APHIS) is a computerised system for recording cattle movements, disease and post mortem data and has been in operation since November 1998. It replaced the earlier Animal Health computer system that operated for the previous ten years.

APHIS delivers a wide range of support to many sections of the agricultural community. Cattle traceability, a major component of APHIS, enables the industry to meet its EU responsibilities on animal identification and movement and provides marketing support for the meat industry and an invaluable customer assurance to purchasers of the North's products. It is used to determine animals eligible for the export trade such as calves to the continent. Cattle in the North do not require passports because APHIS is recognised by the EC Commission as an 'operational database'.

APHIS provides the structure for all of DARD's disease control programmes, including direct access by private vets for tuberculosis (TB) testing.

APHIS assists DARD's Grants and Subsidies Division in paying the LFA Compensatory Allowance payments and for CAFRE's Beef and Suckler Quality Initiatives.

In addition to meeting this wide range of current needs, APHIS has been designed to provide a springboard for future developments. For example, over 7,500 farmers are already able to access the system directly from a computer in their own farm office, can register cattle births and deaths, and obtain up to the minute herd lists and authorisations for new or replacement ear tags.

They can also electronically notify cattle movements to markets or meat plants, obtain details of herd tests and post mortem data on slaughtered cattle. Industry staff in markets and beef processing plants have recently begun to use APHIS to record and confirm cattle movements onto their premises.

Overall this will lead to a considerable increase in information availability and flexibility, improved data validation, and a reduction in paper and bureaucracy.

Aphis on-Line also allows farmers to update their annual Sheep Inventory on line; and the compilation of herd and flock data through this and other channels has reduced significantly the amount of information farmers had to submit by other means for Farm Census purposes.

There is every expectation that APHIS' capabilities will increase still further as the system and industry demands on it continue to evolve.

Rural Development Programme

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give a timescale within which funding from the 2007-2013 Rural Development Programme will be available to rural groups; and to detail whether or not agreement has been reached between Councils, in relation to clustering, to deliver Rural Development funds. (AQW 2867/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Clustering work is progressing well. Of the 7 proposed Clusters 5 have now been approved by their respective Councils to form Joint Clusters and the other two are to be agreed at full council meetings before the end of January. The 5 agreed clusters are:

1. Antrim, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey
2. Ballymena, Ballymoney, Coleraine, Larne and Moyle
3. Ards, Banbridge, Down and North Down
4. Armagh, Craigavon, and Newry & Mourne
5. Magherafelt, Cookstown, Dungannon and Enniskillen

The remaining two clusters (already passed by sub committee) are:

6. Belfast, Castlereagh and Lisburn (Castlereagh not agreed yet – Lisburn Lead); and

7. Omagh, Strabane, Derry and Limavady (Derry not agreed yet – Omagh will Lead).

Programme funding (called ‘animation’ funding) for the express purposes of the competitive selection of Local Action Groups and for the development of Local Development Strategies is available now to Joint Clusters agreed by full Council. The Antrim, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey cluster will shortly receive animation funding and an invitation to submit an application for the animation funding will issue this week to Ballymena, Ballymoney, Coleraine, Larne, Moyle and the Ards, Down, North Down and Banbridge clusters.

Farming Penalties

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is her assessment of the penalties imposed on farmers who had duplicate fields on their Integrated Administration and Control System forms in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2869/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Under the 2005 Single Farm Payment scheme, financial penalty was applied in 1,163 cases. The total value of the penalties applied to 2005 payments was 3.073 million euro. In 531 cases, a further 0.415 million euro is recoverable from payments due over the following three scheme years.

For the 2006 scheme year, financial penalty was applied in 59 cases. The total value of the penalties applied to 2006 payments was 95,000 euro. In 18 cases, a further 19,000 euro is recoverable from payments due over the following three scheme years.

Information in respect of relevant penalties under the 2007 SFP scheme is not yet available.

Dairy Farmers

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of advisors, employed by her department, who offer advice to dairy farmers in Northern Ireland. (AQW 2889/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department currently employs 90 front line staff to provide advice / support, albeit not exclusively, to dairy farmers.

In addition, Veterinary Service employ 283 staff who may on occasions provide advice to dairy farmers. However this is not their sole role or function.

Rural Development Fund

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what percentage of the Rural Development Fund 2007-2013 will be used for technical aid by the Local Action Groups.

(AQW 2890/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 is two-pronged, aiming to improve rural areas’ economic competitiveness while strengthening them socially, objectives dealt with in Axes 1 and 3 of the programme, respectively. Axis 4 deals with the local action groups to be constituted to deliver Axis 3.

A total of £145 million will be available for Axes 1, 3 and 4, with funds provided on an equal basis by the European Union and the British Exchequer. Some £45 million, including administration costs, will go on the Axis 1 measures to improve the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector. Axis 3 quality-of-life measures will receive £80 million, with funding of up to £20 million — 20% of the total — for the local delivery mechanisms stipulated under Axis 4.

The Axis 4 implementation structures are intended to maximise the programme’s social and economic benefit through effectively targeted local delivery and the nurturing of a local skills base. The 20% figure is an upper limit, and the local action groups may also be used to deliver certain Axis 1 measures.

It is important to stress that the inclusive local structures envisaged for delivery of the RDP are themselves an integral aim of the programme and as such are compulsory from an EU perspective.

Rural Development Programme

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the progress that has been made in establishing Local Action Groups to deliver Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013. (AQW 2891/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: This work has progressed well and of the 7 proposed Clusters 5 have now been approved by their respective Councils to form Joint Clusters and it is expected the other two to be agreed at full council meetings this month. The 5 agreed clusters are:

7. Antrim, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey
8. Ballymena, Ballymoney, Coleraine, Larne and Moyle
9. Ards, Banbridge, Down and North Down;
10. Armagh, Craigavon, and Newry & Mourne;

11. Magherafelt, Cookstown, Dungannon and Enniskillen;

The remaining two clusters (already passed by sub committee) are:

12. Belfast, Castlereagh and Lisburn; and

7. Omagh, Strabane, Derry and Limavady.

The next step is for Clusters to work with all the representative groups in their areas as a precursor to competitively selecting a Local Action Group (LAG) and funding is being made available to Joint Clusters for the express purposes of doing this, and also for drawing up of Local Action Groups; and for the development of Local Development Strategies.

The Antrim, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey cluster (now called GROW) is now in receipt of animation funding and an invitation has issue to the Ballymena, Ballymoney, Coleraine, Larne and Moyle cluster to submit an application for animation funding.

Climate Change

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what plans she has to integrate climate change into agricultural policies; and to detail the funds that will be allocated for this purpose. (AQW 2926/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Climate change is integrated into my Department's policy-making at the highest level. The DARD Strategic Plan 2006-2011 has, among its strategic objectives, the adoption by the agri-food sector of environmentally sustainable farming methods, further conversion of farmland to woodland and forest, and the increased exploitation of renewable energy opportunities.

Under this overarching concern with climate change, a wide range of DARD-led policies can be expected to mitigate the impact of climate change, or to help local agriculture adapt to those impacts.

These include the agri-environment measure under the Rural Development Programme 2007-13 (with a total budget of £219 million), the Farm Nutrient Management Scheme (some £140m), and the Forest Service schemes (£16.5m).

Other policies seek more specifically to address the challenges and opportunities presented by climate change in the farming and food processing sectors. The proposed £10m Energy from Agri-Food Waste Challenge Fund will encourage the adoption of sustainable energy technologies.

My Department has also secured £4.2m from the Environment and Renewable Energy Fund. This supports

a range of research initiatives by AFBI, including the new Environment and Renewable Energy Centre of Excellence at Hillsborough, as well as CAFRE technology transfer programmes that will help reduce the carbon footprint of the local farming and food processing sectors.

Rivers Agency

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to explain why the Rivers Agency, who are responsible for the Newtownards Canal, do not cut the grass at the lip of the canal bank.

(AQW 2946/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: A major section of the Newtownards Canal is designated within the terms of the Drainage (NI) Order 1973 and as such is subject to routine inspection and subsequent maintenance as required to maintain free flow of water, ensure adequate outfall for discharge of storm drainage and limit the risk of flooding. Cutting the grass at the "lip of the canal" is not necessary to achieve these objectives.

Maintenance Work

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm when maintenance work will be carried out on the roads and drainage infrastructure of Tollymore Forest Park, Newcastle. (AQW 2950/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I can confirm that maintenance work on roads and drainage infrastructure within Tollymore Forest Park is planned in conjunction with significant forestry operations, such as the harvesting and haulage of timber. Currently, there are approximately 3 hectares of forest which have been recently harvested and will be replanted this Spring. Maintenance work to drains is planned to take place within the next few weeks. Any further requirements for maintenance of the roads and associated drainage will be undertaken following completion of the planned replanting work, expected to be later in the Spring.

Forest Service has an ongoing approach to remedial work on drainage and road infrastructure to deal with issues such as damage caused by severe weather conditions.

Newtownards Divisional Veterinary Office

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the reason for the closure

of the Newtownards Divisional Veterinary Office. (AQW 3085/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As the closure of Newtownards Divisional Veterinary Office and its relocation is a property related matter, this is a matter for DFP and not DARD.

Forestry Renewal

Ms Ni Chuilín asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the schemes that (i) are currently in place; and (ii) are planned, for forestry renewal. (AQW 3107/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: (i) Under the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013, my Department's Forest Service can provide grant aid and advice to help farmers and other landowners create new woodland and manage existing woodland.

The Woodland Grant Scheme (WGS) supports the creation of conventional woodland and support is also available for establishment of Short Rotation Coppice (SRC) willow for an energy end use.

In addition, some farmers may be eligible for annual payments to compensate for agricultural income forgone by creating woodland under the Farm Woodland Premium Scheme (FWPS). Payments are made for 15 years for broadleaf woodland and 10 years for conifer woodland. Non-farmers may also be eligible for the FWPS, however the payment rates are less than those for farmers.

Support is also available for those with existing woodlands in the form of a Woodland Environment Grant which assists significant enhancement of biodiversity and a Sustainable Forestry Operations Grant which assists environmental improvements over a five year period.

(ii) The Woodland Grant Scheme and Farm Woodland Premium Scheme have only recently been revised under the new Rural Development Programme and there are no immediate plans to introduce new forestry grant schemes.

Bluetongue Disease

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what actions she has agreed with her counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, to deal with any outbreak of bluetongue on the island of Ireland; and if she will undertake, in conjunction with her counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, to put in place an acceptable east to west zone arrangement

on the island, to encourage flock and herd owners to vaccinate against the disease. (AQW 3355/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My staff and I have been working closely with our counterparts in Dublin in relation to keeping Bluetongue out of the island of Ireland and about contingency arrangements should Bluetongue enter.

DARD and DAFF are employing similar preventative controls. Each jurisdiction has introduced post-import testing for all susceptible animals arriving on the island, with those animals being restricted until negative test results are received.

Staff in both Departments have also been working closely to consider the range of actions to be taken should Bluetongue arrive on the island. The precise method of dealing with any such disease incursion will depend on where the disease appears, its likely means of entry, the vector activity at that time, the availability of vaccine, etc. Various scenarios have been considered and discussions are continuing. Our Bluetongue Working Group, on which major local stakeholders are represented, have also been consulted on these issues.

Until disease is present in an area, the EU legislation does not allow vaccination for Bluetongue. However, we continue to work closely with colleagues in Dublin in relation to resolving the practicalities of any vaccination programme and updating our contingency plans.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Fishing

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the 14 Northern Ireland Water Company reservoirs whose fishing rights leases are managed by his department; (ii) the names of the respective fishing clubs/representative bodies, with whom his department has agreements to manage the fishing rights at any of these sights; (iii) the date upon which the most recent lease agreements expired; (iv) the date upon which the most recent leases were signed; (v) the names of the individuals who signed each respective lease agreement; and (vi) the length of the current lease agreement. (AQW 2917/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poole): The Department lease the fishing rights at the following 14 reservoirs from Northern Ireland Water Limited under a Service Level Agreement.

Name of Reservoir	
1	Copeland (Marshallstown)
2	Dungonnell
3	Killylane
4	Lough Bradan
5	Lough Cowey
6	Lough Lee
7	Lough Mourne
8	Portavo
9	Spelga
10	Stoneyford
11	Woodburn North
12	Woodburn Upper South
13	Woodburn Middle South
14	Woodburn Lower South

(ii) Under a Management Agreement with the Department, Ards District Fly Fishing Club manages the fishing rights at Lough Cowey. The Department manage the fishing rights at the other reservoirs.

(iii) The current Service Level Agreement between the Department and Northern Ireland Water Limited and the current Management Agreement between the Department and Ards District Fly Fishing Club both expire on 31st March 2008.

The current Service Level Agreement between the Department and Northern Ireland Water Limited was signed on 29th March 2007.

The current Management Agreement between the Department and Ards District Fly Fishing Club was originally signed retrospectively on 17th November 2005 and then due to a change of personnel in the Club was revised and signed on 17th November 2006.

The current Service Level Agreement between the Department and Northern Ireland Water Limited was signed by Mr M J Cory, on behalf of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and by Mr Philip Barker on behalf of the Department of Regional Development Water Service.

The current Management Agreement between the Department and Ards District Fly Fishing Club was signed by Mr M J Cory on behalf of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. As you are aware the Data Protection Act restricts the disclosure of personal details in certain circumstances and the Department has in this instance withheld the personal details of the representatives who signed the Management Agreement on behalf of Ards District Fly Fishing Club.

(vi) The current Service Level Agreement between the Department and Northern Ireland Water Limited is for a period of one year. The current Management Agreement between the Department and Ards District Fly Fishing Club is for a period of five years expiring on 31st March 2008.

Infrastructure Costs

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail whether or not his department has responsibility for infrastructure costs, including roads and transport facilities, for a new National Sports Stadium, or if these costs are incorporated into other departmental budgets. (AQW 2930/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: While my Department has lead responsibility for progressing the development of the Multi-Sports Stadium it does not have responsibility for the infrastructure costs, which rest primarily with OFMDFM.

NI Events Company

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm whether or not a business case was made for each event sponsored by the Northern Ireland Events Company. (AQW 3103/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Northern Ireland Events Company's assessment of applications to its funding programmes 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.

Recording Studios Association

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the financial assistance provided by his department to the Northern Ireland Recording Studios Association, in the past three years. (AQW 3144/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has not provided any financial assistance to the Northern Ireland Recording Studio Association.

EDUCATION

Integrated Children's Services

Ms Purvis asked the Minister of Education to detail, by constituency, the distribution of the Renewing Communities monies for Integrated Children's Services; and to confirm if any annual allocation or capital monies remain to be allocated, and the relevant amounts outstanding.[R] (AQW 2087/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): The funding under Renewing Communities for Integrated Children's Services was not distributed on a constituency basis. All recurrent and capital funds have been allocated.

School Admission

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether or not grammar schools will be entitled to use academic criteria for admission purposes, following the implementation of the new transfer procedures. (AQW 2755/08)

The Minister of Education: It is my firm belief that academic criteria, central to a system of academic selection, are unnecessary to the achievement of academic excellence in our post-primary schools and unjust to the 10 and 11 year olds who must be put through the tests academic criteria necessitate. I am therefore committed to achieving consensus for a new system of post-primary transfer which ensures children have access to both academic and vocational education but does not involve either academic or vocational selection. I am committed to achieving the support of the Executive and Assembly to place my proposals on a statutory basis.

Aghavilly Primary School

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether or not Aghavilly primary school, Milford, Co Armagh, will be receiving funding for the implementation of the P1 curriculum for the 2008/2009 school year. (AQW 2834/08)

The Minister of Education: Census data for the school, as verified by the Education & Library Board for the area, show that there are no pupils enrolled in the primary 1 class for Aghavilly primary school for funding in the incoming year. The school, therefore, did not qualify to receive a share of the £3m allocated in the current school year to support the statutory implementation of the Foundation Stage in Year 1 classes in that year.

The school will continue to receive its share of delegated formula funding under the Common Funding arrangement for all schools covered by the Scheme. The Department is also looking, in the context of the Comprehensive Spending Review outcomes once finalised, at providing support to all schools for the implementation of the Foundation Stage curriculum for Years 1 and 2 in 2008/09.

Neo-Natal Hearing Screening Programme

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to prioritise services for children assessed as deaf through the Neo-Natal Hearing Screening Programme, in recognition of the importance of early intervention, and continuing communications support, for deaf children.

(AQW 2901/08)

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 hearing impaired children. 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. The following figures have been supplied by the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards in relation to 2007.

	BELB	SEELB	NEELB	SELB	WELB
Average age of referral	4 days (Only one child was referred during 2007)	3-4 months	7-8 weeks	4 months	1yr
Number of 0-3yrs regularly seen	10	22	21	19	5

Time between referral and contact with family	Initial contact within 1 week and visit within 1 week after referral	Initial contact within 48 hrs and initial visit within 4 days	Initial contact within 48 hrs and initial visit within 1 week	Initial contact within 48 hrs	Initial contact within 48 hrs
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All the Boards recognise the importance of early intervention for babies and young children and the need to avail of relevant training to help develop skills and knowledge in this area to lead to improved delivery of Support Services. As a result of the audit, DE also provided funding to the five 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. Further training on the audiological needs of young children is due to take place in February 2008.

School Amalgamation

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education if she will give an update on the review of the amalgamation of St Joseph's and St Patrick's Primary Schools.
(AQW 2919/08)

The Minister of Education: My department continues to have contact with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools on issues relating to the proposed amalgamation so that the position can be confirmed shortly.

Sudden Cardiac Death

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education what discussions she has had with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in relation to introducing a form of screening to help detect symptoms which might lead to sudden cardiac death in the young.
(AQW 2983/08)

The Minister of Education: I have talked with Minister McGimpsey about this matter and as a result officials from Department of Education have been engaged with colleagues in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in planning a workshop on the issue of Heart Defect Screening. Officials from both departments have attended an initial planning meeting led by the Senior Medical Officer to examine research evidence on heart screening. The proposed workshop will be held on 10 March 2008 at the Island Civic Centre, Lisburn and will bring together leading health experts, government

departments, Public Health Bodies, some schools and Sport NI and Voluntary Organisations.

My Department will cooperate fully with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in the planning of any new health checks and programmes for schools.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail how her proposed arrangements for post-primary transfer will apply to the situation in Newry, where there are four grammar schools, two secondary schools, a high school, and where some catchment areas have an average radius of twenty miles.
(AQW 2984/08)

The Minister of Education: It would be entirely inappropriate for me to speculate on the future structure of post-primary provision within a particular area. I am committed to making a further statement in February on progress towards achieving consensus on new transfer arrangements. That statement will include comment on the establishment of area based planning arrangements, which will ultimately determine the best way of arranging provision within the Newry area.

Reading Recovery Co-Ordinators

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of reading recovery co-ordinators that have been trained in Northern Ireland; and (ii) how many are currently working in that role outside of whole class teaching.
(AQW 2985/08)

The Minister of Education: I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the five Education and Library Boards that between 1998/99 and 2007/08, 650 teachers have been trained in Reading Recovery in the North of Ireland. Of these, 160 are currently working in a Reading Recovery capacity outside of whole class teaching.

In addition a total of 11 Reading Recovery tutors were trained and 8 remain in position across the Education and Library Boards.

Access to Schools

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to ensure equality of access to schools, under her proposals for transfer at ages 11 and 14.
(AQW 2986/08)

The Minister of Education: Equality considerations will underpin all the component parts of my proposals. I am committed to fulfilling my

obligation to assess the equality implications of my policy on transfer to ensure that the overall effect is compatible with the promotion of equality and social inclusion. It is incontrovertible that only when educational pathways are genuinely chosen (as under my proposals), will social and economic background no longer compromise equality of access.

Modern Languages

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education (i) how many teachers will be involved when modern languages are introduced into primary schools; (ii) the length of their contracts; (iii) whether or not preference will be given to teachers who are on the substitute teachers' roll, and who have not yet been in full time employment in education; and (iv) what financial resources will be allocated to the project.

(AQW 2987/08)

The Minister of Education: I believe that introducing children to a second language at an early stage can have huge benefits which is why I am putting a new programme in place for primary schools who wish to opt-in.

I am providing up to £330,000 for the programme in the current school year and am considering what further support can be provided in 2008-09. This will provide for the employment of a network of 50 peripatetic tutors to work alongside teachers, delivering the programme in around 500 schools and focusing on Spanish and Irish. The Boards are managing the recruitment of peripatetic tutors and will set up a call-off list to match them to participating schools. Tutors will be fluent linguists and therefore the programme will provide additional opportunities for unemployed newly-qualified teachers who are fluent in one of the featured languages. Contractual terms will be a matter for the Boards, as the employers, to determine as they work with the participating schools.

Pupil Enrolment

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Education to detail, in relation to each primary and post-primary school in West Tyrone, (i) their enrolment capacity; (ii) the current pupil enrolment; and (iii) the enrolment forecast for the next 2 years. (AQW 2989/08)

The Minister of Education: The following table relates actual enrolments, taken from the latest school census, to enrolment capacity, expressed in terms of approved enrolment numbers which the Department of Education sets for each school.

Schools are legally obliged to remain within their approved enrolment number, however, the table

includes a number of examples where this is not the case. This is explained by the fact that the census figures include pupils enrolled who have a statement of special educational need. The approved enrolment number may legitimately be exceeded if the excess relates to such pupils, due to the fact that they lie outside the open enrolment process, their placement being determined by the content of the statement.

The Department of Education does not routinely forecast school enrolments. Forecasts do form part of the consideration of specific proposals involving capital expenditure, but such forecasts are long-term in nature, spanning 6-7 years from the date of calculation.

PRIMARY AND POST PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN WEST TYRONE CONSTITUENCY 2007/08

School Reference	School Name	Enrolment At October 2007	Approved Enrolment 2007/08
Post Primary			
2230111	St Eugene's High School	147	310
2210065	Castlederg High School	434	450
2210164	Strabane High School	271	550
2230301	Holy Cross College	1369	1830
2230148	St John's High School	157	450
2410096	Strabane Grammar School	398	400
2420065	Loreto Grammar School	917	914
2230298	Sacred Heart College	968	950
2420064	Christian Brothers' Grammar School	941	950
2410066	Omagh Academy	664	660
2260283	Drumragh College	607	580
2210125	Omagh High School	443	530
2230138	Dean Brian Maguirc College	458	440
Primary			
2012344	McClintock Primary School	104	109
2012378	Dunmullan Primary School	68	78
2012392	Drumlegagh Primary School	44	69
2012617	Erganagh Primary School	59	107
2012638	Edwards Primary School	165	203
2012641	Killen Primary School	102	106

School Reference	School Name	Enrolment At October 2007	Approved Enrolment 2007/08
2012648	Gillygooley Primary School	64	98
2012660	Denamona Primary School	88	131
2012669	Queen Elizabeth Ii Primary School	38	61
2012671	Langfield Primary School	43	83
2012674	Bridgehill Primary School	49	105
2012691	Omagh County Primary School	302	393
2012707	Dromore Primary School	44	91
2012708	Strabane Controlled Primary School	232	231
2012709	Trillick Primary School	35	41
2012711	Donemana Primary School	106	162
2016068	Artigarvan Primary School	146	175
2016089	Gibson Primary School	280	436
2016127	Maguiresbridge Primary School	83	104
2016262	Newtownstewart Model Primary School	81	145
2016376	Ardstraw Primary School	64	108
2016395	Gortin Primary School	48	106
2016442	Sion Mills Primary School	258	333
2016645	Bready Jubilee Primary School	86	145
2016663	Cooley Primary School	124	174
2032473	Magheralough Primary School	27	51
2032510	Barrack Street Boys' Primary School	137	285
2032537	Loreto Convent Primary School	215	448
2032573	St Brigid's Primary School	68	80
2032600	Drumnabey Primary School	48	104
2032603	Tummery Primary School	72	95

School Reference	School Name	Enrolment At October 2007	Approved Enrolment 2007/08
2032607	St Mary's Primary School	378	406
2032612	St Matthew's Primary School	32	81
2032628	Knocknagor Primary School	58	65
2032631	Envagh Primary School	24	75
2032639	Drumduff Primary School	51	74
2032662	St Brigid's Primary School	40	94
2032664	St Davog's Scraghey Primary School	19	57
2032676	St Patrick's Primary School	80	142
2032677	Drumlish Primary School	55	52
2032679	St Columba's Primary School	17	69
2032681	St Patrick's Primary School	31	95
2032682	St Eugene's Primary School	54	97
2032683	St Joseph's Primary School	33	72
2032684	St Lawrence's Primary School	208	243
2032685	St Brigid's Primary School	31	58
2032687	St Macartan's Primary School	31	70
2032688	St Eugene's Primary School	40	48
2032689	St Mary's Boys' Primary School	403	552
2032694	St Caireall's Primary School	86	190
2032700	St Joseph's Primary School	92	175
2032702	Evish Primary School	63	69
2032704	Recarson Primary School	127	131
2032705	St Patrick's Primary School	62	86
2032712	Gortnagarn Primary School	68	66

School Reference	School Name	Enrolment At October 2007	Approved Enrolment 2007/08
2032716	St Patrick's Primary School	17	90
2032721	Sacred Heart Primary School	84	92
2032722	Altishane Primary School	41	48
2032723	Roscavey Primary School	34	91
2032724	Loughash Primary School	36	56
2032730	St Columba's Primary School	104	142
2032731	St Teresa's Primary School	133	176
2032737	St Columbkille's Primary School	257	273
2036008	St Patrick's Primary School	160	159
2036053	St Colmcille's Primary School	185	523
2036094	St Patrick's Primary School	203	259
2036095	St Mary's Primary School	194	197
2036096	St Mary's Girls' Primary School	296	645
2036097	St Peter's Primary School	97	140
2036116	St ConOr's Primary School	397	408
2036153	St Seire's Primary School	87	143
2036186	St Dympna's Primary School	88	145
2036291	St Oliver Plunkett Primary School	96	145
2036387	St Patrick's Primary School	50	106
2036389	St Anne's Primary School	266	295
2036415	Our Lady Of Lourdes Primary School	108	134
2036449	Christ The King Primary School	122	337
2036459	St Theresa's Primary School	143	165

School Reference	School Name	Enrolment At October 2007	Approved Enrolment 2007/08
2036557	All Saints Primary School	32	111
2046638	Gaelscoil Ui Dhocartaigh	130	130
2046677	Gaelscoil Na Gcrann	45	58
2066552	Omagh Integrated Primary School	274	276

Source: School Census

Note: Figures for Primary Schools Include Children in Reception and Year 1 - 7 Classes Only.

Common Funding Formula

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Education to (a) state the amount of money available in the Common Funding Formula for each school to support children whose first language is not English; and (b) detail the basic level of support that he would expect to be provided to each child for whom schools claim this allowance. (AQW 2990/08)

The Minister of Education: It is not possible to confirm allocations for these pupils for the 2008/09 financial year as final Budget allocations for schools have yet to be determined.

Under Common Funding Formula arrangements each full-time pupil, whose first language is not English, generates an additional allocation for the school; equivalent to 0.5 of the basic Age Weighted Pupil Unit cash value. Part-time pupils are weighted at 0.25.

In 2007/08 schools were allocated £942.64 for each qualifying full-time pupil, and the total amount distributed to all schools under this factor within the common formula amounted to £3,602,785.

In addition to receiving funding as part of their Common Funding Formula allocation, schools can ask for the assistance of the Inclusion & Diversity Service, operated by the Education and Library Boards.

The Inclusion & Diversity Service offers the following:

- Diversity Co-ordinators who facilitate capacity building by working with the schools on whole school and classroom issues;
- Interpreters and translators that schools can use when speaking to the children, and their parents;
- A North/South toolkit for primary school teachers, with plans to produce toolkits for nursery and post-primary schools in the future; and

- A multi-lingual website to help newcomer parents with EAL children and young people.

Furthermore, teacher training programmes are also being organised. No charge is levied for these services. Schools can therefore use their Common Funding Formula allocation to support EAL children directly.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to outline the alternative options in relation to post-primary transfer, if current proposals fail to achieve consensus in the Assembly. (AQW 3033/08)

The Minister of Education: I have made clear my desire to achieve consensus on my proposals, and I remain of the view that this is possible. My focus is on that goal and I am therefore working tirelessly with educational stakeholders and political representatives to try and achieve a consensual way forward.

Sustainable Schools Policy

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail the viability quotas for (i) primary schools; and (ii) secondary schools, under the new Sustainable Schools Policy. (AQW 3034/08)

The Minister of Education: The Sustainable Schools Policy consultation document proposed six criteria to be used in replying to assess a school's viability, including enrolments. The enrolment thresholds proposed were 105 and 140 pupils for rural and urban primaries respectively, 500 for post-primary schools (11-16) and 100 for sixth forms. I am currently considering the detail of the policy approach, including the issue of enrolment thresholds, in light of the consultation.

Increase Funding

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail what action she is taking to increase funding for primary schools in the 2008-11 period. (AQW 3035/08)

The Minister of Education: I am currently considering the detailed distribution of the budget allocation for Education Services, including the level of funding for primary schools. I will be making an announcement on this shortly.

Pension Contributions

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Education (i) what arrangements are in place for the transfer of

pension contributions, for teachers who reside in Northern Ireland but work in the Republic of Ireland, when they commence teaching in Northern Ireland; and (ii) to confirm whether or not this issue has been raised at a meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council. (AQW 3077/08)

The Minister of Education: There are currently no arrangements in place for the transfer of teacher pension contributions between the North and South of Ireland.

However, at the North-South Ministerial Council (NSMC) Institutional format meeting on 30 October 2007 Ministers agreed that the NSMC Joint Secretariat should convene a working group of relevant Departmental officials to explore options for the transfer of pension rights on a cross border basis (for public sector pensions). The first meeting of the Working Group was held on 10 January 2008 when options were discussed and a further meeting is due to be held during February 2008.

Educational Psychologist

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the impact that delays in children being assessed by an educational psychologist is having on their future educational potential. (AQW 3097/08)

The Minister of Education: A review of special educational needs (SEN) and inclusion is addressing a range of issues associated with the current SEN framework. The review has been focusing on a number of key themes including the nature, quality and extent of provision and support relating to needs. In broad terms, proposals emerging from the review will aim to ensure that all children who face barriers to learning will receive the right support at the right time to allow them to develop their skills and abilities to their fullest potential.

The Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards have informed me that while there have been no systematic studies that have looked specifically at this issue, delays can have a negative impact on children's educational potential. This will vary depending on the child's age, the nature and degree of their disability, the quality of teaching and parental support and the availability of community support. Each child's individual education plan should be reviewed and revised, in consultation with the parents, on a regular basis to ensure that, pending any assessment by an educational psychologist, appropriate interventions can be identified and implemented to meet the child's special educational needs.

Educational Psychologist

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children waiting to see an educational psychologist, in each of the Education Board areas; and what action she is taking to reduce these waiting lists. (AQW 3098/08)

The Minister of Education: With regard to the number of children waiting to see an educational psychologist, I would refer the Member to my reply to AQW 1308/08, tabled by the Member for Strangford, Michelle McIlveen, and published in the Official Report on 23 November 2007.

As part of Budget 2004 Spending Review, the Department provided additional resources to support 24 students training to be educational psychologists at any one time as opposed to the 12 students under the former arrangements.

A review of special educational needs (SEN) and inclusion has addressed a range of issues associated with the current SEN framework, including the effective use of educational psychology services, in meeting the needs of pupils with SEN. Proposals emerging from the review will be subject to public consultation later in the year.

I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) that all boards continually review procedures to try to maintain an effective service. For example most ELBs use the time allocation model of service delivery, whereby schools receive a guaranteed minimum number of annual visits from an educational psychologist on a pre-planned basis, which keeps waiting lists to a minimum. All boards also make determined efforts to recruit additional educational psychologists.

St Joseph's Grammar School

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Education to provide a timescale for the approval of the development proposal for St Joseph's Grammar School, Donaghmore. (AQW 3102/08)

The Minister of Education: There is no Development Proposal for St Joseph's Grammar School, Donaghmore. The Department has been in discussion with the Trustees about the long-term enrolment for the proposed new school and the Trustees have recently submitted a paper to the Department which is being considered.

Funding Allocation

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail the funding allocation to each (i) primary; and

(ii) post-primary school in the Mid-Ulster constituency, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3109/08)

The Minister of Education: The funding allocation delegated to each primary and post primary school in Mid Ulster in each of the last three financial years is set out in the table below:

School Name	Delegated Resources 2004/05 excluding carry over £	Delegated Resources 2005/06 excluding carry over £	Delegated Resources 2006/07 excluding carry over £
Altayeskey Primary	£ 108,596	£ 116,946	£ 129,866
Ampertaine Primary	£ 178,528	£ 205,036	£ 225,191
Anahorish Primary	£ 450,509	£ 454,921	£ 465,245
Aughamullan Primary	£ 144,492	£ 174,218	£ 186,802
Ballylifford Primary	£ 168,479	£ 185,271	£ 190,369
Ballytrea Primary	£ 219,175	£ 251,247	£ 277,104
Bellaghy Primary	£ 124,923	£ 129,955	£ 138,067
Castledawson Primary	£ 252,647	£ 284,976	£ 318,681
Churchtown Primary	£ 120,808	£ 130,123	£ 133,619
Coagh Primary	£ 206,460	£ 203,320	£ 220,873
Cookstown High	£ 3,441,965	£ 3,572,994	£ 3,630,830
Cookstown Primary	£ 1,124,762	£ 1,132,443	£ 1,128,311
Crievagh Primary	£ 113,156	£ 125,325	£ 133,122
Crossroads Primary	£ 222,704	£ 267,799	£ 295,738
Culnady Primary	£ 142,839	£ 161,559	£ 167,001
Derrychrin Primary	£ 279,261	£ 313,620	£ 327,374
Desertmartin Primary	£ 142,321	£ 155,178	£ 167,052
Donaghey Primary	£ 281,240	£ 281,485	£ 294,355
Donaghmore Primary	£ 136,962	£ 144,476	£ 158,169
Drumard Primary	£ 153,650	£ 177,787	£ 186,428
Edendork Primary	£ 599,783	£ 595,608	£ 617,817
Gaelscoil na Speirini	£ -	£ -	£ 61,660
Gaelscoil Ui Neill	£ 229,197	£ 278,287	£ 317,452
Glen Primary	£ 308,161	£ 350,092	£ 378,905

School Name	Delegated Resources 2004/05 excluding carry over £	Delegated Resources 2005/06 excluding carry over £	Delegated Resources 2006/07 excluding carry over £
Holy Family Primary, Magherafelt	£ 1,094,445	£ 1,162,053	£ 1,244,355
Holy Trinity College	£ 2,748,526	£ 2,957,316	£ 3,101,581
Holy Trinity Primary, Cookstown	£ 1,518,914	£ 1,682,249	£ 1,767,950
Kilross Primary	£ 161,289	£ 177,197	£ 194,852
Knockloughrim Primary	£ 160,176	£ 164,506	£ 178,149
Knocknagin Primary	£ 154,277	£ 164,220	£ 171,921
Lissan Primary	£ 208,352	£ 248,831	£ 249,930
Maghera High School	£ 742,240	£ 821,741	£ 850,245
Maghera Primary	£ 247,430	£ 263,662	£ 291,316
Magherafelt High School	£ 1,689,676	£ 1,873,943	£ 1,866,437
Magherafelt Primary	£ 707,341	£ 751,195	£ 801,897
Moneymore Primary	£ 373,139	£ 407,058	£ 422,645
New Row Primary	£ 334,796	£ 377,944	£ 398,952
Newmills Primary	£ 156,860	£ 169,195	£ 182,306
Orritor Primary	£ 395,527	£ 456,934	£ 490,887
Phoenix Integrated Primary	£ 48,801	£ 120,692	£ 174,701
Primate Dixon Memorial Primary	£ 1,178,070	£ 1,305,986	£ 1,397,838
Queen Elizabeth II Primary, Pomeroy	£ 141,770	£ 136,074	£ 152,659
Rainey Endowed	£ 2,532,566	£ 2,714,337	£ 2,808,664
Sacred Heart Primary, Rock	£ 251,867	£ 267,670	£ 282,546
Sperrin Integrated College	£ 497,492	£ 792,567	£ 1,160,140
Spires Integrated Primary	£ 416,311	£ 444,384	£ 484,796
St Brigid's Primary Knockloughrim	£ 354,595	£ 380,024	£ 423,428
St Brigid's Primary Tirkane	£ 329,602	£ 349,972	£ 366,176

School Name	Delegated Resources 2004/05 excluding carry over £	Delegated Resources 2005/06 excluding carry over £	Delegated Resources 2006/07 excluding carry over £
St Brigid's Primary, Mountjoy	£ 297,355	£ 312,144	£ 329,194
St Colm's High School	£ 1,151,294	£ 1,294,053	£ 1,393,431
St Columba's Primary Straw	£ 251,780	£ 278,620	£ 319,376
St Columb's Primary Magherafelt	£ 197,052	£ 274,672	£ 252,630
St Eoghan's Primary	£ 179,896	£ 202,824	£ 216,744
St John Bosco Primary, Ballynease	£ 228,908	£ 243,469	£ 271,169
St John's Primary Swatragh	£ 349,711	£ 412,074	£ 407,772
St John's Primary, Kingisland	£ 248,179	£ 262,413	£ 260,208
St Joseph's College, Coalisland	£ 1,690,281	£ 1,830,793	£ 2,011,307
St Joseph's Primary, Galbally	£ 361,117	£ 410,496	£ 453,481
St Joseph's Primary, Killeenan	£ 217,907	£ 220,330	£ 229,021
St Joseph's, Donaghmore	£ 1,791,955	£ 1,900,873	£ 1,967,835
St Malachy's Primary, Drumullan	£ 148,282	£ 131,233	£ 143,262
St Mary's College	£ 1,032,665	£ 1,152,668	£ 1,154,735
St Mary's Primary Bellaghy	£ 418,709	£ 446,009	£ 477,850
St Mary's Primary Draperstown	£ 475,353	£ 477,230	£ 551,671
St Mary's Primary Glenview	£ 724,994	£ 764,497	£ 764,574
St Mary's Primary Greenlough	£ 347,997	£ 406,462	£ 401,007
St Mary's Primary, Dunamore	£ 332,063	£ 375,488	£ 413,888
St Mary's Primary, Lisbuoy	£ 172,647	£ 199,200	£ 212,258
St Mary's Primary, Pomeroy	£ 440,188	£ 496,603	£ 559,451

School Name	Delegated Resources 2004/05 excluding carry over £	Delegated Resources 2005/06 excluding carry over £	Delegated Resources 2006/07 excluding carry over £
St Mary's Primary, Stewartstown	£ 277,846	£ 295,246	£ 359,371
St Mary's, Magherafelt	£ 3,922,039	£ 4,222,219	£ 4,344,348
St Patrick's College Maghera	£ 4,447,173	£ 4,701,397	£ 4,828,218
St Patrick's Primary, Annaghmore	£ 487,046	£ 549,027	£ 583,810
St Patrick's Primary, Donaghmore	£ 372,335	£ 388,371	£ 450,995
St Patrick's Primary, Loup	£ 304,850	£ 318,986	£ 317,209
St Patrick's Primary, Moneymore	£ 248,301	£ 260,413	£ 270,823
St Patrick's Primary, Mullinahoe	£ 440,298	£ 450,588	£ 451,512
St Peters' Primary, Moortown	£ 389,649	£ 444,818	£ 520,158
St Pius X College	£ 2,779,211	£ 3,160,516	£ 3,347,721
St Trea's Primary	£ 209,883	£ 231,046	£ 259,004
Stewartstown Primary	£ 124,945	£ 133,445	£ 155,247
Tobermore Primary	£ 151,099	£ 177,189	£ 197,670
Woods Primary	£ 220,820	£ 257,862	£ 282,484

School Enrolment

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail the (i) enrolment capacity; (ii) current pupil enrolment; and (iii) enrolment forecast for the next 2 years, for (a) primary; and (b) post-primary schools in the Mid-Ulster constituency. (AQW 3110/08)

The Minister of Education: The following table relates actual enrolments, taken from the latest school census, to enrolment capacity, expressed in terms of approved enrolment numbers which the Department of Education sets for each school.

Schools are legally obliged to remain within their approved enrolment number, however, the table includes a number of examples where this is not the case. This is explained by the fact that the census figures include pupils enrolled who have a statement of special educational need. The approved enrolment number may legitimately be exceeded if the excess relates to such pupils, due to the fact that they lie outside the open enrolment process, their placement being determined by the content of the statement.

The Department of Education does not routinely forecast school enrolments. Forecasts do form part of the consideration of specific proposals involving capital expenditure, but such forecasts are long-term in nature, spanning 6-7 years from the date of calculation.

SCHOOLS IN THE MID ULSTER CONSTITUENCY 2007/08

School Reference	School Name	Enrolment At October 2007	Approved Enrolment 2007/08
Post Primary			
3210035	Magherafelt High School	478	580
3210090	Maghera High School	154	350
3230132	St Colm's High School	377	367
3230142	St Mary's College	282	350
3230168	St Pius X College	894	868
3230234	St Patrick's Co-Ed Comp College	1284	1355
3260303	Sperrin Integrated College	403	450
3420058	Rainey Endowed School	706	701
3420080	St Mary's Grammar School	1077	1074
5210230	Cookstown High School	980	1100

School Reference	School Name	Enrolment At October 2007	Approved Enrolment 2007/08
5230192	ST Joseph's High School	454	680
5230278	Holy Trinity College	744	800
5420073	St Joseph's Convent Grammar School	514	500
Primary			
3012233	Tobermore Primary School	83	130
3012234	Ampertaine Primary School	86	138
3012255	Drumard Primary School	57	116
3012267	Magherafelt Controlled Primary School	325	479
3012282	Culnady Primary School	46	63
3012290	Bellaghy Primary School	32	115
3012291	Maghera Primary School	90	163
3013703	Kilross Primary School	67	112
3013704	Castledawson Primary School	101	145
3016283	Knockloughrim Primary School	63	85
3032011	Altayeskey Primary School	33	46
3032018	St Brigid's Primary School Tirkane	133	203
3032109	New Row Primary School	165	170
3032185	St Trea's Primary School	92	107
3032197	Knocknagin Primary School	36	75
3032205	St Columb's Primary School (Cullion)	84	113
3032218	Crossroads Primary School	128	145
3032246	Ballynease Primary School	90	106
3032257	Anahorish Primary School	191	193
3032268	St Columba's Primary School	128	126
3032271	St Eoghan's Primary School	76	127

School Reference	School Name	Enrolment At October 2007	Approved Enrolment 2007/08
3032273	St Mary's Primary School	218	260
3032274	St John's Primary School	171	195
3032275	Greenlough Primary School (St Mary's)	142	196
3032281	St Mary's Primary School	180	222
3036039	St Mary's Primary School (Glenview)	304	446
3036103	St Brigid's Primary School	187	182
3036292	St Patrick's Primary School (Glen)	160	175
3036562	Holy Family Primary School	497	622
3042162	Desertmartin Primary School	36	48
3046678	Gaelscoil Na Spéiríní	23	36
3066613	Spires Integrated Primary School	201	203
5012280	Moneymore Primary School	155	223
5012615	Ballytrea Primary School	102	143
5012632	Donaghmore Primary School	52	87
5012643	Stewartstown Primary School	35	98
5012649	Coagh Primary School	51	106
5012719	Newmills Primary School	57	113
5012726	Cookstown Primary School	419	719
5013702	Woods Primary School	117	138
5016141	Churchtown Primary School	43	82
5016200	Queen Elizabeth Ii (Pomeroy) Primary School	31	104
5016221	Orritor Primary School	183	203
5016224	Donaghey Primary School	105	142
5032208	Ballylifford Primary School	56	93

School Reference	School Name	Enrolment At October 2007	Approved Enrolment 2007/08
5032262	Lissan (I) Primary School	92	127
5032585	Edendork Primary School	247	310
5032592	St Mary's Primary School	62	77
5032678	St Patrick's Primary School	176	232
5032692	St Mary's Primary School	112	140
5032693	Crievagh Primary School	34	58
5032698	St Brigid's Primary School	135	161
5032699	St Mary's Primary School	167	189
5032703	St Peter's Primary School	158	175
5032713	Derrychrin Primary School	107	206
5032714	Aughamullan Primary School	78	92
5032717	St Patrick's Primary School	172	284
5032729	St John's Primary School	66	191
5036031	St Patrick's Primary School, Loup	120	157
5036033	St Joseph's Primary School	179	213
5036047	St Patrick's Primary School	216	259
5036057	St Malachy's Primary School	34	109
5036108	St Joseph's Primary School	81	170
5036118	St Mary's Primary School	172	220
5036120	St Patrick's Primary School	92	136
5036136	Sacred Heart Primary School, Rock	99	140
5036567	Holy Trinity Primary School	638	794
5036590	Primate Dixon Primary School	444	610
5046637	Gaelscoil Ui Neill	113	116

School Reference	School Name	Enrolment At October 2007	Approved Enrolment 2007/08
5066657	Phoenix Integrated Primary School	79	79

Source: School Census.

Note: Figures For Primary Schools Include Reception & Years 1 - 7 Classes Only.

School Attendance

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education to detail her department's analysis of the levels of school attendance by children from a Traveller background. (AQW 3150/08)

The Minister of Education: There is insufficient data available at this time to analyse particular group's school attendance. The Department is currently developing processes to enable more comprehensive data collection on Traveller children's attendance. A pilot exercise has been commissioned and future roll-out is planned for September 2008 subject to the satisfactory resolution of data protection considerations.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

European Globalisation Adjustment Fund

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, in relation to accessing the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund, in order to assist the workers in Seagate, Limavady, who are soon to lose their jobs. (AQW 2897/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The Minister has had no discussion with the Sec of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulation Reform on this issue. Officials have had discussions with officials in the Department for Work and Pensions which deals with UK applications to the European Commission about the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund. In addition, a senior official from the Department has met with officials from the European Commission to explore the relevance of the Fund to Seagate.

Undergraduate Places

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the numbers of full time equivalent undergraduate places at (i) Queen's University, Belfast; and (ii) each campus of the University of Ulster, for each of the last five years. (AQW 3018/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department has responsibility for the control of full-time undergraduate places. Part-time places are the responsibility of the universities themselves. The number of full-time undergraduate places is subject to a cap as a means of controlling the cost to Government of higher education. The cap, which is known as the Maximum Student Number (MaSN), does not apply to full - time undergraduate students from outside the European Union, to part - time undergraduates or to postgraduate students.

The MaSN allocation for each university in each of the last five academic years is shown below:

	Queen's University Belfast	The University of Ulster	Total
2003/04	10,406	12,522	22,928
2004/05	10,676	12,608	23,284
2005/06	10,902	12,628	23,530
2006/07	11,052	12,702	23,754
2007/08	11,134	12,688	23,822

Source: Department for Employment and Learning - Maximum Student Number (MaSN) allocations 2003/04 – 2007/08

The distribution of places across individual campuses is entirely a matter for each university and so my Department does not hold details of the number of places at each campus of UU.

Information on the number of Full-Time Equivalent undergraduate enrolments (including part-time and non-EU students) at QUB and UU is however available through data supplied by the universities to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). Figures for the last five academic years are shown below.

FULL-TIME EQUIVALENT UNDERGRADUATE ENROLMENTS AT QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST AND UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER 2002/03 - 2006/07

	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Queen's University Belfast	13,780	14,055	14,225	14,540	14,610

		2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
University of Ulster	Belfast	930	1,060	1,025	990	990
	Coleraine	3,630	3,800	3,635	3,720	3,775
	Jordanstown	8,755	9,435	9,450	9,170	8,650
	Magee	2,500	2,755	3,005	2,995	2,790
	Total UU	15,810	17,050	17,120	16,870	16,200
Total	QUB and UU	29,590	31,105	31,345	31,410	30,810

Notes:

- Figures in the table are rounded to the nearest five and so the sum of numbers may not match the totals shown.
- HESA data for the 2007/08 Academic Year will not be available until January 2009.

Source: HESA

Participation of Women

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the projects in which his department is currently involved, that promote greater participation of women in North Belfast in further education and training courses. (AQW 3105/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Department is encouraging participation in Further Education and training by all sectors of society, through various initiatives and activities.

The Belfast Metropolitan College, offers a wide range of courses to meet local demand in its community outreach facilities. In 2005/06 women accounted for 65% of enrolments in further education.

In terms of North Belfast, discrete FE provision is currently being provided to women's groups in Duncairn Gardens, White City and Ardoyne.

Other Departmental initiatives which encourage the participation of women are:

- Essential Skills** courses to improve literacy and numeracy skills: - to date 2,226 women in North Belfast have enrolled for Essential Skills provision, representing 52% of the total enrolments in the area.
- New Deal**, which offers a range of education and training provision; and
- Training for Success**, which offers qualifications, tailored training and employability skills for 16 – 24 year olds.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Tourism Promotion

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what discussions his department has had with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, about a potential tourism promotion package in relation to a terrorist shrine at the former Maze Prison site. (AQW 2929/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): No discussions have taken place between OFMDFM and DETI regarding any potential tourism promotion package in relation to a terrorist shrine at the former Maze prison site.

Tourism Funding

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the tourism funding his department has provided in the East Antrim constituency in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2936/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Figures are still being collated and I will have a substantive answer to you by Wednesday, 6 February 2008 at the latest.

Vacant Industrial Properties

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail his policy on the future development and usage of vacant Government-owned industrial sites/properties. (AQW 3006/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Within my Department all industrial sites and properties are owned and managed by Invest NI.

Invest NI's industrial sites and properties are held exclusively for the use of its clients. Property will only be provided in support of projects that are compliant with Invest NI's business intervention principles and have an immediate demonstrable business need.

The 2007/08 financial year is forecast to be a record year for property sales, with over 100 acres likely to be sold. There is evidence that land that has remained vacant for some time is now attracting healthy interest.

In line with its property policy, and following guidelines set out by the Department of Finance and Personnel, Invest NI regularly reviews its land holding to establish whether any properties can be classified as 'surplus'; land that shows no reasonable prospect of

sale to client companies. The most recent review identified that Invest NI held no surplus land.

On an ongoing basis Invest NI undertakes programmes of infrastructure work right across its property portfolio in order to develop sites for future economic development purposes.

In line with both its enabling legislation and government policy as set out in the Regional Development Strategy, Invest NI will continue to both provide, and develop, land for economic purposes.

Renewable and Efficient Energy

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the government and non governmental or community/voluntary organisations that are working to promote the use of (a) renewable energy; and (b) energy efficiency, in the following sectors (i) household; (ii) community and voluntary sector; (iii) farming; (iv) local government; (v) central government; (vi) small and medium sized enterprises; and (vii) large businesses. (AQW 3022/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

Organisation	Work Area	Sectors
Action Renewables	Action Renewables provides general advice and information on Renewable Energy. It is primarily funded by DETI.	All Sectors
Carbon Trust	The Carbon Trust is a UK wide organisation that provides Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy Advice primarily to the Industrial and Commercial sector.	Small and medium sized enterprises and large businesses, including the farming industry.
Department for Social Development	DSD promotes the use of renewable energy and improved energy efficiency in owner occupied and privately rented housing through the Warm Homes Scheme.	Community and voluntary Household
Northern Ireland Housing Executive	The Northern Ireland Housing Executive promotes the use of renewable energy and energy efficiency through various Heating Replacement Schemes.	Household

Organisation	Work Area	Sectors
Department of Finance and Personnel	DFP's Public Sector Energy Campaign (PSEC) promotes energy efficiency across both Local and Central Government. DFP also administers the Central Energy Efficiency Fund (CEEF) which provides financial assistance to local and central government capital projects.	Local Government Central Government
Energy Savings Trust	The Energy Savings Trust is a UK wide organisation that promotes energy efficiency, renewable energy and low carbon transport to householders and the small commercial sector.	Household Small and medium enterprises Farming
Northern Ireland Energy Agency	NIEA promotes energy efficiency, renewable energy and low carbon transport to householders and not-for-profit organisations.	Household Community and voluntary.

Intelligent Energy

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions he has had with organisations to ensure that applications are made for Intelligent Energy - Europe funding in order to promote energy efficiency and sustainable energy.
(AQW 3026/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Applications for funding for the Intelligent Energy Europe programme can only be made in response to a Call for Proposals from the EU Commission; the 2008 call has not yet been announced. DETI maintains a watching brief and when appropriate will signpost interested parties to the appropriate national contact point.

Granville Industrial Estate

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the total number of businesses currently operating at the Granville Industrial Estate, Dungannon; (ii) the number of those businesses that have resulted from foreign inward investment; and (iii) the amount of land owned by Invest NI, at the Granville Industrial Estate, that is as yet undeveloped.
(AQW 3088/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI holds approximately 50 acres of developed land and 44 of undeveloped land at Granville. The remainder was sold to the private sector in 1994.

There are 2 companies currently on the Invest NI land at Granville Industrial Estate and a third is in the process of developing a site. All of these companies are locally owned. Invest NI is currently negotiating with a company on a major Foreign Direct Investment for the site which is currently at contract stage.

Invest NI plans to have site works completed on the undeveloped land by the end of summer 2009. When complete, this project will release a maximum of 26 acres of land usable as sites for sale to Client companies. The remaining lands will be taken up with roads, landscaping, environmental protection works, etc.

Currently Invest NI has expressions of interests from 16 Client companies for the land to be developed amounting to over 65 acres. This level of interest reflects the overall level of interest in Invest NI land in recent years.

Seagoe Technologies

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the action his department is taking to secure the remaining 300 jobs at Seagoe Technologies; and what actions is he taking to secure further jobs and investment in the Portadown area.
(AQW 3112/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI is working with the Seagoe Technologies senior management on a number of issues directly related to the future of the plant. These include enhancing manufacturing efficiency through lean manufacturing and business improvement techniques together with investigation and development of new products, to widen the company's product range with a focus on high energy efficiency and renewable technologies. Invest NI has an excellent working relationship with Seagoe Technologies' ultimate parent management team the Glen Dimplex group.

Invest NI will continue to sell the benefits of doing business in Northern Ireland to this Group and will be supportive of any investment proposals brought forward which offer sustainable, long term and high calibre employment for all of Northern Ireland.

Focusing on the Upper Bann Parliamentary Constituency area, over the 5-year period 2002-03 to 2006-07, Invest NI Clients in Upper Bann were offered assistance of over £57.4m in support of projects which plan to invest almost £253.5m in the area. Some £17m of this assistance was provided in support of 10 inward investment projects promoting 188 new jobs and safeguarding over 2,100 jobs in the area. During the same time period, 933 offers were made in support of locally owned business start-ups within Upper Bann.

In the Upper Bann area, as is the case in NI in general, Invest NI's assistance is targeted at innovative, high tech, companies such as the Almac Group and ACSNI, both of whom have the skills and expertise to compete and succeed globally. At a local level, Invest NI also continues to work with key stakeholders in the area to introduce initiatives to promote and stimulate economic development.

Irish Language and Culture

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail how the promotion of Irish language and culture has contributed to tourism in Northern Ireland. (AQW 3287/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Visitors tend to want to experience the diversity of Northern Ireland's culture of which the Irish language and Ulster Scots are a part. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (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 to develop product and experiences suitable for visitors in accordance with market demands. When there is a specific request from visitors or the travel industry regarding the Irish language, NITB liaise directly with Foras na Gaeilge.

The Irish language itself is not a tourism product. However, where it impacts upon the development of tourism opportunities the NITB uses www.discovernorthernireland.com as a tool to provide consumers with access to the relevant information.

ENVIRONMENT

Planning Service

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of legal cases that have been taken against her Department in relation to Planning Service matters in the years 2006-2007 and 2007-2008; and to detail (i) the fee paid per legal case; (ii) the number of cases that have been (a) won; (b) lost; and (c) settled out of court; and (iii) the total cost to the taxpayer. (AQW 2704/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): For the purposes of this reply, legal cases have been taken as Judicial Reviews (JR). Details of the number of JRs taken against my Department in relation to Planning Service matters over the 2 years are shown in the attached table.

2006/2007

JR	Fees paid (i)	Outcome (ii)
Magherafelt/Northern Area Plans	£43,000#	On-going
Draft Banbridge, Newry & Mourne Area Plan	£0.00	On-going
Allied Bakeries – Orby Road, Belfast	£0.00	On-going
Peter Woods – Mealough Road, Belfast	£0.00	On-going

2007/08

JR	Fees paid (i)	Outcome (ii)
Sprucefield	£3,000	Application withdrawn
George Best Belfast City Airport	£0.00*	Won
John Hill – Ballywalter Bowling Club	£0.00	Won
Kim Massey	£4,000	Lost
Sperrin Galvanisers	£6,000	Withdrawn
Hetherington	£0.00	Postponed

Interim payment

* The costs of this case were awarded to the Department

The figures for fees paid are the costs to the Department of employing its own legal representation. Costs have been awarded against the Department in a number of cases, but invoices have yet to be received. The total costs to the taxpayer are for the moment therefore the same as the fees paid.

Planning Service

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the level of liaison between the Enforcement Section and the Applications Section of the Planning Service. (AQW 2764/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Divisional Planning Managers are responsible for both development control and enforcement functions. Each Divisional Planning Office and Headquarters Strategic Project Division has dedicated district development control and enforcement teams. These teams are headed up by Principal Planning Officers who work directly to the Divisional Planning Managers.

There is already existing close and ongoing liaison between these two functions within each Divisional Planning Office on a daily basis. Both in cases when officers are investigating potential breaches of planning control, and when planning applications stemming from enforcement cases are submitted, the relevant case officers from the development control and enforcement sections liaise closely in order to ensure that all relevant issues are fully considered. In addition

the enforcement team will proactively monitor certain developments following the grant of planning permission to ensure the development is carried out as approved or conditions have been complied with.

Planning Applications

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of planning applications that remain undetermined or have been refused due to inadequate sewerage infrastructure, in the Cookstown and Magherafelt district council areas, in the last 3 years. (AQW 2770/08)

The Minister of the Environment: As this information is not readily available electronically, a limited manual search of the current applications has been carried out for both areas. Although a new treatment works has been provided in Cookstown, seven applications in the Cookstown area remain undetermined because of inadequate sewerage infrastructure. In the Magherafelt area, 36 applications remain undetermined. In some of these cases, other additional planning issues also need to be resolved. No recent refusals have been issued in either District solely because of inadequate sewerage infrastructure.

Northern Area Plan

Mr Storey asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on the draft Northern Area Plan. (AQW 2807/08)

The Minister of the Environment: While the draft Northern Area Plan was published in May 2005, progress on taking it forward to an Independent Examination was delayed because of a judicial challenge from Seaport Investments Ltd in relation to its Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA).

The final judgement on this challenge, which was handed down on 13 November 2007, did not quash either the draft Plan or the related SEA Regulations. However, my Department is actively considering the implications of the judgement, including preparation for an appeal.

In these circumstances, my Department is not yet in a position to indicate when it would be able to progress the draft Plan to the next Independent Examination stage.

In addition, progress will be influenced by whether or not a recent retrospective decision that it was not feasible to carry out a SEA is also challenged.

Planning Service

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of the Environment to detail Planning Service policy in relation to a dwelling that has been built and approved for retirement purposes, when the person or persons who are granted the dwelling subsequently pass away. (AQW 2815/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Where planning permission is granted for a dwelling house for a retiring farmer or a surviving partner, the occupancy of the dwelling is restricted by condition to a person last employed in agriculture, forestry or fishery including any dependents of such a person residing with him/her.

Article 28 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 provides for an application to develop land without compliance with conditions previously attached to a planning permission. It is therefore possible to apply for planning conditions to be discharged and in the circumstances referred to above, the Department is likely to discharge such a condition.

Fly Tipping

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration she has given to transferring power to local councils to enforce regulations in relation to fly tipping offences. (AQW 2824/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I am fully aware of the need to establish effective enforcement arrangements to deal with fly tipping offences, and have asked my officials to consider policy options for dealing with fly tipping in Northern Ireland. Thereafter, I will assess the need for legislative change to provide councils with greater powers.

Northern Area Plan

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment if she will give a timescale within which the draft Northern Area Plan 2016 will be finalised and adopted. (AQW 2833/08)

The Minister of the Environment: While the draft Northern Area Plan was published in May 2005, progress on taking it forward to an Independent Examination was delayed because of a judicial challenge from Seaport Investments Ltd in relation to its Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA).

The final judgement on this challenge, which was handed down on 13 November 2007, did not quash either the draft Plan or the related SEA Regulations. However, my Department is actively considering the implications of the judgement, including preparation for an appeal.

In these circumstances, my Department is not yet in a position to indicate when it would be able to progress the draft Plan to the next Independent Examination stage.

In addition, progress will be influenced by whether or not a recent retrospective decision that it was not feasible to carry out a SEA is also challenged.

Carrickfergus Castle

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment to explain why the banquet hall in Carrickfergus Castle cannot be hired for events outside opening hours.

(AQW 2848/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The primary functions of Environment and Heritage Service in relation to Carrickfergus Castle are its conservation and its interpretation to the public and school groups. The hiring of the Castle as a venue for private events has always been at the discretion of local management. EHS has experienced difficulties in providing staff to open and close the building in the evenings and staff have, at times, had problems late at night with the behaviour of guests departing from functions. Cleaning up on the following morning in time for opening presents further difficulties, potentially affecting the visitor experience and enjoyment of the property.

As a result EHS is no longer able to offer the hire of the premises for private functions in the evenings, though this service will still be available during normal opening times to the extent that resources and education priorities allow.

Irish Government Building

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail, in relation to the planning application for the new Irish Government building at Notting Hill, Malone Road, Belfast; (i) the use; and (ii) the size of the building.

(AQW 2870/08)

The Minister of the Environment: While no precise address has been specified my Department assumes that the question relates to a planning application for the erection of a replacement dwelling at 29 Notting Hill, Belfast that was granted permission on

12 February 2003. The application was submitted by Dunarden Properties Ltd, High Street, Belfast and the building is to be used as a dwelling.

The dwelling measures 1200 square metres in total providing accommodation on three levels: basement; ground floor and first floor.

Grouse Moors

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration she has given to the introduction of an initiative to revitalise grouse moors.

(AQW 2882/08)

The Minister of the Environment: In March 2008 my department will publish a Species Action Plan for the Red Grouse in Northern Ireland. This Plan will include a number of actions to benefit Red Grouse habitat. I will ask my officials in EHS to send you a copy of the Action Plan as soon as it is published.

Carbon Emissions

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the amount of carbon emitted per annum, as a result of domestic energy use, in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 2894/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The table below shows the levels of carbon dioxide and carbon from residential combustion which includes home and garden machinery for 2003, 2004 and 2005. Figures for 2006 and 2007 are not yet available. It is not possible to attribute indirect emissions resulting from the production of electricity for domestic energy use at power stations.

Year	Kilo tonnes of Carbon dioxide	Kilo tonnes of Carbon equivalent
2003	2905.1	792.3
2004	2879.1	785.2
2005	2729.4	744.4

Source of Figures: The Greenhouse Gas Inventories for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland compiled by AEA Technology

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) what action local authorities can take to reduce greenhouse gas emissions; and (ii) what funding is available to local authorities to take such action.

(AQW 2895/08)

The Minister of the Environment: In a previous answer (AQW 2403/08), you were informed of actions and funding available to assist councils in reducing emissions in relation to biodegradable waste and the Community ECO-Challenge Project.

In general, District Councils, like the rest of society, need to be conscious of the climate change agenda by reducing energy consumption and promoting the use of renewable technologies when discharging their

functions. Some of this can be by way of self-help whilst government regulation can also play a role.

In terms of self-help my officials are working with the local government sector to consider how a commitment to tackle climate change can be galvanised through for example, Climate Change Declarations, similar to the commitment in England by Councils to what is known as the "Nottingham Declaration". The intention is that by councils publicly committing to reducing emissions it becomes a real agenda item within councils and all efforts are deployed on achievement.

In terms of government regulation, from 31 March 2007 Northern Ireland Departments and District Councils have a statutory duty to "act in the way it considers best calculated to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development in Northern Ireland"¹. Climate Change is one of the key elements of the sustainable development agenda.

In terms of future government support, councils with an electricity bill of around £500k per annum are likely to be included in a new carbon cap and trade scheme known as the Carbon Reduction Commitment. My officials are currently working with UK officials to develop this scheme which could be implemented from 2010. The principle by which it will work is that if an organisation is more energy efficient than expected, it can sell surplus allowances to the less efficient. Hence, the overall objective of reducing emissions will be achieved.

1. Section 25 of the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006.

National Park

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions she has had with her Ministerial colleagues in relation to the proposed National Park designation for the Mourne/Slieve Croob area of South Down. (AQW 2896/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I have already stated that I would consult with Assembly colleagues, other Departmental Committees and the Council for Nature and Conservation of the Countryside (CNCC) before making any decision regarding a possible National Park in the Mourne/Slieve Croob area.

I recently received the views of the CNCC and I look forward to receiving the responses of the two Committees that I have consulted on the report of the Mourne National Park Working Party. I also met recently with a delegation from the Mourne area, including Slieve Croob, to hear the views of some groups who are opposed to the designation of a National Park in that area. I will shortly meet with a range of organisations that see benefits in the designation of a Mourne National Park.

I will progress my consideration of this matter as soon as I have heard the views of those whose opinions I have sought. Should I decide to proceed towards the establishment of a National Park in the Mourne/Slieve Croob area, I will of course refer the matter to my Ministerial colleagues, through the Executive Committee, for consideration.

Retirement Dwellings

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the criteria used when assessing all aspects of an application for a retirement dwelling, including the specifications regarding the design and size of the dwelling. (AQW 2952/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Under current policy planning permission will be granted for a dwelling-house on a farm for a farmer retiring from agriculture, forestry or fishing or for the surviving partner of a farmer including any dependents residing with him/her, where the applicant can demonstrate all the following;

- The applicant last worked mainly as a farmer, or is the surviving partner of someone who last worked mainly as a farmer;
- The applicant is of retirement age and has recently retired or is about to retire, or has to retire prematurely from farming because of ill-health or is a surviving partner as in the above criterion;
- The site for the new dwelling-house is on the land which the applicant or, in the case of a surviving partner, her/his partner farmed until retirement;
- The farm is viable and therefore capable of supporting a farmer in full-time employment;
- The farm retirement dwelling is required to facilitate the orderly sale or transfer of the farm holding as a going concern;
- The existing farmhouse will continue to be used as the farmhouse on the farm;
- There are no alternative development opportunities available on the farm; and
- No dwellings or development opportunities have been sold off from the farm holding.

In terms of size, current policy requires that the dwelling can be visually integrated into the rural landscape and the detailed design reflects the traditional pattern of development in the locality.

Thomas Mountain Quarry

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration she has given to the reinstatement

of the Thomas Mountain quarry, Newcastle.
(AQW 2957/08)

The Minister of the Environment: There is a history of extraction of stone on this site dating back to the 1970s. The Department is currently processing a planning application for an amendment of a previous time restricted proposal which expired in 2004 to allow further extraction. This planning application contains a restoration plan which presents an excellent opportunity to highlight the association of Mourne granite itself with the wider Mournes. This is especially relevant given the site's location as part of/ adjoining the Mourne Granite Trail. The site restoration plan views the Eastern Mournes Special Area of Conservation as its context with an emphasis on natural recolonisation of the site by dry heath elements as it is already occurring.

Should planning permission be granted for the proposal then any approval which may issue would be conditioned to require the implementation of the restoration plan.

Planning Policy Statement 14

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm whether or not the revised Planning Policy Statement 14: Sustainable Development in the Countryside will maintain the withdrawal of Countryside Policy Area designation, in existing statutory and published draft development plans, specifically in relation to the draft Magherafelt Area Plan.

(AQW 2958/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My aim is to develop a policy that protects the countryside from unnecessary development and supports rural communities. It is still too early in the process to provide details on the new draft PPS 14.

Conservation Area

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the criteria used when assessing an application for a detached dwelling in a large garden, situated within a Conservation Area.

(AQW 2960/08)

The Minister of the Environment: In a Conservation Area development proposals for new a detached dwelling in a large garden will only be permitted where all of the following criteria are met:

- The development preserves or enhances the character and appearance of the area;
- The development is in sympathy with the characteristic built form of the area;

- The scale, form, materials and detailing of the development respects the characteristics of adjoining buildings in the area;
- The development does not result in environmental problems such as noise, nuisance or disturbance which would be detrimental to the particular character of the area;
- Important views within, into and out of the area are protected;
- Trees and other landscape features contributing to the character or appearance of the area are protected; and
- The development conforms with the guidance set out in conservation area documents.

Other material planning considerations include the need to ensure that there is an adequate means of access to the site and that all necessary water and sewerage services can be provided. Additionally there must be no threat to the amenity of occupiers of adjoining dwellings, including the existing dwelling in whose garden the building will be constructed.

Tourist Accommodation

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the criteria used by the Planning Service when assessing an application for tourist accommodation in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

(AQW 2961/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Proposals for tourist development, either new build or conversion of existing buildings, are judged on their contribution to the needs of the tourism industry and the benefit to the local economy balanced against the objective of protecting the countryside from unnecessary or excessive development. In AONBs in particular there is a delicate balance between exploitation of the exceptional quality of the landscape and over development which would destroy its intrinsic character and quality.

Specific policy relating to AONBs acknowledges while their designation is one of protection and enhancement of these special landscapes, account must be taken of the need to sustain the economic and social well-being of those living in these areas. Tourist related development will be acceptable where it meets tourist needs and supports the local economy and it is not detrimental to environmental quality. It is expected that the conversion of existing buildings will be carried out in a sympathetic manner and new buildings will respect the traditional architectural styles and settlement patterns of the locality.

Tourist Accommodation

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of successful planning applications for tourist accommodation, in the Moyle District Council area, in the last three years.

(AQW 3023/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The current system of electronic data retrieval – 20/20 – does not contain any single classification for this type of application. Accurate and comprehensive figures could be obtained only through a manual exercise which could not be done in the time available and would incur disproportionate costs.

The database has nevertheless been interrogated using the key words tourism, holiday, self-catering, guest house, hotel and bed and breakfast. This has identified the following 16 applications as having been issued with planning approval between January 2005 and January 2008.

- (i) Three applications were granted approval for tourist accommodation.
- (ii) Eight applications were granted approval for holiday accommodation.
- (iii) Two applications were granted approval for self catering accommodation.
- (iv) One application was granted approval for a guest house.
- (v) Two applications were granted approval for a hotel and ancillary accommodation.

Tourist Accommodation

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of unsuccessful planning applications for tourist accommodation, in the Moyle District Council area, in the last three years.

(AQW 3024/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The current system of electronic data retrieval – 20/20 – does not contain any single classification for this type of application. Accurate and comprehensive figures could be obtained only through a manual exercise which could not be done in the time available and would incur disproportionate cost.

The database has nevertheless been interrogated using the key words tourism, holiday, self-catering, guest house, hotel and bed and breakfast. This has identified the following 14 applications as having been refused planning permission between January 2005 and January 2008.

- (i) Two applications were refused permission for tourist accommodation.
- (ii) Nine applications were refused permission for holiday accommodation.
- (iii) Three applications were refused permission for self catering accommodation.

Planning Applications

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of the Environment what action she is taking to meet the target, in the draft Programme for Government, of a six month turnaround in planning applications.

(AQW 3029/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Programme for Government refers to a six month target being applied to large scale planning proposals. These are proposals which are considered to have significant economic or social implications for the whole or a substantial part of Northern Ireland. They will be handled by the Strategic Projects Division of Planning Service and the six month target will apply provided there have been pre-application discussions with an agreed outcome.

Within the Strategic Projects Division I have recently agreed to the creation of two multi-disciplinary teams – teams which are comprised of planning staff as well as professionals from other relevant disciplines – to help to further enhance the efficiency of the service that is provided. I am hopeful these multi-disciplinary teams will be in place by Spring of this year.

My officials have also published guidance for prospective developers/applicants on pre-application discussions. This will assist in the development of procedures for meaningful pre-application engagement between the Planning Service, our key consultees – some of whom will be represented in our multi-disciplinary teams – and applicants. As part of the pre-application discussions, an indicative timescale for processing the application will be provided. Clearly, if this is to be a success in terms of speeding up the process there will be obligations on everyone involved in the planning process, including agents, through a mutual commitment to improve the quality of applications and maximise the prospects of getting through the statutory process quickly.

Ards and Down Area Plan

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the reasons for a 3 month delay in the announcement of the Ards and Down Area Plan.

(AQW 3036/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My

Department is currently waiting for the report of the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) into the public inquiry into the draft Ards and Down Area Plan. The PAC has confirmed that, while work on the report is well advanced, it will now be available no later than 31 March 2008. It had previously indicated that it would be available by the end of 2007.

As the PAC is an appellate body, totally independent of my Department, I am not in a position to detail the reasons for the delay. This is a matter for the PAC.

Road Deaths

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what action she is taking to reduce the rising death toll on roads. (AQW 3037/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Provisional figures indicate that 112 people died on our roads in 2007. That equals the total for the year 1947 and is also the lowest number of road deaths ever recorded. Five children died in 2007, again the lowest on record.

Although the improving figures provide some encouragement, I believe we can do much better in reducing road casualties. I am particularly concerned, for example, that the number of motorcyclists killed last year increased from 14 to 25. That is why I have instigated a review of the road safety strategy, and why I am seeking new measures to complement those that we already know are working.

However, I have no intention of waiting for the outcome of the review before taking action. I have already:

- announced tougher new penalties for using hand-held mobile phones while driving; for not using seat belts or allowing children to travel without belts; for ignoring temporary speed limits; for careless driving and for driving unroadworthy vehicles;
- consulted on compulsory basic training for motorcyclists and on the introduction of a mandatory register for motorcycle trainers;
- announced the introduction of changes to the motorcycle test later this year;
- announced my intention to publish a significantly revised version of the Highway Code in the Spring.

Also on the way are further improvements to school bus safety and changes to the training and testing regime for professional bus and lorry drivers.

- In addition, I have announced my intention to consult shortly on proposals for:
- changes to the arrangements for driver training, testing and licensing;

- the introduction of a graduated fixed penalty and deposit scheme, aimed at improving compliance for all classes of drivers and vehicles including those of foreign origin;
- graduated penalty points for speeding; and
- addressing drink driving issues, including lowering blood alcohol limits and introducing random breath testing.

High Hedges

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm what priority she is giving to the introduction of legislation in relation to the nuisance of high hedges; and to provide (i) a timescale for; and (ii) details of, such legislation. (AQW 3041/08)

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 starting with a policy consultation on the detailed operation of the legislation. However, the timing will be subject to consideration of other competing priorities facing my Department.

Plastic Carrier Bags

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the powers available to her to impose a levy on plastic carrier bags. (AQW 3062/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 envisages that Acts of the Assembly could, among other things, impose a tax. Paragraph 9 of Schedule 2 to that Act, which lists fiscal matters the Northern Ireland Assembly cannot deal with, also needs to be considered. Legal interpretation of these provisions supports the view that, in the absence of a plastic bags levy applying to the United Kingdom as a whole or any comparable tax or duty, the Assembly is competent to legislate for such a levy to be introduced in Northern Ireland.

‘Chicken Litter’ Power Plant

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment 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 3067/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Planning Service staff met with agents acting on behalf of Rose Energy on the following dates:

- 3 August 2006, 31 May 2007 and 13 August 2007 to hear details of the proposal and to discuss the

likely content of a planning application and environmental statement.

EHS staff met with representatives of Rose Energy (including personnel from Moy Park Ltd and O Kane's Poultry Ltd) to discuss the proposal on the following dates:

- 21 December 2005, 24 January 2006 and 25 January 2007 to be briefed on the outline proposals;
- 23 April 2007 and 2 May 2007 to discuss the proposed methodology to be used in the project's Air Quality Impact Assessment;
- 12 October 2007 to discuss (i) proposed cooling water options associated with the proposal and (ii) requirements for a permit application under the Pollution Prevention and Control Regulations (NI) 2003.

I, along with Minister Dodds and officials, met with Rose Energy to discuss their energy from waste project on 27 November 2007 in Parliament Buildings.

Planning Service and EHS staff met jointly with agents acting on behalf of Rose Energy on the following date:

- 6 December 2007 to discuss progress in developing the proposal and the planning procedures likely to be adopted in processing the planning application.

EHS staff met with representatives of Rose Energy to discuss the proposal on the following date:

- 18 December 2007 to discuss and review the cooling water options

'Project Better Place'

Mr Savage asked the Minister of the Environment what is her assessment of the 'Project Better Place'; and what consideration she has given to proposals to adopt such a plan. (AQW 3068/08)

The Minister of the Environment: You should be clear that direct functional responsibility for transport policy falls to the Department for Regional Development, though other Departments will have an interest. However, I recognise that amongst the actions required to reduce greenhouse gas emissions technological development will be necessary. Hence, "Project Better Place" may be an example of how electric cars and more specifically "recharging networks" might be of value in the future.

Marine Nature Conversation

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of the Environment if she will seek to have marine nature

conversation powers devolved to the Executive.

(AQW 3104/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I have no current plans to seek devolution of marine nature conservation to the Executive.

Road Safety Strategy

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of the Environment to detail how she plans to implement the Road Safety Strategy. (AQW 3106/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The current road safety strategy, published in November 2002, includes casualty reduction targets and 164 action measures to be undertaken by DRD's Roads Service, the Police Service of Northern Ireland and my Department.

The overall strategic target is to reduce fatal and serious injuries by one third, to 1200 or fewer by the year 2012, from the annual average for 1996 to 2000 of 1750. A further target is to halve the numbers of child deaths and serious injuries to 125 or fewer from the average of 250 over the same period.

The current strategy is implemented through cross agency working arrangements. Responsibility for monitoring progress rests with the Road Safety Review Group, which comprises senior officials from DRD, PSNI and DOE. Most action measures in the current strategy have been implemented, and new measures have been progressed since the return of devolution.

Since coming into office I have also instigated a Ministerial road safety group to consider progress and determine the way forward at a strategic level.

Good progress has been made and by the end of 2006 overall deaths and serious injuries had been reduced by 24% and child deaths and serious injuries by 39%. Provisional figures for 2007 indicate that there were 112 deaths, including five child deaths, the lowest totals on record.

At a recent meeting with the Environment Committee, I outlined proposals for actions I intend to take over the next 18 months to address key road safety issues such as speeding and drink driving, and the specific problems of young drivers and motorcyclists. At that meeting I also indicated that work had begun on a fundamental review of the existing arrangements with a view to introducing a new strategy by 2010.

I expect a replacement strategy to include challenging new casualty reduction targets and measures to reduce casualties significantly through education, training, engineering and enforcement.

Implementation will be considered in detail during the preparation of the new strategy, but the objective will be a fully integrated, coherent and coordinated approach to delivery.

Road Safety Information

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of the Environment what action she is taking to provide road safety information and awareness for schools and youth services. (AQW 3115/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department's Road Safety Education Officers (RSEOs) promote and deliver road safety education for children and young people in line with best practice guidelines. The guidelines are based on research which recommends that road safety education of children and young people is best carried out by professional teachers on a regular structured basis with RSEOs providing appropriate teaching resources, expertise, teacher training and support. RSEOs meet regularly with teachers and where appropriate deliver interactive road safety sessions to supplement and reinforce teachers' work.

RSEOs also work closely with teachers on the delivery of specific initiatives such as practical child pedestrian safety training in 75 primary schools in areas of social need, and cycle proficiency training, with around 9,000 children trained annually. Within post-primary schools, RSEOs actively promote the timetabling of road traffic studies and a GCSE in motor vehicle and road user studies (MVRUS) and provide the necessary teaching materials and resources, teacher training, advice and support to deliver these. In the 2007-08 school year, around 175 schools are timetabling road traffic studies and, of these, 77 are offering MVRUS. A driver training scheme is another initiative delivered in post-primary schools. Each year my Department also provides a five-week road safety theatre-in-education tour for school children aged 5-9 years and two further tours aimed at children and young people in post-primary schools.

Through an annual requisition, infant, primary and post-primary schools can order a selection of free road safety teaching materials and resources from my Department, up to a value determined by the number of full-time teaching staff. A road safety teaching aid calendar is also distributed free of charge to every classroom in every nursery and primary school in Northern Ireland. The calendar contains teaching notes and curriculum links to assist teachers in teaching road safety.

Within the past year, my Department has developed a road safety education website that includes a range of information, animations, interactive games and

advice for children and young people. Also included is specific advice and information for teachers and parents. RSEOs actively promote the website within schools both as a source of information and as an education tool. New interactive games are currently being developed.

The delivery of road safety education to children in line with best practice is fully supported by road safety practitioners as the most effective means of ensuring that all children and young people receive road safety education on a regular basis throughout the school year.

Ards and Down Area Plan

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on the when the Down/Ards Area Plan is going to be made available. (AQW 3209/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department is currently awaiting receipt of the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) report into the public inquiry of the draft Ards and Down Area Plan. While the inquiry ended in January 2007 the PAC has confirmed that work on the report is well advanced and it will now be available no later than 31 March 2008. It had previously indicated that it would be available by the end of 2007.

On receipt of the report my Department is committed to progressing towards adopting the final plan as a matter of priority but progress will be dependent on the contents of the report and any additional work required.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Central Payments System

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to state the number of credit/debit cards held by each department, and to indicate when he expects a central payments system to be complete.

(AQW 2709/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): The number of credit/debit cards held by each department is detailed in the table below:

Department	No of credit cards	No of debit cards
DARD	0	0
DCAL	17	0
DE	2	0
DEL	0	0

Department	No of credit cards	No of debit cards
DETI	1	0
DFP	1	0
DHSSPS	12	0
DOE	1	0
DRD	0	0
DSD	1	0
OFMDFM	3	0
Total	38	0

It is anticipated that all departments will move to Account NI, the central payments system, by 1 April 2009.

Staff Disciplinary Process

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to the answer to AQW 2327/08, what is his assessment of why (i) the Department for Employment and Learning; and (ii) the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, have a significantly higher number of staff who are undergoing a disciplinary process as a result of an unacceptable sickness record, compared to other departments. (AQW 2846/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Given the similar nature of these questions I have addressed both in this joint answer.

Taking AQW 2846/08 first, my original answer on this matter (AQW 1629/08) refers. The figures provided in that answer related only to each Northern Ireland Government Department as requested. Executive Agencies and NDPBs were therefore excluded from the answer.

To a large extent this explains the apparent disparity in the figures with DARD and DEL presenting higher figures than other core departments.

The details requested in AQW 2847/08 are set out in the attached table. It includes the number of staff currently undergoing inefficiency action as a result of an unacceptable sickness absence record. The overall figures presented include NI Government departments, Executive Agencies and NDPB (where such information is available).

For the purpose of answering these questions, the term 'disciplinary procedures' has been interpreted as inefficiency in line with the current NICS policy.

Departments (including their Executive Agency and NDPBs (where available))	Overall number of staff with a live warning or under notice of dismissal at January 2008
--	--

DE	19
DCAL	18
DFP	135
DSD	917
DHSSPS	17
DETI	49
OFMDFM	10
DRD	134
DOE	180
DEL	155
DARD	204
Overall	1838

Staff Disciplinary Process

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of staff in each Government department that are currently going through a disciplinary process as a result of an unacceptable sickness record. (AQW 2847/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Given the similar nature of these questions I have addressed both in this joint answer.

Taking AQW 2846/08 first, my original answer on this matter (AQW 1629/08) refers. The figures provided in that answer related only to each Northern Ireland Government Department as requested. Executive Agencies and NDPBs were therefore excluded from the answer.

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Building Regulations

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to release the technical and financial evidence, and policy advice, in support of his decision to abandon plans for revised building regulations in relation to the installation of renewable energy technologies in new homes. (AQW 2859/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am happy to place in the Library a copy of the Regulatory Impact Assessment produced in association with the former Secretary of State's proposal to amend the building regulations to make microgeneration mandatory in all new buildings. The Regulatory Impact Assessment shows clearly that while it may be technically feasible to require all new buildings to have a renewable energy source, it is not currently cost-effective to do so. I will also provide you with a copy of the policy advice I received on this matter from officials, which raises other issues which I took into consideration when making this decision.

I did not meet with any representatives of the construction industry in the lead-up to making this decision; however my officials met with a group of major stakeholders with an interest in renewable technologies, including the Construction Employers Federation, in order to inform the formulation of policy. In addition, officials consulted regularly with the Northern Ireland Building Regulations Advisory Committee (NIBRAC). This statutory Committee is made up of representatives from the construction industry, including designers, suppliers, engineers and building control practitioners. The role of NIBRAC is to advise the Department's proposed amendments to the building regulations. NIBRAC was unanimously of the opinion that it was not appropriate to make microgeneration mandatory at this time and specifically asked that I be advised accordingly.

Finally, you have asked me to provide full details in support of my decision to overturn the former Secretary of State's proposal for mandatory microgeneration. The Regulatory Impact Assessment and the policy advice contained in the submission accompanying this response provide that information. I support fully the need to reduce our carbon footprint. However I remain unconvinced that amending building regulations to introduce a mandatory requirement for microgeneration in all new buildings is the most appropriate mechanism to achieve this at this time. It is widely recognised, including by many who support renewable technologies, that improving the thermal efficiency of the fabric of buildings is the most effective and cost-efficient way to reduce carbon emissions from buildings. It is important to note that this proposal related to new buildings only, approximately 1% of the Northern Ireland building stock.

A recent amendment to the Northern Ireland building regulations that came into operation in November 2006 set standards that reduce energy usage in buildings which are subject to these regulations by up to 40% on previous standards. There will be a corresponding 40% reduction in carbon dioxide emissions from these buildings. I trust you will appreciate this significant improvement over previous standards which required good standards of thermal performance. The new standards are fully in line with those in England & Wales and Scotland. It should be noted that there is no requirements for mandatory microgeneration in any part of the UK, nor are there any plans to introduce such a requirement.

The inclusion of low and zero carbon energy sources is facilitated fully in the current building regulations and the "Whole Building Approach" offers designers the flexibility to take any number of routes, including microgeneration, to match, or indeed improve on, the carbon emissions target set for the building.

I have instructed my officials to study the feasibility of further reducing carbon emissions targets for new buildings by an additional 25% by 2010, as a further step towards zero carbon homes.

Building Regulations

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what meetings he held with the construction industry, including the Construction Employers' Federation, in the lead-up to his decision to abandon plans for revised building regulations in relation to the installation of renewable energy technologies in new homes; and to provide details of these meetings.

(AQW 2861/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am happy to place in the Library a copy of the Regulatory

Impact Assessment produced in association with the former Secretary of State's proposal to amend the building regulations to make microgeneration mandatory in all new buildings. The Regulatory Impact Assessment shows clearly that while it may be technically feasible to require all new buildings to have a renewable energy source, it is not currently cost-effective to do so. I will also provide you with a copy of the policy advice I received on this matter from officials, which raises other issues which I took into consideration when making this decision.

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I have instructed my officials to study the feasibility of further reducing carbon emissions targets for new buildings by an additional 25% by 2010, as a further step towards zero carbon homes.

Building Regulations

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide full details in support of his decision to abandon plans for revised building regulations in relation to the installation of renewable energy technologies in new homes. (AQW 2862/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am happy to place in the Library a copy of the Regulatory Impact Assessment produced in association with the former Secretary of State's proposal to amend the building regulations to make microgeneration mandatory in all new buildings. The Regulatory Impact Assessment shows clearly that while it may be technically feasible to require all new buildings to have a renewable energy source, it is not currently cost-effective to do so. I will also provide you with a copy of the policy advice I received on this matter from officials, which raises other issues which I took into consideration when making this decision.

I did not meet with any representatives of the construction industry in the lead-up to making this decision; however my officials met with a group of major stakeholders with an interest in renewable technologies, including the Construction Employers Federation, in order to inform the formulation of policy. In addition, officials consulted regularly with the Northern Ireland Building Regulations Advisory Committee (NIBRAC). This statutory Committee is made up of representatives from the construction industry, including designers, suppliers, engineers and building control practitioners. The role of NIBRAC is to advise the Department's proposed amendments to the building regulations. NIBRAC was unanimously of the opinion that it was not appropriate to make microgeneration mandatory at this time and specifically asked that I be advised accordingly.

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The inclusion of low and zero carbon energy sources is facilitated fully in the current building regulations and the "Whole Building Approach" offers designers the flexibility to take any number of routes, including microgeneration, to match, or indeed improve on, the carbon emissions target set for the building.

I have instructed my officials to study the feasibility of further reducing carbon emissions targets for new buildings by an additional 25% by 2010, as a further step towards zero carbon homes.

Registration Applications

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the processing time at Land Registers of Northern Ireland for any registration applications relating to Ballyallaght Farmyard Cottages, Bushmills, in October or November 2007; and (ii) any such applications that were fast-tracked. (AQW 3132/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: An application for Site 1 Ballyallaght Farmyard Cottages was first lodged in Land Registers on 23 October 2007.

The application was rejected and returned to the lodging solicitor on 30 October advising that same

could not be processed. A revised application was relodged on 15 November 2007 with a written request that the transaction should be expedited.

The relodged case was dealt with under the normal day code procedures and as all papers lodged were in order and the Digital Map update required for the property was in place, it was not necessary to expedite. The application was registered on 26 November 2007.

The above application was not fast-tracked.

Domestic Property Registrations

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the average processing time for domestic property registrations at Land Registers of Northern Ireland. (AQW 3133/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The average turnaround times for all regular transactions which have been accepted into Land Registry is 19.6 days.

The average turnaround time for a non regular application which has been accepted into Land Registry is 58.48 days.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Neonatal Hearing Screening

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of children assessed by the neonatal hearing screening programme, since it was implemented, who were subsequently assessed by audiology services as mild, moderate, severe or profoundly deaf, broken down by (i) Health and Social Services Board; and (ii) Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 2751/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): The Boards and Trusts do not currently hold this information in this form. The newborn hearing screening programme, which was introduced in October 2005, aims to identify children with a permanent, unilateral or bilateral hearing impairment of 40dB or greater. The regional newborn hearing screening group is in the process of collating and quality-assuring data on all cases referred to audiology from screening. The group will use this information to assess the overall effectiveness of the programme in terms of early diagnosis.

Neonatal Hearing Screening

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to publish statistics for the neonatal hearing screening programme. (AQW 2752/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Data are recorded, collated and quality-assured for the purposes of planning, managing, monitoring and evaluating the programme, rather than with a view to publication. Anonymised information is provided on request, and such data was shared at a hearing screening seminar in May 2007 with key stakeholders including non-government organisations such as the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) and the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID).

Neonatal Hearing Screening

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number and percentage of children successfully screened by the neonatal hearing screening programme, since it was implemented, broken down by (i) Health and Social Services Board; and (ii) Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 2753/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This information in the table below details the number of children screened and this number as a percentage of all babies born, by quarter from 1 October 2005 until 31 March 2007. Data for the year 2007/08 are not yet available.

TAKE-UP OF NEWBORN HEARING SCREENING, BY HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE TRUSTS AND BOARDS

COLUMN A: TOTAL NUMBER OF BABIES SCREENED

COLUMN B: THIS NUMBER AS % OF ALL BABIES SCREENED WITHIN 3 MONTHS OF BIRTH

Trusts	Southern		Northern		Western		South Eastern		Belfast			
Boards	Southern		Northern		Western		Eastern A B				NI	
	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
1 Oct – 31 Dec 2005	1202	96.6	1309	97.0	929	94.9	884	95.4	979	95.4	5303	96.0
							1863 95.4%					
1 Jan – 31 March ‘06	1090	97.0	1338	97.5	968	95.7	949	96.1	971	96.0	5316	96.5
							1920 96.1%					
1 Apr – 30 June ‘06	1272	97.5	1405	97.7	950	98.0	945	98.0	1051	97.2	5623	97.7
							1996 97.6%					
1 July – 30 Sept 2006	1288	96.8	1568	98.4	1018	98.5	1077	98.1	1048	94.9	5999	97.4
							2125 96.5%					
1 Oct – 31 Dec 2006	1233	97.6	1395	98.2	1026	98.2	1041	98.4	1071	97.1	5766	97.9
							2112 97.7%					
1 Jan – 31 March ‘07	1241	98.3	1404	98.9	915	95.6	1055	99.5	1062	98.3	5677	98.2
							2117 98.9%					

Health Centres

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of new health centres that are (i) planned; (ii) under consideration, in the Strangford constituency in the next 3 years. (AQW 2931/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Primary & Community Care Infrastructure (PCCI) programme is a modernisation programme to provide for a range of community based projects over the next 10 years for primary care

facilities including Health and Care Centres, facilities for Learning Disability, Physical Disability, Mental Health, Elderly Mentally Ill facilities, Adult Centres and Children's Homes. Within the current Budget there is an allocation of £40 million for these facilities, which allows the first five of these projects to be progressed over these next 3 years. Business Cases for these projects, which have been prioritised in consultation with the Boards and Trusts, are currently with my Department for consideration. These include four Health and Care Centres and an Integrated Community Mental Health Treatment Centre.

The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has identified as its first priority a new Health and Care Centre for Dunmurry. In addition the Trust is presently reviewing its remaining PCCI plans with a view to confirming a priority list of other schemes across the Trust area, including the Strangford constituency.

As part of this review of investment needs, the Trust is considering options in to address the needs of the Bangor and Ards communities and also the prospect of developing smaller primary care facilities to address the needs of more dispersed communities across the constituency.

The Trust expects to be in a position to confirm its assessed priorities to the Eastern Health & Social Services Board, and subsequently my Department for consideration, in the spring of 2008.

Community Nurses

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the increase in the numbers of community nurses in the Strangford constituency in the next 3 years. (AQW 2932/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Staffing levels are a matter for individual Trusts, based on service requirements and available resources. I am aware, however, that the South Eastern Trust is currently reviewing the provision of District Nursing services, with a view to providing 24 hour access to the service throughout the entire organisation. The review is not yet sufficiently advanced as to be able to provide details on numbers and the information requested is not specifically available for the Strangford area.

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 nurses, both within the acute and community setting.

Published reviews can be found on the Departmental internet site at

<http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/hrd/wpu/wpu-planning/wpu-publications.htm>

Ambulance Service

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his strategy for improving the arrival times for the Northern Ireland

Ambulance Service in reaching isolated rural areas. (AQW 2963/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has been actively working for a number of years with the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) on a range of developments to help provide a more responsive and speedy service throughout Northern Ireland including rural and sparsely populated areas. These include the introduction of:

- additional ambulance deployment points throughout Northern Ireland, particularly in rural areas;
- Rapid Response Vehicles which can get potentially life saving treatment to patients quickly until an A&E ambulance arrives;
- geographic information systems, including digital mapping, to Ambulance Control;
- new computer assisted dispatch systems, telephony systems and digital radio systems; and
- automatic vehicle location and satellite navigation systems to ensure the nearest ambulance responds to an emergency and that it is sent by the shortest route;

In addition, my Department is exploring the feasibility of introducing first responder schemes in rural areas to improve response in emergency situations. These schemes train volunteers living in the community who can be tasked by ambulance control to provide life-threatening first aid until an ambulance arrives. First Responders are not a substitute for the ambulance service but are complementary to it.

Personality Disorders

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the support that is available to neighbours of people with a serious personality disorder who have a history of erratic behaviour related to that disorder. (AQW 2964/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There is no direct support available from the Health and Social Services to neighbours of people with a serious personality disorder who have a history of erratic behaviour related to that disorder. If neighbours have a complaint about a patient's behaviour they should contact their local Health and Social Services and explain their concerns.

North-South Health Issues

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail all costs incurred

by the North-South bodies in relation to health issues.
(AQW 2971/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department, along with the Department of Health and Children, in the Republic of Ireland, are responsible for one North-South Implementation body, the Food Safety Promotion Board (FSPB). The FSPB role focuses on the promotion of food safety and protection of health. The (as yet unaudited) FSPB expenditure for the calendar year 2007 was approximately £6,459,000 broken down as follows:

FSPB Main Programmes	£k
Marketing	2,180
Food Science	511
Human Health and Nutrition	1,442
Salaries, overheads, other non-programmed expenditure	2,326
Total	6,459

Mental Health

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the current expenditure on mental health; (ii) the percentage of the total health budget that this represents; and to confirm whether the spend on mental health has changed in (a) real terms; or (b) as a proportion of the health budget, in each of the past five years.

(AQW 2982/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A total of £190.7m was spent by Health & Social Services Boards in commissioning mental health services in 2006/07. This represented 7.5% of total commissioning expenditure. The table below shows mental health expenditure in the period 2002/03 to 2006/07, adjusted to 2006/07 prices. Expenditure, in real terms, increased by 23% over the period. The table also shows how mental health expenditure remains substantively the same percentage of total commissioning expenditure over the same period.

	Mental Health Commissioning Expenditure at 2006/07 prices*	Percentage of Total Commissioning Expenditure
Year	£m	%
2006/07	190.7	7.5
2005/06	182.9	7.5
2004/05	172.5	7.5
2003/04	165.0	7.6
2002/03	154.7	7.8

* Figures were inflated to 2006/07 prices using the HM Treasury measure of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), a broad measure of inflation.

Wanless and Appleby Recommendations

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that, in the event of his department implementing the (i) Wanless; and (ii) Appleby recommendations, he will be ensuring that equality consideration will be an 'add-on' within the delivery of health and social care. (AQW 2993/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Sir Derek Wanless draws attention to similar issues as Appleby concerning productivity but also to the importance of more targeted Public Health initiatives and other initiatives which assist people to engage knowledgeably in regard to their own health and to manage their own conditions. This is crucially important if a free health service is to be sustainable.

Implementing the Appleby recommendations has and will bring about improved efficiency which will enable the HSC to treat more people from its finite resources. Keeping waiting lists low, for example, will improve equity of access to acute services, as people who cannot afford to go private and who therefore stay on the waiting list, will stay on the waiting list for less time.

I therefore see addressing inequity, and indeed the basic sustainability of a free universal health service, as intrinsic parts of the forward course charted by the two reports.

Furthermore, in Northern Ireland, resources are allocated to all areas through a funding formula that takes explicit account of age, poverty, rurality and other indicators of need.

Deprivation and Inequalities in Care

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what arrangements he has put in place for the funding applications that many community and voluntary groups have submitted to address deprivation and inequalities in health and social care delivery. (AQW 2994/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department currently awards funding to some 76 voluntary and community bodies to assist meeting business objectives in improving the health and well being of the people of Northern Ireland, including tackling deprivation and inequalities in health and social care delivery.

These awards follow a 3 year cycle, with regional bodies submitting applications once every 3 years for

core funding in respect of central administration costs. Project Funding Applications for specific business objectives in respect of innovation and development are made available annually.

The Departments grant making procedures are set out in the Departmental Grants Manual and can be accessed on the DHSSPS website www.dhsspsni.gov.uk

In addition and from time to time, other specific programme funding is made available to the voluntary and community sector to assist the Department meet specific priority business objectives.

Private Company Carers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of carers available through private companies in the (i) Ards Borough Council area; and (ii) Strangford constituency, in the last 3 years. (AQW 2996/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information is not available in the form requested or for geographies such as council area or parliamentary constituencies. However, the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, which is responsible for service provision in these specific areas, currently have 579 domiciliary care staff employed by various private domiciliary providers to work within the Trust area. In the last 3 years it is estimated that there were, on average, between 448 and 472 staff employed by private domiciliary providers to work in the Trust area. Not all of these staff will be full time and many will have a variable working pattern.

Ambulances

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of emergency requests for ambulances made in (i) Newtownards; (ii) Comber; and (iii) Ballygowan, in the last 3 years. (AQW 2997/08)

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.

Ambulances

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of emergency requests for ambulances that have been made in the Ards Peninsula area in the last 3 years. (AQW 2998/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information in the table below is based on the BT22 postcode which covers the majority of the Ards Peninsula area. The calls received include duplicate and hoax/malicious calls as well as those where an ambulance was no longer required.

	2005	2006	2007
Calls Received	770	818	858
Calls Responded to	688	746	773

Attacks on the Ambulance Service

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of recorded attacks upon Northern Ireland Ambulance Service vehicles in each of the last five years. (AQW 3013/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is contained in the table below.

Year	Attacks on Northern Ireland Ambulance Service Vehicles
2003	9
2004	9
2005	14
2006	14
2007	12

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 Ambulance Service in each of the last five years; and (ii) the number of these calls that were found to be malicious. (AQW 3014/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is contained in the table below.

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Number of Emergency Calls	83,734	86,893	101,548	111,351	123,545
Number of Malicious Calls*	6,610	8,972	8,808	8,742	8,235

* Includes hoax callers, no case at scene, and caller hung up without details given.

Physical Assaults

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of physical assaults upon Health Service workers in each of the last five years. (AQW 3015/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of physical attacks against health service workers has been recorded since 1 April 2004. On a six-monthly basis employers report all such incidents to the Department and the table below details the number of attacks since 2004.

	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008 (1 April 2007 – 30 September 2007)
Total Number of Physical attacks recorded	3825	3590	4283	2049

Fire and Rescue Service

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of attacks upon Fire and Rescue Service appliances and vehicles recorded in each of the last five years. (AQW 3016/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Attacks on appliances are recorded as indicating some level of damage / inflicted on appliances / vehicles. The table below details such recorded incidents over the last five calendar years.

Year	Damage to Appliances
2003	86
2004	73
2005	53
2006	40
2007	41

Private Finance Initiative

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of Private Finance Initiative projects being considered for new build projects within the Health Service and their location. (AQW 3017/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are two new build projects currently being procured using the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) methodology. They are the new South West Acute

Hospital north of Enniskillen and the new Enhanced Local Hospital Complex at Omagh.

Decisions on the procurement method to be used for future new build projects will be based on a rigorous value for money and affordability assessment for each project.

Health and Care Centres

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what the proposed new Health and Care Centres will cater for.

(AQW 3019/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The new Health and Care Centres will provide a wider range of services in the community, including diagnostic testing and minor surgery, to improve access and responsiveness, and support greater integrated working among health and social care professionals and between primary and secondary care sectors. What each centre will provide will be influenced by factors such as local need, safety, value for money and the assessment of existing services.

Serious Personality Disorders

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the support that is provided to people with a serious personality disorder, who live on their own. (AQW 3025/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department's policy is to enable those with disabilities, including serious personality disorder, to achieve the highest standards of living possible and to be fully integrated into society. Anyone with a mental illness, living in the community, will have a package of care pitched at a level specific to their particular needs. This package of care may involve active participation from a community mental health team. This is aimed, inter alia, to minimise any disruption to their lives or others in the community.

Public Car Parking

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the number of public car parking places available at (i) Altnagelvin Hospital; (ii) the Royal Hospital; and (iii) the City Hospital, Belfast; and to detail the car parking charge tariffs, including any overnight rates, in each of these hospitals. (AQW 3031/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is not possible to distinguish balance

dedicated staff and dedicated visitor parking areas at Altnagelvin. The information available, which includes free disabled spaces, is detailed in the table below:

	Altnagelvin	Royal Group of Hospitals	Belfast City
Public Car Parking Places	1500	645	1250
Charges	£	£	£
0-1 hours	0.50	1.00	1.00
1-2 hours	1.00	1.00	1.50
2-3 hours	1.50	1.00	2.00
3-4 hours	2.00	1.00	2.50
4-5 hours	4.00	1.80	4.50
5-6 hours	6.00	1.80	7.50
6-8 hours	8.00	3.60	10.00
8-24 hours	10.00	3.60	10.00

Altnagelvin has 22 car parks in total and of these 2 are 'pay as you park'. Those parking overnight would tend to use the free car parks. A new 'pay as you park' with 43 spaces is opening soon and fees are expected to be 50 pence per hour. Outpatients and day patients have access to a 184 space car park which is free with a code provided on the appointment letter. A permit holder facility for urgent services/community services is also operated for chaplains, community midwives etc.

At the Royal and City hospitals there is not a specific charge for overnight stay. Rather, the charge is based on the length of time in the car park.

Sexual Abuse Cases

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of sexual abuse cases that were referred to social workers in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust during the Christmas and New Year period.

(AQW 3038/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of cases that were referred to social workers in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust during the Christmas and New Year period ie 21 December 2007 to 2 January 2008 were 2.

Sexual Abuse Cases

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of sexual abuse cases that were referred to social workers

in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, in each of the last three years. (AQW 3040/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of sexual abuse cases that were referred to social workers in the South Eastern Trust in each of the last three years were as follows.

The figures provided are not referrals made but cases that were placed on the Child Protection Register in each year under the category of either potential, suspected or confirmed sexual abuse.

Year	Potential	Suspected	Confirmed	Total
2005	29	2	7	38
2006	38	5	1	44
2007	29	5	6	40
Overall Total	96	12	14	122

Anaesthetists at the Ulster Hospital

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what action he is taking to address the shortage of anaesthetists at the Ulster Hospital, which is causing delays for those waiting for non Accident and Emergency surgery.

(AQW 3042/08)

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. The previous review of the medical profession was carried out in 2006 and the published report can be found on-line at

<http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/hrd/wpu/wpu-planning/wpu-publications.htm>

Northern Ireland has 12% more consultant anaesthetists per head of population than England and the training programme has the potential to provide for a 30% increase over the next 7 years.

Mental Health Services Unit

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the financial assistance he is providing towards the building of an inpatient unit at the Child and Adolescent Mental Health

Services Unit, Templepatrick; and to provide a timescale for the completion of this building. (AQW 3043/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department is not providing any financial assistance towards the private inpatient unit being built at Templepatrick by an independent healthcare provider. It will be for Health and Social Services Boards and Trusts to decide if they will purchase services from this unit when completed.

Medical and Dental Students

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not legislation is being acted upon by his department when providing pre-registration students of medicine and dentistry with bursaries; and to detail (i) the grounds that graduate students of medicine and dentistry are excluded from being recipients of a bursary; and (ii) whether or not this position will be reviewed by his department, so that graduate students of medicine and dentistry can receive a bursary for the academic year 2009/10. (AQW 3050/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety provide bursaries to pre-registration medical and Dental students under Article 44 of the Health and Personal Social services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972.

The Department's current policy is in line with the longstanding principle that resources should be targeted at undergraduate level, allowing a wider number of students to experience third level study. Eligibility for support for medical and dental students is set out Part 2 Paragraph 3 of the "Financial Support arrangements in the 2007/08 Academic Year for Allied Health Professionals and Medical and Dental students from year five of study" July 2007.

A review of the support arrangements has been completed, which included the cost implications; proposals in relation to changes to the funding arrangements for the 2009/10 academic year are currently being considered within the competing priorities in the Health Service.

Day Care Provision

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to reverse the decision, by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, to withdraw day care provision from some people with learning difficulties, who are currently catered for at (i) Prospects Warrenpoint; and (ii) Prospects Newry, Day Opportunities centres. (AQW 3057/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have been informed by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust that it has not made any blanket decision to remove day care provision for some people with a learning disability who are currently attending Prospects Day Opportunities centres in Warrenpoint or Newry. The responsibility for operational matters in the provision of services rests with the Health and Social Care Trusts within Northern Ireland. It would be inappropriate for me to oversee or reverse decisions made by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust in the provision of services for individual people.

Neurologists

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current shortfall in the number of neurologists working in Northern Ireland. (AQW 3059/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are no vacant posts in neurology therefore there is no shortfall against current investment.

Northern Ireland currently has 12 consultant neurologists in post and a further 6 in training. This will increase the workforce by 50% over the next few years.

New Surgery in Trillick

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give a timescale for the construction of a new surgery in Trillick, Co. Tyrone. (AQW 3070/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Western Health and Social Services Board have advised that together with the GPs in Trillick potential premises have been identified in the Trillick Enterprise Centre which could be renovated to provide new practice premises.

This project is part of the Western Board's Capital Development programme and cost rent funding for the new premises has been earmarked by the Board. The premises are currently being assessed from a technical and rental point of view.

The Board have also advised that everything possible will be done to expedite the creation of the new premises and subject to both Board and the Western Health and Social Care Trust approval the building will be operational in early 2009.

Disciplinary Action

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2675/08, to detail (i) whether or not any disciplinary action was taken in this matter; and (ii) the estimated cost to the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. (AQW 3081/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No formal disciplinary action has been taken in respect of this matter. It is not possible to determine if any actual loss is involved in the long term in the misinterpretation of the regulations as commutation calculations are based on tables of life expectancy provided by the Government Actuarial Department (GAD). Costs will therefore depend on the actual life span of each of the individuals affected.

Patient Files

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what actions were taken by his department to ensure that those affected by the leak of patient files to the Loyalist Volunteer Force from Craigavon Hospital were informed; what investigations were conducted by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust to ensure the leaks would not be repeated; and what disciplinary action has been taken against the staff involved. (AQW 3113/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Matters regarding an alleged breach of patient confidentiality at Craigavon Area Hospital are the subject of an ongoing police inquiry.

As these matters are still under investigation it would not be appropriate for me or the Southern Health and Social Care Trust to give a detailed account of the investigations conducted by the Trust. I can assure you however that the Trust has acted in accordance with police advice in respect of these matters. Similarly it would not be appropriate for the Trust to publicly discuss any disciplinary action taken against individual members of staff as a result of the Trust's internal investigation into these matters.

Catering Arrangements

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide details of catering arrangements, for each hospital (i) where food is freshly prepared and cooked on the premises; and (ii) where food is provided by an outside source and (iii) to indicate from where the food is procured. (AQW 3121/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The details are as follows:

SOUTHERN TRUST

Hospital Name	Food Freshly Prepared And Cooked On Premises?	Outside Source Where Applicable
Daisy Hill	Yes	
Craigavon	Yes	
Lurgan	Yes	
St Luke's	Yes	Cook Chill Prepared at St Luke's
Mullinure	No	Cook Chill From St Luke's hospital
Longstone	No	Cook Chill From St Luke's hospital
South Tyrone	No	Cook Chill From St Luke's hospital

BELFAST TRUST

Hospital Name	Food Freshly Prepared And Cooked On Premises?	Outside Source Where Applicable
Belfast City	Yes	
Mater	Yes	
Muckamore Abbey	Yes	Entrée dishes are Cook Chill or Cook Freeze products supplied by Appetito and Hughes Frozen Foods
Foster Green	Yes	
Knockbracken	Yes	
Musgrave park	Yes	
Royal Hospitals	Yes	The Hospital uses a mixture of traditional and Cook Freeze food production. Cook Freeze products supplied by Tillery Valley

NORTHERN TRUST

Hospital Name	Food Freshly Prepared And Cooked On Premises?	Outside Source Where Applicable
Antrim	Yes	The Hospital uses a mixture of traditional and Cook Freeze food production. Cook Freeze products supplied by Tillery Valley
Causeway	No	Cook Freeze – Tillery Valley
Mid Ulster	Yes	

Hospital Name	Food Freshly Prepared And Cooked On Premises?	Outside Source Where Applicable
Whiteabbey	No	Cook Chill – Antrim Hospital
Moyle	No	Cook Chill – Knockbracken Foods
Braid Valley	No	Cook Chill – Knockbracken Foods

WESTERN TRUST

Hospital Name	Food Freshly Prepared And Cooked On Premises?	Outside Source Where Applicable
Altnagelvin	Yes	
Tyrone County	Yes	
Erne	Yes	
Gransha	Yes	
Lakeview	Yes	

SOUTH EASTERN TRUST

Hospital Name	Food Freshly Prepared And Cooked On Premises?	Outside Source Where Applicable
Downshire	Yes	
Downe	Yes	The Hospital uses a mixture of traditional and Cook-Chill food production. Cook Chill meat products supplied by Downshire Hospital
Lagan Valley	Yes	The Hospital uses a mixture of traditional and Cook-Chill food production. Cook Chill meat products supplied by Downshire Hospital
Ulster	Yes	
Ards	No	Cook Freeze - Appeetito
Bangor	No	Cook Freeze - Appeetito

Waiting Times

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average waiting time for patients in Accident and Emergency Departments in (i) each hospital; and (ii) in Northern Ireland. (AQW 3123/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the average time that

patients wait for treatment in Accident and Emergency departments is not collected centrally.

Data extracts providing Accident and Emergency department waiting time information have been requested from Trusts' electronic data systems and work is ongoing to merge these extracts. The availability of the requested information is dependent on a successful technical solution being developed to merge the datasets.

A target has been set to ensure that 95% of patients are treated and discharged, or admitted to a ward, within four hours of arrival at A&E by March 2008. Progress towards this target is being closely monitored and my Department is supporting Trusts through a programme of reform and modernisation.

Whilst the new system is being developed, aggregate data on waiting times is being collected on a monthly basis from Trusts. Figures for December 2007, the latest month for which data are available, on the total attendances at A&E Departments and Minor Injury Units and the percentage of patients who waited 4 hours and under are presented in the table below.

Hospital	Percentage of Attendances waiting 4 Hours and Under	Total Attendances at A&E during December 2007
Altnagelvin	90%	3,675
Erne	89%	1,783
Tyrone County	99%	1,616
Antrim	89%	5,187
Whiteabbey	100%	1,653
Mid Ulster	92%	1,424
Causeway	95%	3,001
Craigavon	91%	5,516
Daisyhill	95%	2,545
South Tyrone	100%	944
Armagh/Mullinure	100%	534
Belfast City	79%	3,528
Royal	80%	4,069
Mater	93%	3,295
RBHSC	89%	2,754
Ulster	95%	5,606
Ards MIU	100%	775
Bangor MIU	100%	746
Lagan Valley	97%	2,496
Downe	95%	1,835
Northern Ireland	91%	52,982

Source: Monthly Return, EC1

Pro-Anorexia Websites

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to meet with organisations in relation to the censoring of pro-anorexia websites. (AQW 3126/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have already met with leading internet providers on the issue of sites dealing with suicides. I am hoping to meet with them again in the near future. I will use that opportunity to raise the issue of pro-anorexia websites also.

Nationally, the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform has organised a meeting which will include all reps from both the public sector (including all jurisdictions) and all the main internet providers. The meeting will allow representatives to raise their concerns about harmful internet content, and what action, if any, can be taken to address it.

Eating Disorders

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of individuals, broken down by age and gender, diagnosed with eating disorders in the last three years. (AQW 3127/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is estimated that each year in Northern Ireland around 50-120 people develop anorexia nervosa and around 170 people develop bulimia nervosa.

It is not possible to detail the number of individuals, broken down by age and gender, diagnosed with eating disorders in the last three years as information on those diagnosed by GPs is not held centrally and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. Furthermore, many young people with an eating disorder may be treated under child and adolescent mental health services and not necessarily recorded as having eating disorders.

Referrals to the Regional Eating Disorders Service in Belfast are as follows:

Aug 05 to Dec 05	3 males and 36 females
Jan 06 to Dec 06	11 males and 89 females
Jan 07 to Dec 07	6 males and 107 females

Uninterrupted Mealtimes

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration he has given to mandatory 'protected meal times' in hospitals

to ensure uninterrupted mealtimes and promote improved nutrition. (AQW 3128/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: We are currently developing a strategic framework for food and nutrition in hospitals that will ensure that we can provide nutritional hospital food that supports the delivery of high quality health and social care. The recently launched Nursing Care Standards for Patient Food in Hospital acknowledges that we can improve the nutritional care of patients by creating a protected environment that allows patients to eat their meals without disruption. The Department, Health and Social Care Trusts, the Royal College of Nursing and other professional bodies are continuing to work together to progress this initiative.

Sexual Abuse Cases

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of social workers, dealing with sexual abuse cases, currently working for the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 3146/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not readily available in the format requested. Social Work staff will work with a range of cases where sexual abuse is an issue. In our new Children's Services structure there are 73 Social Workers and 21 Senior Practitioners working in a range of teams, including Gateway, Looked After Children's teams and Family Intervention teams. Any one of these staff may deal with a case where sexual abuse is concerned ie investigation, treatment and care or care planning for a child where abuse has taken place

Mental Health and Learning Disabilities

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not the additional monies being made available to his department for mental health and learning disabilities are now ring-fenced, to be spent solely on the implementation of the recommendations of the Bamford Review. (AQW 3165/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The additional monies allocated to this department for Mental Health and Learning Disability will be ring-fenced recurrently solely for the implementation of the Bamford recommendations.

Bamford Review

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what steps (i) he has taken; and (ii) he will take, to ensure that the recommendations of the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability will be implemented, so that children and adolescents with mental health difficulties will not be treated in adult services.

(AQW 3168/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Where necessary, adolescents requiring inpatient mental health services have, as the least worst option, been placed in adult mental health facilities. In November 2005, the Department issued guidance to address this issue. This guidance distinguishes between admissions to general adult mental health wards (which is prohibited) and separate, side room accommodation in adult facilities which could continue to be utilised for young people under appropriate supervision and with measures in place to keep length of stay to a minimum.

Action is underway to provide an 18 place adolescent facility at Forster Green and replacing the current 15 place children's unit. This will give a total of 33 inpatient beds which will help to reduce the number of occasions when treatment has to be provided in an adult setting.

Cost of Patient Care

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not care packages for patients treated at home are allocated in budgetary terms, such as a maximum budget for each patient.

(AQW 3169/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Domiciliary care packages are provided on the basis of individual assessment of both the client's need and the level of risk to the client, family and carers of meeting that need in the client's own home. The Department has not set a maximum budget for individual domiciliary care packages.

Alzheimer's Sufferers

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the criteria used to determine the treatment of Alzheimer's sufferers, including the allocation for nursing home places; and to confirm whether or not the age of the patient forms any part of the criteria.

(AQW 3176/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The treatment of Alzheimer's sufferers is determined by need, not age. Everyone who has a

form of dementia, including Alzheimer's disease, will have an individual, multi-disciplinary, assessment of their needs. This assessment is conducted by a range of professionals and involves the physical, mental and social functioning of the person who has dementia. The assessment will determine what medical treatments and support services are to be provided. The assessment will also determine if a person with dementia needs to be placed in a care home, and if so, the type that is best suited to meet their individual needs. The aim is to support the person in their own home for as long as possible.

Translation Services

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what translation services are available to assist non-English speakers with access to health services, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQW 3178/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Interpreting Service (NIHSCIS) which came into operation in June 2004, provides a regional interpreting service for all Health and Social Care Trusts. It enables Trusts to book the services of professional interpreters to meet the personal communication needs of those members of black and minority ethnic groups who do not speak English as a first or a competent second language. In emergency or other unplanned situations where the NIHSCIS is unable to supply an interpreter, a supplementary list of service providers is available to Trusts for face to face and telephone interpreting services.

In addition, a regional translation service is available to all Trusts which provides quality- assured translations. It was established to help overcome the language barriers faced by some members of the black and minority ethnic groups in relation to written information. On request documents are translated into other languages by providers from an approved list.

Drug Misuse

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the work his department has undertaken to identify the extent of drug misuse in South and East Belfast; (ii) the plans his department has to tackle this issue; and (iii) the consultations his department has had with drug awareness Agencies in South and East Belfast, with a view to increased co-operation in tackling this issue.

(AQW 3194/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety: (i) The Department commissions a number of prevalence surveys which provide information on the level of drug use across Northern Ireland among both young people and adults. The Department also maintains a number of monitoring systems that provide information on the number of drug users presenting to treatment services. This information is used to help to target resources at both a regional and local level. Such data is available at Health and Social Service Board level.

The Eastern Drug and Alcohol Co-Ordination Team (EDACT), which is funded by the Department, assesses local need when developing initiatives and targeting resources within the Eastern Health and Social Services Board (EHSSB) area, including South and East Belfast.

(ii) The New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs (NSD), which was launched in 2006, seeks to reduce the harm related to alcohol and misuse in Northern Ireland. A total of £6.8 million was allocated to the implementation of the NSD in 07/08. The NSD is outcome based, with actions taken to achieve its aims and objectives at both a regional and local level. Regionally, the Department takes forward a range of actions including research, and regional public information campaigns.

Locally, the four Drug and Alcohol Co-ordination Teams (DACTs) are implementing their individual Action Plans, which they developed in response to local need and in support of the overarching outcomes in the NSD. The four DACTs were allocated a total of £4.8 million in 07/08 to implement their Local Action Plans, including the provision of mentoring and counselling services for young people in each Health and Social Services Board Area. To deliver on these Local Action Plans, the DACTs issued tenders for the services they required in their respective areas, and all local organisations were able to bid to provide these services. Within EDACT a number of programmes, projects and initiatives have been developed which include South and East Belfast.

(iii) The Department hosted a range of workshops, seminars, and meetings during the development of the NSD to engage and consult with key stakeholders from across Northern Ireland. This included establishing of a number of special interest groups, who looked at specific issues such as workforce development, harm reduction, children and young people, etc. These meetings were open to anyone with an interest in attending, and included representation from a number of statutory, voluntary and community organisations who work in South and East Belfast.

In developing its Local Action Plan, EDACT undertook an assessment of need in the EHSSB area

and consulted with key local stakeholders. The implementation of EDACT's action plan is also informed by a range of local subgroups (including the South and East Belfast Substance Abuse Network) and the local independent sector forum which also includes representation from community/voluntary organisations in South and East Belfast.

Dental Service

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration he will give to a community led dental service for the Ards Peninsula area, to provide NHS dental treatment for patients who are currently disenfranchised.

(AQW 3204/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Any initiative to set up a community led dental service on the Ards Peninsula can be discussed with the Commissioners of Dental Services for the area i.e. the Eastern Health and Social Services Board. Enquiries in relation to this should be addressed to Mr Will Maxwell, the Dental Director of the Eastern Board. He can be contacted at 028 9055 3780.

I will give due consideration to any such proposal.

General Dental Practitioners

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he intends to take in relation to General Dental Practitioners reducing their commitment within the NHS, resulting in people not having access to NHS care.

(AQW 3214/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am totally committed to the aim of securing a robust and accessible health service dental service for everyone in Northern Ireland. 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 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.

In the interim, and in an effort to stem the flow of dentists from Health Service dentistry into private work, I announced in the Assembly on the 17th September 2007 an injection of £4.4 million into health service dentistry aimed at addressing the problems of access

reported in parts of the province. £2m of this money is allocated directly to health service practices to assist with the overhead costs of running a practice. Following on from my announcement, all Health and Social Services Boards have been actively working to use the additional monies now available to them to commission salaried general dental practitioners in areas where access to dental services is currently problematic. The Northern Health and Social Services Board have already recruited 3 such salaried dentists, based in Ballymena, Cushendall and Magherafelt. If further dentists can be successfully recruited by each of the four Health Boards, the additional dentists provided will go some considerable way towards addressing access problems throughout Northern Ireland.

Bamford Review

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to encourage patients to receive care in their homes and communities as recommended in the Bamford Review. (AQW 3216/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Caring for patients in their own homes or communities, when possible, has long been recognised as the preferred option. There is a wide range of service developments already underway. Some examples are as follows:

- Community mental health services are being developed including Crisis Response, Assertive Outreach and Home Treatment Services.
- A 4 –Tier model for child and adolescent mental health services is being implemented. This will mean that only the more seriously ill will be treated in hospital.
- A specialist eating disorder team has been established in each board area. This will reduce the number of hospital referrals.

Clostridium Difficile

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the clostridium infections that have occurred at Antrim Area Hospital; and to detail the measures that have been introduced to address the problem. (AQW 3219/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have asked the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority to carry out an independent review on the Antrim Area Hospital outbreak as soon as the outbreak has been contained.

In the meantime the Trust has put in place a robust action plan which includes: reviewing antibiotic use;

containment of infected patients, and an intensive cleaning regime.

My Department already has a number of policies in place to tackle healthcare associated infections. In September 2007 I announced targets for reducing MRSA and Clostridium difficile. This is the first time that such targets have been set. In response to the Antrim outbreak, on 25 January I announced an extensive package of further measures aimed at fighting healthcare associated infections.

Tanning Salons

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration he has given to introducing legislation, similar to that proposed in the Scottish Parliament, in relation to the regulation of tanning salons. (AQW 3221/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment (COMARE) is an independent expert advisory committee, which provides advice to Government Departments and the Devolved Administrations in relation to the health effects of natural and man-made radiation. COMARE has been asked to provide advice to Government on the health effects of sunbed use. Its report to Government is expected by the end of 2008 and is likely to inform future policy development.

In addition, the Sunbed Working Group of the Northern Ireland Melanoma Strategy Implementation Group (NIMSIG) is currently examining the issues relating to sunbeds and their use.

Permanent Care Places

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people waiting for permanent care places in each of the Health and Social Care Trust areas. (AQW 3223/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information is not available centrally on the number of people waiting for permanent care places in each of the Health and Social Care Trust areas (AQW 3223/08 & AQW 3224/08). However, information is available on the number of people waiting for community care packages by Health & Social Care Trust, according to specified time bands. The table overleaf presents information on the number of people waiting as at 30 September 2007, the latest date for which such information is available.

All Persons Waiting for the Main Components of their Assessed Continuing Care Needs at 30 September 2007

HSC Trust	Less than 12 Weeks		12 Weeks or More		Total
	Number	%	Number	%	
Belfast HSC Trust	116	72%	46	28%	162
Northern HSC Trust	53	41%	75	59%	128
South Eastern HSC Trust	34	36%	61	64%	95
Southern HSC Trust	8	100%	0	-	8
Western HSC Trust	24	71%	10	29%	34
Northern Ireland	235	55%	192	45%	427

Source: Community Information Branch return CC5b

At 30 September 2007, 427 people were waiting for the main components of their assessed continuing care needs to be met in Northern Ireland. Across Trusts, this ranged from 8 people in the Southern HSC Trust to 162 in the Belfast HSC Trust. (AQW 3223/08)

Permanent Care Placement

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the longest period of time for which an assessed patient is currently waiting for a permanent care placement, for each Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 3224/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information is not available centrally on the number of people waiting for permanent care places in each of the Health and Social Care Trust areas (AQW 3223/08 & AQW 3224/08). However, information is available on the number of people waiting for community care packages by Health & Social Care Trust, according to specified time bands. The table overleaf presents information on the number of people waiting as at 30 September 2007, the latest date for which such information is available.

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Source: Community Information Branch return CC5b

Of the total number of people waiting on this date, 235 were waiting for less than 12 weeks (55%) and 192 (45%) were waiting for 12 weeks or more. Whilst no one in the Southern HSC Trust waited more than 12 weeks for the main components of their assessed continuing care needs to be met, 75 people in the Northern HSC Trust waited 12 weeks or more.

(AQW 3224/08)

Healthcare Facilities

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the timescale for new healthcare facilities in Ballygowan.

(AQW 3264/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are currently no plans for any new healthcare facilities in Ballygowan within the Department's Capital Development Programme.

I understand the South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust is presently reviewing its Primary & Community Care Infrastructure plans with a view to confirming a priority list of schemes across the Trust area. As part of this review of investment needs, the Trust is considering options to address the prospect of developing smaller primary care facilities to address the needs of more dispersed communities.

The Trust expects to be in a position to confirm its assessed priorities to the Eastern Health & Social Services Board, and subsequently my Department for consideration, in the spring of 2008.

Air Ambulance Service

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to provide for an Air Ambulance Service. (AQW 3270/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Currently, I have no plans to provide for an air ambulance service. My priority for some years to come must be to invest in modernising ground ambulance services to enable the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service to improve its response to

emergency life-threatening calls. My budget during the Comprehensive Spending Review period reflects this priority.

Enhanced Hospital in Omagh

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not the costings for a new health centre are included in the £190m for the proposed new enhanced hospital in Omagh. (AQW 3315/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The costs of a new Health and Care Centre are included in the new Omagh Hospital Complex project, which also includes a new local enhanced hospital and mental health centre, at an estimated total capital cost of £190 million.

Hearing Screening Programme

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the priority he will give to interdepartmental and interagency work to provide wraparound services for children assessed as deaf through the neonatal Hearing Screening Programme. (AQO 1613/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Wraparound is the Southern Health and Social Services Trust specific scheme for delivering services for disabled children. The other Boards also provide services for children, including those assessed as deaf, using their own development of a multi-disciplinary multi-agency model. It would be inappropriate to give priority to a specific scheme. It is important that services are provided to meet the needs of all disabled children.

Convalescent Services and Palliative Care

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline how he proposes to ensure the continuance of convalescent services and palliative care for residents of the Northern area. (AQO 1593/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am committed to the provision of high quality convalescent and palliative care services in the most appropriate setting. The Northern Board plans to continue to develop both hospital and community-based rehabilitative and palliative care services. The new Health and Social Care centres planned for the Northern Board area will provide rehabilitative services. The Board also plans to provide specialist

rehabilitation and palliative care services in the Antrim Area Hospital.

My Department has also funded a project to develop a new regional model for supportive and palliative care services in 2008. This project is being delivered and piloted by the Northern Health and Social Services Board in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Cancer Network and the Marie Curie Delivering Choice programme. The overall aim of the project will be to develop a new integrated model for supportive and palliative care services that will be applicable across all care settings and will be able to respond to the needs of patients, their carers and families, regardless of diagnosis.

Mental Health Provision

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how much funding will be devoted to mental health provision, following the conclusion of the Comprehensive Spending Review. (AQO 1586/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Following the Budget announcement, I can confirm that there will be an additional £11m allocated to mental health services in 2008/09, £12m in 2009/10, and £23m in 2010/11. This will be on top of an estimated spend of £187million in 2007/08 on mental health services. This means by 2010/2011 there will be an increase of over 12% on current spend.

Mental Health Services

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the funding allocation for the Belfast Health Trust for mental health services in the next financial year. (AQO 1609/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is proposed that an additional £4.39m will be allocated to the Eastern Health and Social Services Board for mental health services development in 2008/09. This is on top of the £78m currently allocated to the Board for mental health service provision in the Board's area. The Department does not stipulate how this should be split between the Belfast and South Eastern Health and Social Care Trusts. It is the decision of the Eastern HSS Board to assess the needs of its own population and allocate resources to best meet those needs.

Efficiency Savings

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his efficiency

savings strategy for the next three years.
(AQO 1517/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department is currently finalising challenging efficiencies amounting to £344m by 2010/11, as part of the Executive Committee's agreed approach to the Comprehensive Spending Review. This builds on efficiencies of £146m already achieved.

These efficiencies will be attained through a range of workstreams: Pharmaceutical, which will focus on more efficient prescribing and dispensing of medicines; Productivity, which will seek improved productivity, through better ways of working at all levels, and also the RPA, Pay and Administration stream which will reduce administration across the Department and the health and fire services themselves.

My officials are currently working with the services to ensure they develop sufficiently detailed options for the delivery of these efficiencies. Until I have enough information about the options presented to know that they are real efficiencies and not simply cuts by another name, I will not be approving any plans.

Feeding in Hospitals

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the guidelines he has issued to hospitals on the feeding of patients who are unable to feed themselves, due to medical sedation, or because they are suffering from medical conditions, such as Alzheimer's Disease.
(AQO 1513/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On the 14th November 2007 I issued the Nursing Care Standards for Patient Food in Hospital. Entitled "Get your 10 a day!" the 10 standards set out ways in which the nutritional care and food experience of patients in hospital can be improved.

When patients are ill, there is more risk of them not eating the right balance of nutrients which will help their recovery. The challenge for all healthcare workers is to encourage and support patients in meeting their nutritional needs. Responsibility for the delivery and presentation of meals and fluids will be clearly defined, and those patients who require help with eating or drinking identified.

These standards developed by my department in collaboration with the Royal College of Nursing, set out a range of actions – from ensuring that all patients are screened for risk of malnutrition, through to ensuring that those patients who require support with eating or drinking receive assistance when required. The guidelines are readily available from the Department's website.

The standards are written in such a way that they can be audited during the course of 2008.

Suicide Awareness and Prevention

Ms McCann asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of nurses that have been trained in suicide awareness and prevention.
(AQO 1605/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can confirm that there are a range of training programmes (modules and courses) available to help nurses recognise and deal effectively with people who show risk of self-harm.

The Schools of Nursing at Queen's University and the University of Ulster provide modules for all first year nursing students. This involves 480 students at QUB and 250 students at UU. Some 80 students per annum studying mental health pre-registration programmes receive additional training.

Registered nurses also receive additional training as part of other programmes (e.g. midwifery and health visiting). Registered nurses can also access specific self-harm modules and can undertake an internationally recognised programme called ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Workshop).

However, it has not been possible to provide comprehensive statistics on the numbers of post-registration nurses who have received suicide awareness and prevention training.

In recognition of the role that GPs can play in tackling suicide a training programme has been specifically designed by the Health Promotion Agency (Northern Ireland). This programme, in depression awareness, has been attended by 71 practice managers/nurses to date

Diagnosis of Fibromyalgia

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to indicate the average waiting time for a diagnosis of fibromyalgia by a rheumatologist.
(AQO 1608/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Average waiting times for a diagnosis of fibromyalgia are not available. However, of the 2,214 people who were waiting for a first outpatient appointment in the rheumatology specialty as at September 2007 81% were waiting less than 3 months and no-one was waiting more than 6 months.

By the end of March 2008, I expect that the Health and Social Care sector will have met its target that no one will be waiting longer than 13 weeks for a first outpatient appointment.

For any individual patient a definitive diagnosis will normally be made following appropriate clinical assessment and investigation. Time taken will depend

on a patient's individual condition, symptoms and experience and any co-morbidities that may exist.

Family Support and Foster Care

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline how family support and foster care are funded, in order to achieve the target of 10% reduction in children who are looked after, by 2011. (AQO 1612/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The target of a 10% reduction in the number of children in care by 2011 was proposed in the Draft Programme for Government, published for consultation on 25 October 2007 and on which the Assembly has yet to vote. In view of this decisions around funding are yet to be finalised.

Accident and Emergency

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that the accident and emergency department in the Mater Hospital is not under threat of closure. (AQO 1559/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can confirm that the Accident and Emergency Department at the Mater Hospital is not under threat of closure.

Nursing Homes

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (i) the staff-to-resident ratio the department recommends for nursing homes; and (ii) the current average staff-to-resident ratio in nursing homes. (AQO 1520/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: (i) Regulation 20 of the Nursing Homes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005 requires that nursing homes have suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons working at the home in such numbers as are appropriate for the health and welfare of patients. Specific staff-to-resident ratios are not laid down.

Staffing ratios must be determined according to the size of the home, its statement of purpose, and its residents' health and care needs. These vary from home to home and from day to day. It is a provider's obligation under law to ensure that their nursing home is appropriately staffed on a day to day basis.

The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority establishes the staffing required to deliver safe and effective in each home at the time of registration, and

monitors and enforces this through its regulatory activity including a minimum of two inspections each year.

(ii) Information on the average staff-to-resident ratio in nursing homes is not held by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority and is not therefore readily available.

Health Care Centre

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the timeframe for the commencement of the new Health and Care Centre at the Braid Valley site, Ballymena.

(AQO 1618/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Subject to business case approval and confirmation of funding in the draft budget I expect procurement of the new Health and Care Centre to commence in 2008.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Road Improvements

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the spending plans in the Strangford constituency on (i) new roads schemes, naming the schemes; (ii) major road improvements, naming the roads; and (iii) minor road improvements, naming the roads, in each of the next 5 years.

(AQW 2827/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I should advise first that details of all that new road schemes are included within my Department's Roads Service's Major Road Improvement Programme.

There are two major road improvement schemes planned for the Strangford Constituency within the next five years:

- A20 Newtownards Southern Distributor: A 2km scheme being taken forward in conjunction with Castlebawn Development, to link the Blair Mayne Road South to the Comber Road and the Portaferry Road. Work is due to commence on site in March/April 2008 and the total cost of the scheme is £20.5 million, of which Roads Service will contribute £2.5million.
- A20 Newtownards Frederick Street Link: Scheme to provide 0.3km of single carriageway link road that is programmed to commence on site in March/April 2008, at an estimated cost of £2.2million.

As regards minor improvement schemes for the next 3 years within the Strangford Constituency, (schemes for years 4 and 5 have not yet been identified), the table attached contains a list of the indicative schemes. However, I should point out that these schemes are subject to successful land acquisition and the availability of funding.

In addition to the minor improvement schemes listed, a feasibility study has been undertaken into possible improvements to the A23 Moneyreagh Road/Hillsborough Road junction. Roads Service has commissioned an Economic Assessment of the proposed scheme and is currently awaiting a detailed valuation of land before making a decision on the future of the scheme.

Roads Service is also currently considering Road Route Management Study reports on the A23 to Ballygowan, to identify further possible schemes for progression through the Minor Works programme.

	Scheme name	Description of works	Approximate costs
Year 1 2007/08	U310 Quarter Road, Cloughey.	Footway provision	£50,000
	A20 Rowreagh Road/Gransha Road, Kircubbin.	Sightline improvement	£35,000
	C367 Moss Road/Ballykeigle Road, Ballygowan.	Sightline improvement	£45,000
	A21 Saintfield Road/Ravara Road, Ballygowan.	Sightline improvement	£24,000
	C255 Abbey Road/Woburn Road, Carrowdore	Carriageway realignment and improved forward sight distance	£158,000
	C254 Ballyblack Road/Ballyblack Road East, Newtownards.	Sightline improvements	£35,000
	Ballyknockan Road, Ballynahinch	Verge strengthening and localised carriageway widening	£75,000
		Total Spend	£422,000

	Scheme name	Description of works	Approximate costs
Year 2 2008/09	U310 Quarter Road, Cloughey.	Footway provision	£100,000
	U126 Old Shore Road, Newtownards.	Footway provision	£80,000
	U126 at 88 Bowtown Road, Newtownards.	Provision of improved forward sight distance	£70,000
	Rowreagh Road/Rubane Road, Kircubbin.	Sightline improvement	£60,000
		Total Spend	£310,000
Year 3 2009/10	A2 Ballyvester Road/Millisle Road, Donaghadee.	Sightline improvements.	£55,000
	C272 Carrickmannon Road/Bog Road, Ballygowan.	Sightline improvements.	£95,000
	C266 at 60 Ballyrainey Road, Newtownards.	Provision of improved forward sight distance.	£105,000
		Total Spend	£255,000

Water Charges

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm that a cost benefit analysis was carried out by Northern Ireland Water in relation to the metering of, for example, Orange Halls; and whether or not the revenue collected will cover the cost of reading the meter. (AQW 2841/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Following the recommendations of the independent review, the Executive has decided that contributions to fund the cost of delivering water and sewerage services to the non-domestic sector should be extended to all non-domestic consumers. Recognising the challenges faced by the non-domestic sector the Executive has decided to phase in the new charges more slowly than would have been the case under Direct Rule proposals with 50% of the full charge being introduced in 2008/09 and 100% in 2009/10.

I am advised that Northern Ireland Water continuously surveys potential chargeable properties, including Orange Halls, to ensure fair application of the charging policy.

The preferred method of charging for the non-domestic sector is through a metered supply with a standing charge and Northern Ireland Water is currently engaged in a universal non-domestic metering programme. The

cost of installing, reading and maintaining a meter is included within the standing charge.

Flooding in the Glens of Antrim

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on the work of his department in relation to delivering a solution to the flooding problem which occurred in the Glens of Antrim in July 2007. (AQW 2954/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Following the flooding that occurred in the Cushendall area on 2 July 2007, my Department's Roads Service, in consultation with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, undertook to investigate measures to prevent floodwater building up at Black's Bridge on the Tromra Road, south of its junction with Gaults Road. While these investigations are still ongoing, it is hoped to carry out works, which are likely to involve extensive reshaping/resurfacing of the existing carriageway, during the next financial year.

Roads Service officials also met with their counterparts in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, to consider how road drainage in the wider area might be improved, to enable large volumes of water to be removed more quickly from the roadway. I can confirm that work on a number of interim measures, including the cleaning and widening of drainage outlets on the Tromra and Glanaan Roads, is due to commence next week and, subject to local landowner's agreement, additional outlets are planned

Redevelopment of Maze

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what discussions he has had with the Strategic Investment Board in relation to the development of the Maze site. (AQW 2969/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have had no discussions with the Strategic Investment Board regarding the development of the Maze / Long Kesh site.

Skeog Road Development

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Regional Development to give a timescale within which the Skeog Road, Derry/Londonderry, will be opened; and to confirm whether or not the road was built within the proposed budget and timescale. (AQW 3030/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The construction of the Skeoge Link is progressing well and

I intend to perform the opening ceremony in mid-March. Indications are that while the scheme will be built well within budget, it may be delivered three weeks later than originally programmed.

Security Restrictions

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the steps he has taken to advance the proposals to remove the security restrictions on Killead Road, Crumlin Road and Crosshill Road in Crumlin, County Antrim; and (ii) the discussions his department has had with Belfast International Airport and the Royal Air Force in relation to this matter. (AQW 3063/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service is not aware of any steps, or been involved in any discussions, to remove the security restrictions on the Killead, Crumlin and Crosshill Roads in Crumlin. I understand that the review of any such restrictions rests with the Northern Ireland Office.

Independent Water Review Panel

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the total cost to date of the Independent Water Review Panel; and (ii) the projected final cost of the review. (AQW 3064/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Independent Water Review Panel was appointed in June 2007 and since that date it has incurred expenditure of just over £270k. This figure is made up of £114k in respect of the Panel Members' fees and expenses; £84k in respect of the salaries of the administrative support staff and £74k in respect of general running costs and consultancy support.

The projected final cost of the review is approximately £400k.

Sewerage Infrastructure

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the locations in the South Antrim constituency that Northern Ireland Water has identified as having sewerage infrastructure problems; and to detail the nature of these problems. (AQW 3120/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water 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 Northern Ireland Water will write to you about locations with sewerage infrastructure problems, when the full assessment of wastewater treatment works in the South Antrim constituency is complete.

Altamuskin Road

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will implement (i) safety measures at dangerous bends; and (ii) maintenance and repair works, on the Altamuskin Road; and to confirm whether or not he will include Altamuskin Road on the winter gritting schedule. (AQW 3130/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has an assessment procedure that compares and prioritises potential network development schemes, taking into account a number of factors, including traffic volumes, pedestrian usage, and the history of accidents. Proposals to improve the alignment of the Altamuskin Road have recently been reviewed. Unfortunately these proposals have not received sufficient priority, when compared with other competing road improvement proposals throughout Omagh district to be included on Roads Service's work programme. However, I can advise that Roads Service is currently considering the acquisition of land to carry out verge repairs near the Agnagar Road junction.

As regards the maintenance programme, Altamuskin Road is inspected on a cyclical basis. Any actionable defects found are repaired in compliance with the standards contained in Roads Service's Road Maintenance Guidelines. I can also advise that Roads Service plans to carry out resurfacing to a 400m section of the road, within the next 2 months.

With regard to Winter Gritting, I would advise that as the volume of traffic using Altamuskin Road is below the threshold of 1500 vehicles per day, it does not currently meet the criteria for inclusion in the gritting schedule

Rail Network

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to extend the rail network. (AQO 1652/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am keen to support the improvement and development of railway services to the extent that resources permit, and I am pleased that the Budget and Investment Strategy envisage the provision of some £137 million for that purpose. That level of funding will be sufficient to replace the oldest trains still in use on the network, to provide increased frequency and capacity on services in the Belfast area and on the Derry line and to upgrade the railway infrastructure on the Derry line. These are the developments for which the strongest case can be made.

There are no plans to extend the rail network at present, but this is an issue which will be kept under review to assess the case for such extension in the light of the future availability of resources.

Minor Road Maintenance

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the impact the budget will have on minor road maintenance in the (i) Ards; (ii) Peninsula; (iii) Comber; (iv) Saintfield; (v) Killinchy; (vi) Killyleagh; and (vii) Dundonald areas, of the Strangford constituency over the next three years. (AQO 1528/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I should explain that my Department's Roads Service does not allocate its maintenance budget on a constituency basis. Budget allocations are made on the basis of need, to the four Roads Service Divisions, who in turn allocate it across district council areas. As the Member will be aware the Strangford constituency falls into Eastern and Southern Divisions.

Divisional Roads Managers are currently developing their road maintenance proposals within their respective divisions, for 2008/09 and tentative plans for 2009/10 and 2010/11. These will reflect the availability of finances. The proposals for 2008/09 will be presented to the respective district councils in the Strangford constituency at their spring meetings.

Decentralisation of Jobs

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development to indicate what plans he has to decentralise jobs in his department. (AQO 1566/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Around 65% of DRD staff work in locations outside the Greater Belfast area. The outcome of the timebound review of policy on the location of public service jobs announced by the Executive in November, may well involve proposals for some relocation of Departmental functions and jobs. I understand this review is now under way, with a report expected in the summer.

Randalstown-Toome Project

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to indicate when work will (i) commence; and (ii) be completed, in relation to the Randalstown-Toome project. (AQO 1641/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The A6 Randalstown to Castledawson dual carriageway project has recently been through the public inquiry stage. I am awaiting the outcome of the Inspector's Report. I am sure you will appreciate that until the outcome of this inquiry is known, it is not possible to give a meaningful timeframe for commencement and, therefore, completion of the project.

Roadside Memorials

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his policy on roadside memorials. (AQO 1650/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I can assure Members that my Department's Roads Service does not approve of or support the unauthorised use of departmental property for illegally erected roadside memorials. Memorials erected without lawful authority are akin to other unauthorised activities such as kerb and lamppost painting, flying of flags etc, which have local and political sensitivities as well as posing security implications for those tasked with their removal. Roads Service reluctantly tolerates such activities, unless road safety is affected, or there is clear indication that action to remove the offending material would have widespread local support.

A number of memorials have been erected on public roads at various locations throughout the North, without lawful authority but, as they are not obstructing the road and do not constitute a danger to road users, no action has been taken to secure their removal.

Road Construction

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the estimated cost per mile difference between constructing a motorway and a dual carriageway. (AQO 1536/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Firstly, I should explain that there are different standards of dual carriageway. A standard "category five" dual carriageway, which contains roundabouts and priority junctions, would cost on average £10 million/mile.

A "category six" dual carriageway, which is virtually to motorway standard, with fly-over type junctions, no gaps in the central reserve, a central safety barrier, hard shoulder and no private accesses, would cost on

average £14.5 million/mile. These dual carriageways produce journey time savings similar to a motorway and can facilitate non-motorway traffic that may need to use it.

A motorway, on the other hand, would cost in excess of £18.5 million/mile. However, not all traffic is entitled to use a motorway and there may be significant further costs associated with the alternative route for non-motorway users.

The above costs are based on 2007 prices, for a rural situation, but may vary considerably, depending on the local conditions, the number of side roads, topography, ground conditions etc. You will also be aware that recently, inflation of both land and construction costs has had a significant impact on the cost of road schemes.

A37 Road Safety

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to commit further resources to the A37 Coleraine to Derry/Londonderry traffic corridor, to ensure that it is safely operational during winter. (AQO 1510/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the A29/A37/A2 Coleraine to Derry traffic corridor is included in the schedule of salted routes and is treated as required, taking account of forecast weather conditions, to help traffic move as safely and freely as possible during wintry conditions.

The Coleraine to Derry traffic corridor is part of the trunk road network and as such, is given priority status in snow conditions. Resources are directed to the trunk road network before dealing with other routes.

The current level of resources is considered to be appropriate and so at present, there are no plans to commit further resources to the A37 route.

Hightown Bridge

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment he has made of whether or not his department's proposals will meet the needs of residents and businesses of the Glengormley area during the closure of the Hightown bridge. (AQO 1594/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Hightown Bridge is fifty years old and has been assessed as being under strength and in need of replacement for safety reasons. The bridge will close on 27 January 2008 for up to a year to allow for its demolition and reconstruction.

In preparation for the closure my Department's Roads Service undertook a detailed assessment of a range of temporary traffic management options including the erection of a temporary bridge and maintenance of one lane on the existing bridge. However, I am advised that it is not possible to erect a temporary bridge without demolishing several residential properties. Furthermore, the option of keeping one lane open is not feasible, given the resulting re-programming of work, significant delays, the overall impact on traffic including the 63,000 vehicles that use the M2 motorway and the associated cost implications.

On 7 January 2008, I announced a package of measures to accommodate the travelling public and alleviate disruption to the residents and businesses in the Glengormley area during the closure. These measures include:

- provision of a base for Ambulance Service vehicles at Sandyknowes
- maintenance of 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.

While the reconstruction is due to be completed within one year of the closure, following commitments to accelerate the works, the contractor is targeting the re-opening of the road before Christmas 2008.

I appreciate that the temporary closure will mean longer journey times for those using the diversionary route and I fully understand the concerns of local residents and businesses, in the area. However, I trust the Member will accept that all reasonable steps are being taken to mitigate the inconvenience caused.

Island Policy for Rathlin

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on his proposals to create a special island policy for Rathlin; and to

outline how this matter is being taken forward.

(AQO 1648/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The proposal to develop a central government policy for Rathlin Island was endorsed by the Executive in November. An inter-departmental group, led by DRD, has now been set up to take matters forward. The Rathlin Development and Community Association has provided me with its views on the needs of the Island, and I hope to meet with them shortly to discuss their proposals.

The areas which are being considered are:

- access and transport
- agriculture
- childcare and education
- enterprise and employment
- tourism
- environment
- fire and emergency services
- health, including social services
- housing and planning
- marine policy, and
- waste management.

Street Lighting

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total cost of providing electricity for street lighting in each of the last five years.

(AQO 1558/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The total cost of electricity for street lighting purposes in each of the last five years is as follows (these figures are exclusive of VAT):

Year	Total Cost £M
06 / 07	8.9
05 / 06	8.0
04 / 05	7.5
03 / 04	6.9
02 / 03	6.8

Septic Tanks

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on the processing of the backlog in the emptying of septic tanks.

(AQO 1598/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that a backlog of 326 requests for emptying of septic tanks still remains and every effort is being made to complete these outstanding requests as soon as possible. The backlog is now due largely to problems with restricted access to septic tanks during the recent period of exceptionally wet weather.

Customers requesting the septic tank desludging service can now expect their septic tanks to be deslugged within 12 working days.

Accessibility for Passengers

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Regional Development what measures he is taking to promote accessibility for passengers travelling to Belfast International Airport from (i) outside the greater Belfast area; and (ii) the Republic of Ireland.

(AQO 1649/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS) seeks to work towards the vision "to have a modern, sustainable, safe transportation system which benefits society, the economy and the environment and which actively contributes to social inclusion and everyone's quality of life". Included among the major themes of the RTS is a focus on "developing a Regional Strategic Transport Network, based on Key Transport Corridors (KTCs), to enhance accessibility to regional facilities and services". The Regional Strategic Transport Network (RSTN) comprises 5 KTCS, 4 link corridors and the remainder of the Trunk Road Network, providing links from the whole island of Ireland to the major regional gateways, including Belfast International Airport.

My Department's plans for improving accessibility to regional facilities and services are contained in the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan 2015. This includes proposals for schemes to improve accessibility for passengers travelling to Belfast International Airport from not only outside the greater Belfast area, but also from the South. For example, the scheme under construction between Beech Hill and Cloghogue will complete the dualling of the A1 from Sprucefield to the border and will significantly improve access from the South to Belfast International Airport.

A consultation exercise has been completed on a package of £400m of Strategic Road Improvement schemes. A final decision on which schemes are to be added to the Strategic Road Improvement Programme has been withheld pending the finalising of Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2008-2018. One of the schemes being considered for inclusion is the provision

of a number of 2 + 1 carriageway widening schemes on the A26 Nutts Corner to M1 Moira.

Accessibility to the Airport through Belfast will also be significantly improved when Roads Service's major improvements at the M1/Westlink and M2 are completed. These works are valued at £124 million.

With regard to signage to the Airport, 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 Eastern Divisional Roads Manager, to inform you of the outcomes of this review.

With regard to public transport, Ulsterbus operates direct bus services from Lisburn and Antrim to Belfast International Airport. In addition to this, there is a service every ten minutes from Belfast's Europa Buscentre, which connects with Ulsterbus Goldline services from across the North. An hourly service is also provided between Dublin and Belfast Europa Buscentre; this also links to the high frequency connection to the Airport.

In addition to services provided by Ulsterbus, the privately owned Airporter bus company operates eleven services every weekday between Derry and the Airport. A reduced service operates at weekends.

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.

Street Lighting

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to review the criteria which restricts street lighting, to groups of 10 or more houses in rural communities. (AQO 1574/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The main criterion for providing street lighting in rural areas is that there should be at least ten dwellings in a contiguous 200 metres of road length. The policy for provision of road lighting in rural locations was relaxed in 2002, following an extensive review of street lighting provision. The revised criterion means that any public building with significant evening use within a community is counted as two dwellings when considering housing density.

My Department's Roads Service has to balance the demand for more rural lighting against the unwelcome effects of increased urbanisation of the countryside, the environmental impact of light pollution on people,

wildlife and flora and the financial costs of providing and maintaining additional public lighting installations.

I have no plans for a further review of this criteria at this time.

Bypass at Dungiven

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to bring forward the start date for a bypass at Dungiven. (AQO 1573/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: 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.

The consultants are currently examining a variety of different route options within this corridor and plan to consult on these options by summer 2008. 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 will be delivered within the lifetime of the proposed Investment Strategy 2008-2018.

It is proposed that the entire Derry to Dungiven scheme will be advanced through the statutory processes and it is not proposed to bring forward the Dungiven Bypass as a separate project.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Rosemount Barracks

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Social Development to ensure that there is proper consultation on the future of Rosemount Barracks, Derry/Londonderry, if the Housing Executive are to be the lead agency. (AQW 2831/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): The Housing Executive has very recently been advised that it may acquire this site via a Housing Association. Any proposed development will proceed only after extensive consultation with the local community.

Housing Accommodation

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the level of housing accommodation available in the Ballymena Borough Council area at 8 January 2008. (AQW 2955/08)

The Minister for Social Development: In the Ballymena Borough Council area at 31 December 2007 the Northern Ireland Housing Executive had 2,898 properties, Housing Associations had 554 and there were 21,925 in the private sector giving a total of 25,377. This information was obtained from Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Rate Collection Agency sources.

Housing Accommodation

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the level of housing accommodation available in the Ballymoney Borough Council area at 8 January 2008. (AQW 2956/08)

The Minister for Social Development: In the Ballymoney Borough Council Area at 31 December 2007, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive had 1,489 properties, Housing Association had 161 properties and there were 9,942 in the private sector giving a total of 11,592. This information was obtained from Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Rate Collection Agency sources.

Housing Accommodation

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the level of housing accommodation available in the Moyle District Council area at 8 January 2008. (AQW 2965/08)

The Minister for Social Development: In the Moyle District Council area at 31 December 2007 the Northern Ireland Housing Executive had 835 properties, Housing Associations had 163 and there were 7,086 in the private sector giving a total of 8,084. This information was obtained from Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Rate Collection Agency sources.

Social Security Agency

Mr Adams asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of promotions, from Administrative Officer to Executive Officer II grade, within the Social Security Agency, since 1990, by (i) gender; and (ii) district offices. (AQW 3008/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department does not hold the information requested

from 1990. However, the table below contains the number of promotions from Administrative Officer to Executive Officer 2 grade, within the Social Security Agency, since 2003, by (i) gender and (ii) district offices.

District	Offices	Male	Female
Belfast North	Carrickfergus	0	2
	Corp St	6	10
	Larne	2	2
	Newtownabbey	3	3
	Shankill	4	2
Belfast West	Andersonstown	5	11
	Falls	3	4
	Lisburn	2	3
	Shaftesbury Sq	7	3
East Down	Ballynahinch	0	1
	Bangor	1	1
	Downpatrick	0	1
	Hollywood Rd	5	8
	Kilkeel	0	0
	Knockbreda	1	2
	Newcastle	0	4
	Newtownards	0	4
North	Antrim	0	7
	Ballymena	1	2
	Ballymoney	1	3
	Coleraine	1	3
	Cookstown	0	1
	Limavady	0	4
	Magherafelt	0	0
South	Armagh	2	4
	Banbridge	0	0
	Dungannon	0	3
	Lurgan	3	3
	Newry	4	5
	Portadown	1	2
West	EnniSkillen	5	3
	Foyle	9	15
	Lisnagelvin	1	5
	Omagh	2	5
	Strabane	3	7
Total		72	133

Housing Executive Grants

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of households that have been awarded a Housing Executive grant for works to their homes, broken down by each district office area, in the Moyle District Council area, in the last three years. (AQW 3027/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This information is not readily available in the format requested. However the attached table details the information for the Moyle Council area.

NIHE GRANT APPROVALS FOR MOYLE BOROUGH COUNCIL AREA

	Renovation	Disabled Facilities grant	Replacement	Home Repair Assistance	Repair*	Total
Moyle						
2004/05	12	11	2	7	0	32
2005/06	13	16	2	16	0	47
2006/07	9	14	1	14	0	38
Apr – Dec 2007	8	9	0	10	0	27
Total	42	50	5	47	0	144

* The Repair Grant is only available on the basis of a statutory Public Health Notice or Certificate of Disrepair.

Housing Executive Grants

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of households who have been awarded a Housing Executive grant for works to their homes, broken down by each district office area, in the Ballymena Borough Council area, in the last three years. (AQW 3028/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This information is not readily available in the format requested, however the following table details the information for the Ballymena Council area.

NIHE GRANT APPROVALS FOR BALLYMENA BOROUGH COUNCIL AREA

	Renovation	Disabled Facilities grant	Replacement	Home Repair Assistance	Repair*	Total
Ballymena						

2004/05	35	42	3	15	3	98
2005/06	20	23	2	22	0	67
2006/07	21	40	1	32	1	95
Apr – Dec 2007	18	18	1	14	0	51
Total	94	123	7	83	4	311

* The Repair Grant is only available on the basis of a statutory Public Health Notice or Certificate of Disrepair.

Home Improvement Grants

Mr O’Loan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of households that have been awarded a Housing Executive home improvement grant, in the Ballymoney Borough Council area, for each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3052/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is as follows:

	Renovation	Disabled Facilities	Replacement	Minor Works Assistance	Home Repair Assistance	Repair	Total
Ballymoney							
2004/05	21	20	0	3	10	1	55
2005/06	13	22	2	0	8	1	46
2006/07	19	17	0	0	17	2	55
Apr–Dec 07	13	14	2	0	10	0	39
Total	66	73	4	3	45	4	195

Home Improvement Grants

Mr O’Loan asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm whether or not her department keep a record of those who may be eligible for Housing Executive home improvement grants; and if so, to detail the number of households in the (i) Moyle District Council area; (ii) Ballymena Borough Council area; and (iii) Ballymoney Borough Council area, that have been identified as eligible for these grants, but have not yet availed of them, in the last 3 years. (AQW 3053/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive does not collate information on those households which may be eligible for Home Improvement Grants. The Grants scheme is aimed at improving housing conditions in the private sector. The preliminary results of the 2006 House Condition Survey indicate an unfitness rate of around 3% in

Northern Ireland which demonstrates the success of the grants scheme to date. The results of the 2006 survey will be available on a district council basis later in the year and will provide a basis for estimating the number of households in the private sector whose homes are unfit or in disrepair.

Home Improvement Grants

Mr O’Loan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail what action her department is taking to encourage more people to apply for Housing Executive home improvement grants. (AQW 3054/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive already receives considerable numbers of applications for discretionary home improvement grants and considers that it could not justify devoting resources to encourage more people to apply. Applications can only be processed and approvals and payments issued within the financial limits of the available budget.

Pensioner Bungalow Accommodation

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to give a timescale within which the refurbishment of the pensioner bungalow accommodation, located at Millburn, Coleraine, will be completed. (AQW 3060/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Currently these properties are included in a Housing Executive Multi Element Improvement scheme which is programmed to start in the 2009/2010 financial year. This estimated start date will be subject to the availability of finance.

Physical Disabilities

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Social Development to outline her department’s plans for ensuring that a proportion of all new build development is accessible to those with physical disabilities. (AQW 3071/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Association Guide requires all new build social housing to be designed and built to ‘Lifetime Homes’ criteria. These consist of 17 standards that have been developed to ensure that any home is flexible, adaptable and accessible. Lifetime Homes are designed to easily accommodate people with moderate mobility problems and be adaptable to accommodate the majority of conditions with maximum ease and at minimum cost.

Wheelchair housing is a separate category and is specially designed for people who are totally dependant on wheelchairs and who require larger areas and circulation spaces. Where need is established for wheelchair standard accommodation in particular locations, the Housing Executive will make provision for units to be provided as appropriate by Housing Associations within the social housing development programme.

Housing Needs

Mrs McGill asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm whether or not the Housing Executive currently has £240 million worth of land which is surplus to requirements; and what plans she has to utilise this land to meet the housing needs in West Tyrone. (AQW 3073/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive manages an undeveloped land schedule that was last valued at £634m. This schedule comprises:

1. land for transfer to Housing Associations for the social housing development programme - £133m
2. land to be retained for future housing use, e.g. an estate strategy - £261m (ultimately, if not required, this land can be made available for transfer to Housing Associations or disposal), and
3. surplus land - surplus to social housing need, which may be disposed of - £240m. Consideration is at present being given to the method and timing of disposal of the majority of these sites.

The Housing Executive has a small number of sites that can be developed to provide a small number of homes in West Tyrone it has no surplus sites for sale in the area.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the total expenditure by her department on the Warm Homes scheme; and (ii) the administrative costs of running the scheme, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3078/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The table set out below details my Department's expenditure on the Warm Homes Scheme in the last 3 years.

	DSD spend on measures	Administrative costs - fixed fees	Administrative costs - variable fees (based on number of households assisted)	Total Dsd Scheme Expenditure
Year 04/05	£10,567,228	£599,804	£805,128	£11,972,160
Year 05/06	£12,884,482	£875,244	£1,089,120	£14,848,846
Year 06/07	£18,186,971	£875,244	£1,239,877	£20,302,092

Housing Needs

Mrs McGill asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the reasons why the Housing Executive has accumulated land holdings worth £633 million according to March 2007 Valuation, particularly given the housing need that exists in West Tyrone. (AQW 3079/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive manages an undeveloped land schedule that was last valued at £634m. This schedule comprises:

1. land for transfer to Housing Associations for the social housing development programme - £133m
2. land to be retained for future housing use, e.g. an estate strategy - £261m (ultimately, if not required, this land can be made available for transfer to Housing Associations or disposal), and
3. surplus land - surplus to social housing need, which may be disposed of - £240m. Consideration is at present being given to the method and timing of disposal of the majority of these sites.

The Housing Executive has a small number of sites that can be developed to provide a small number of homes in West Tyrone it has no surplus sites for sale in the area.

Regeneration of Armagh

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail progress made in relation to the 'Inspiring Armagh' campaign, particularly in relation to the physical regeneration of Armagh, through the 'City Centre Integrated Development Plan'. (AQW 3092/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department has allocated £66,992 for Town Centre Promotion and Marketing in Armagh City as part of which the "Inspiring Armagh" campaign was launched on 5 September 2007. This has been used to promote

several major events including Interiors Showcase, a Ronan Keating concert and the Chamber of Commerce Business Awards. Armagh City and District Council developed the City Centre Integrated Development Plan in September 2004 and has responsibility for its delivery. The City Centre Public Realm Scheme, which is due to start imminently, is as a result of the plan and will address many of the physical regeneration issues facing Armagh. My Department is the primary funder of the scheme contributing over £3m.

Housing Executive Grants

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the steps she is taking to ensure the early reinstatement of new inspections of grant aided works, which are currently suspended until April 2008, in order that the payment of the relevant Housing Executive grants can be made.

(AQW 3124/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Housing Executive grants payment inspections were temporarily suspended for several days in January 2008 because of the uncertainty over funding. They have however been reinstated and there are currently no delays in payments. The payment of grant is kept under continuous review to ensure that budget limits are adhered to in any financial year.

Regeneration of the Village Area, South Belfast

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development whether or not she will commit to making the regeneration of the Village area in South Belfast a priority in her budget.

(AQW 3134/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Housing conditions in the Village area are mixed with some private sector properties in very poor condition. There have been a number of meetings between my officials and representatives from the area to discuss the means to address these problems. My budget settlement provides me with some room to move forward and I hope to be in a position to make an announcement shortly on the social housing programme.

Regeneration of the Village Area, South Belfast

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an update on funding bids relating to the redevelopment of the Village area in South Belfast.

(AQW 3140/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Housing conditions in the Village area are mixed with some private sector properties in very poor condition. There have been a number of meetings between my officials and representatives from the area to discuss the means to address these problems. My budget settlement provides me with some room to move forward and I hope to be in a position to make an announcement shortly on the social housing programme.

Regeneration of the Village Area, South Belfast

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an assessment of housing conditions in the Village area in South Belfast.

(AQW 3141/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Housing conditions in the Village area are mixed with some private sector properties in very poor condition. There have been a number of meetings between my officials and representatives from the area to discuss the means to address these problems. My budget settlement provides me with some room to move forward and I hope to be in a position to make an announcement shortly on the social housing programme.

Newtownards Masterplan

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm that the Newtownards masterplan, co-ordinated by the council and the local commercial community, will be supported financially, technically and in policy terms by her department to ensure that this plan is effective from June 2008.

(AQW 3142/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Newtownards Masterplan will not be effective from June 2008 as necessary approvals for the consultancy expenditure are not in place and work has consequently not yet started. Even if this was not the case, a comprehensive masterplan reflecting the various issues and potential developments in Newtownards will take some time to be researched, drafted, consulted on and finalised.

Irish Traveller Community Sites

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the steps that she is taking to address the concerns of Craigavon residents over the location of Irish Traveller Community sites in the area.

(AQW 3148/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The provision of Travellers sites is the operational responsibility of the Housing Executive. I have recently asked the Housing Executive to facilitate a meeting with Craigavon Borough Council to clarify the position on the location of sites. I have been invited to visit the Legahory site and intend to do so as soon as it can be arranged. During this visit, I will take the opportunity to meet both Traveller families and local residents.

Irish Traveller Community Sites

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail what contact she has had with (i) the Police Service of Northern Ireland; (ii) the Northern Ireland Housing Executive; and (iii) other agencies, over the damage caused at Irish Traveller Community sites. (AQW 3149/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The provision and management of Travellers sites falls under the operational responsibility of the Housing Executive. Housing Executive officials liaise with other relevant statutory agencies and local councils where problems arise and where it has responsibility it addresses any repair issues through its response and planned maintenance programmes.

Home Improvement Grants

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her comments in the Assembly on 2 July 2007, to confirm whether or not departmental officials met with home owners in the Village area of South Belfast, to discuss concerns in relation to home improvements. (AQW 3155/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Housing conditions in the Village area are mixed with some private sector properties in very poor condition. There have been a number of meetings between my officials and representatives from the area to discuss the means to address these problems. My budget settlement provides me with some room to move forward and I hope to be in a position to make an announcement shortly on the social housing programme.

Departmental Land

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to give a timescale within which the land owned by her department at Ballee, Ballymena, is due to be sold; and to confirm whether or not a final price has been agreed for the land. (AQW 3156/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Matters regarding the sale of land at Ballee are not yet complete. A sale price was agreed in June 2007 and officials are currently in discussions with the interested parties with a view to settling remaining issues quickly. I hope that the sale will still complete before the end of this financial year.

Departmental Land

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the (i) correspondence; and (ii) discussions she and her department have had with Mr Ian Paisley Jnr, in relation to departmental land at Ballee, Ballymena. (AQW 3157/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Since I took up office in May 2007, Mr Ian Paisley Jnr has written to me on one occasion, on 6 June 2007, on behalf of his constituents regarding the land at Ballee, Ballymena. I replied on 7 June.

Mr Paisley has also raised, on a number of occasions, the issue or queried progress on its resolution, in informal discussions on other matters, with myself and officials.

Departmental Land

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development what actions she is taking to ensure that land owned by her department is not sold for less than the market value. (AQW 3158/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department adheres to the guidance on Disposal of Assets as outlined in chapter 24 of Government Accounting Northern Ireland manual. This means that, when deciding to sell land and buildings on the open market, my Department takes appropriate professional advice to ensure that the consideration obtained for the property is the best that can reasonably be obtained.

Housing Strategy

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of new homes that have been built in North Belfast as a result of the North Belfast Housing Strategy; and to outline the areas in which new homes have been developed. (AQW 3159/08)

The Minister for Social Development: 1,248 new social homes have been built as a result of the North Belfast Housing Strategy. I have placed a copy of

tables, which detail the new build areas, in the Assembly Library.

Environmental Improvement Schemes

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development to detail any proposed cuts in relation to the Environmental Improvement schemes in the Colin area of West Belfast. (AQW 3167/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I have not proposed any cuts in relation to Environmental Improvement schemes in the Colin area of West Belfast. My Department, through its Belfast Regeneration Office, is involved in a number of proposed Environmental Improvement schemes in the Colin area along with other statutory bodies and local community representatives. These proposed schemes are at various stages of development and as with all such schemes, they will be subject to agreement on scheme design and satisfactory economic appraisals and the necessary funding being in place at the time.

Inappropriate Contact

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development if she has assessed any contact between Members of the Assembly and her department, in the last nine months, to have been inappropriate. (AQW 3174/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I have made no assessment of communications between my Department and Ministers of the Assembly.

However some telephone calls were made to my former Special Adviser, which were referred to the Permanent Secretary who passed the matter on to the Head of the Civil Service.

Regeneration of the Village Area, South Belfast

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail what bids for finance she has made in relation to the regeneration of the Village area of South Belfast, in (i) this year's Budget; and (ii) previous monitoring rounds. (AQW 3190/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Since I visited the area, a number of meetings and discussions have taken place between senior officials in my Department and community and public representatives. I will be adopting a dual approach to the problems facing the people in the Village area. In the long term we will be working with the community and its representatives to identify housing and

regeneration opportunities. Innovative private sector contributions must also play a key role in the Village regeneration proposals.

In the short term I am taking steps to try to address the needs of those vulnerable people in the greatest need, for example we have offered to carry out room conversions, install insulation, upgrade heating and re-house where necessary and feasible.

I have not held discussions with Ministerial colleagues specifically about the Village but discussions have been held on the budget issue generally. My budget settlement provides me with some room to move forward and I hope to be in a position to make an announcement shortly on the social housing programme.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Attwood asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the amount of money allocated to the Warm Homes scheme under the 2007 December monitoring round; and to confirm whether or not (i) all the money is to be allocated to solar heating projects; and (ii) all or some of the monies will be allocated to people who urgently require an upgrade to traditional heating systems. (AQW 3191/08)

The Minister for Social Development: £2 million was allocated to my Department in the December monitoring round for energy efficiency measures. This money was transferred from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investments Environment and Renewable Energy Fund and can only be used for renewable energy projects.

Regeneration of the Village Area, South Belfast

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to outline what steps she has taken in relation to housing and the regeneration of the Village area of South Belfast, since her visit to the area in June 2007. (AQW 3192/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Since I visited the area, a number of meetings and discussions have taken place between senior officials in my Department and community and public representatives. I will be adopting a dual approach to the problems facing the people in the Village area. In the long term we will be working with the community and its representatives to identify housing and regeneration opportunities. Innovative private sector contributions must also play a key role in the Village regeneration proposals.

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I have not held discussions with Ministerial colleagues specifically about the Village but discussions have been held on the budget issue generally. My budget settlement provides me with some room to move forward and I hope to be in a position to make an announcement shortly on the social housing programme.

Regeneration of the Village Area, South Belfast

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail what discussions or consultations she has had with Ministerial colleagues, in relation to the regeneration of the Village area in South Belfast.

(AQW 3193/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Since I visited the area, a number of meetings and discussions have taken place between senior officials in my Department and community and public representatives. I will be adopting a dual approach to the problems facing the people in the Village area. In the long term we will be working with the community and its representatives to identify housing and regeneration opportunities. Innovative private sector contributions must also play a key role in the Village regeneration proposals.

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I have not held discussions with Ministerial colleagues specifically about the Village but discussions have been held on the budget issue generally. My budget settlement provides me with some room to move forward and I hope to be in a position to make an announcement shortly on the social housing programme.

Social Housing

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development, following the allocation of extra resources to her department in the Budget, to detail the number of social housing units that will be built in the South Down constituency in the next 3 years.

(AQW 3213/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Over the next three years the Social Housing Development

Programme for the South Down area has 101 units planned for 2007/08, 118 units planned for 2008/09 and 52 units planned for 2009/10. Detailed information on the plans for the area has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Social Housing

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the approximate cost of providing a social housing unit. (AQW 3230/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The total average cost of a 5 person 3 bedroom social house is £167,000

Child Poverty

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development to outline (i) the reasons why her department's submission to the Committee for the OFMDFM's inquiry into child poverty was 40 days late; (ii) the consequential action she is taking; and (iii) her commitment to the eradication of child poverty by 2020.

(AQO 1551/08)

The Minister for Social Development: However unsatisfactory it may seem, the reason for the delay in the submission of my department's response to the Committee of OFMDFM was administrative oversight. I have sent my apologies for the delay to the Chair of that Committee and I have made clear to the officials involved, in terms that are unambiguous, that this sort of delay must not be repeated. I have instructed that steps be taken to review systems to ensure that is the case and I have been reassured by their response.

In answer to the third point, the regrettable delay in the submission of that report is entirely unrelated to my own, unchanged commitment to tackling poverty and not just managing it. I have consistently highlighted in this house and elsewhere, in evidence to committees and in other published forms, in public and in private, my commitment to alleviating the impact of poverty and particularly child poverty.

The member may wish to note that one of the things about this episode which I find frustrating is the fact that the content of this report is being eclipsed by the debate around its delay. The report gives an account of the important work already underway in my department to alleviate the impact of poverty especially among vulnerable groups, like children, and it identifies some important issues and challenges that need to be addressed so that the Executive can work towards meeting the ambitious objectives we have set in the Programme for Government.

Housing Association

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the steps her department is taking to address the variations in Housing Association policy; and what plans she has to bring all associations under the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Tenant Handbook. (AQO 1562/08)

The Minister for Social Development: While all associations operate under the guidelines set out in the Tenants' Guarantee they need to have flexibility to vary their tenants' handbooks to reflect the differing needs of the variety of client groups they serve. There are therefore no plans to bring associations under the Housing Executive's Tenant Handbook. However it is my intention to review the current Tenants' Guarantee to ensure that it remains fit for purpose.

Social Housing

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the projection for social housing units to be built in South Belfast, in the next eighteen months. (AQO 1626/08)

The Minister for Social Development: As the social housing development programme is constructed on the basis of financial years it is not possible to give information for an 18 month period. In the current financial year provision has been made for 72 starts and for a further 290 in the next 2 financial years. Over the 5 year period from 2007 to 2012 the programme provides for a total of 508 homes.

The programme is currently being rolled forward by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and I am advised that the updated programme will be available within weeks.

I have placed a copy of the current 5 year programme for South Belfast in the Assembly Library.

Liquor Licensing and Regulation

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development what initial assessment has she made on the reform of liquor licensing and regulation in Northern Ireland. (AQO 1543/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I am currently considering my predecessor's review of liquor licensing and have sought the views of a number of key stakeholders. I will be engaging in wider consultation, including discussing this with the Social Development Committee and Executive colleagues, before bringing forward any proposals on liquor licensing.

Festivals in Belfast

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development to indicate what funding her department has provided in relation to festivals in Belfast, in the last three years. (AQO 1625/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department for Social Development provided funding totalling £209,613 for community festivals in Belfast in the financial year 2005-06. DSD has not funded community festivals in ensuing years as the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure assumed this responsibility from the 2006-07.

Shackleton Barracks

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development what progress she has made in securing the vacated dwellings at Shackleton Barracks for the purposes of public sector letting. (AQO 1511/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has reviewed the level of demand for public sector housing in this area and has advised that there is a very limited future need for public sector dwellings at Shackleton.

Social Security Fraud

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the latest figures for the amount estimated to be lost through social security fraud; and (ii) the amount of money recovered by her department during this period. (AQO 1632/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department has a robust strategy for tackling fraud and error in the social security system wherever it occurs. The strategy focuses on prevention, detection correction of errors and where appropriate prosecution of fraudsters. Fraud losses have reduced from £60.9m in 2001/02 to £18.1m in 2006/07, a reduction of 70% in 5 years.

The Social Security Agency's 2006/2007 Accounts show the latest estimate of the level of fraud in benefits administered by the Agency is £18.1m which equates to 0.5% of benefit expenditure; and the amount of overpaid Social Security Agency benefits recovered was £8.9m. This includes overpayments due to customer fraud and error and official error. A further £99k was recovered on behalf of the Agency by means of a Confiscation Order and settlements achieved by the Assets Recovery Agency.

Renewing Communities

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the progress made by the Renewing Communities pilot scheme for rural areas. (AQO 1600/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Renewing Communities Action Plan was launched by Direct Rule Ministers in April 2006 with my Department taking responsibility for the overall planning and initial implementation across an initiative involving eight Government Departments. The pilot scheme for Rural Areas has been managed and delivered by the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development and questions with regard to progress of this specific pilot should be directed to the Minister for that Department.

Review of Public Administration

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the functions of her department that will be transferred to local government under the Review of Public Administration. (AQO 1542/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I would refer my colleague to the Emerging Findings paper on the Review of Functions transferring to local government, which was published on 19 October 2007. I proposed for transfer a range of Urban Regeneration and Community Development functions. The final report will be considered by the Executive on 31 January 2008.

Shared Future in NI

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development to detail how her department will contribute to the vision of a Shared Future in Northern Ireland. (AQO 1544/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I am committed to building the objectives of A Shared Future into the work of my Department and that of the Housing Executive. Developing good relations with and between our communities is a very significant part of what my Department does through its daily work, and I will continue to drive forward this agenda.

The Department for Social Development and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive made a significant and extensive contribution to the objectives and targets set out in the previous administration's A Shared Future Action Plan. It is my intention that my Department will deliver on these commitments.

Departmental Underspend

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the reasons for her department's underspend in this financial year. (AQO 1622/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department is planning to use its full budget by the end of the financial year and the budget will continue to be refined up until the February Monitoring Round in the light of emerging pressures and reduced requirements.

In the Monitoring Rounds to date, budgetary surrenders have been declared due to:

- project slippage or delays and programmes not progressing as originally anticipated, particularly the Social Security Modernisation Programme and the completion of the Jobs and Benefits Accommodation Project.
- difficulties being experienced in recruiting staff into the department.

My Department has also benefited from budgetary surrenders made by other Departments at the Monitoring Rounds with additional resources secured for the Housing Programme.

Provision of Social and Affordable Housing

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Social Development what progress has been made on the introduction of a system of developer contribution toward the provision of social and affordable housing. (AQO 1541/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I recently received reports from my Interdepartmental Affordability Review Group, the Panel of Experts led by Professor Adair and from Baroness Ford, formerly Chair of English Partnerships. Each has commented on the introduction of a developer contribution.

I am satisfied that such a contribution can make a significant impact, increasing the supply of social, and affordable housing across Northern Ireland. My officials have already held a number of meetings with other interested Departments, including Planning Service, to identify what needs to be done to introduce this as soon as practically possible.

Rosemount Police Station

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm that there will be a full community consultation process on how best to utilise any land transferred to her department on the site of

the former police station at Rosemount, Derry/Londonderry. (AQO 1627/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The PSNI declared the cleared site of its former Rosemount station surplus to requirements in 2007. In accordance with the Disposal of public sector property guidelines the Central Advisory Unit of the Department of Finance and Personnel's Land and Property Services Agency conducted an extensive public sector tawl of the property to determine if there was any qualifying public sector interest in acquiring it, prior to proceeding with any other forms of sale.

Interest was expressed for regeneration purposes and for social housing. Interest was also expressed by the Western Health and Social Services Board, Derry City Council and a local community group, Rosemount Resource Centre. The regeneration, WHSSB and Council interests were subsequently withdrawn and without the support of a public body with statutory powers of acquisition, the community group interest could not be pursued.

That left only the social housing interest. A nominated Housing Association will now proceed with the purchase from the PSNI.

Any proposed social housing development will proceed only after extensive consultation with the local community.

Regeneration Activity

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Social Development what is her assessment of the challenges that lie ahead in transferring regeneration activity to local government. (AQO 1563/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The regeneration functions that I have identified for transfer to local government are substantial and present a number of challenges. Firstly, there will be a need to review the existing urban regeneration legislation to ensure that local government has an appropriate range of powers to effectively discharge this function. The legislation will reflect the requirement for my Department to take forward major urban regeneration schemes of regional significance.

I would want to ensure that the transfer is resourced properly. It must be recognised that local delivery, as opposed to regional delivery of services, can result in additional costs due to diseconomies of scale. The final decision on the local government delivery model will be important in this regard. The skill base in a number of specialised areas must be broadened to enable councils to carry out the increasingly complex work involved in regeneration. I will look again at the issue of compulsory transfer of staff with a view to

introducing some flexibility on movement. Whatever the challenges, I am determined to overcome them and I will be looking at innovative ways of achieving some tangible outcomes well ahead of the transfer timetable for 2011.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Energy Saving

Mr Beggs asked the Assembly Commission to detail its energy saving initiatives. (AQW 3163/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): The Assembly Commission works closely with the Energy Conservation Branch and the Carbon Trust to improve energy efficiency. A number of measures have been introduced, for example - energy-saving bulbs are used, where feasible, throughout the building and a number of offices have powered lighting that turns off when there is no one in the office.

Eurest has also adopted the Assembly's recycling policy and has all of its used cooking oil collected and recycled.

With regard to IT, there is a 60% reduction in the amount of energy absorbed by the display screens of the new computers, and there is a reduction in the heat produced by those machines. Printers are pre-set to go into low-power mode after approximately five minutes of inactivity, and this leads to an 80% reduction in power used. Furthermore, the enhanced capabilities of new printers permit a reduction in the amount of paper used through double-sided printing and multiple-page presentations. A contract is also in place for recycling all printer consumables from Parliament Buildings and constituency offices.

In addition to all of the above an environmental audit is currently being carried out which includes exploring:

- 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

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 08 February 2008

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

European Globalisation Fund

Mr F McCann asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions it will have with members of the European Task Force, on its visit to Northern Ireland in December, regarding the demonstration of flexibility in the application of the European Globalisation Fund in situations such as occurred in Limavady. (AQO 1217/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley and Mr M McGuinness): We welcomed the visit by the Taskforce which followed on from the important work taken forward by both Junior Ministers when they visited Brussels on 22 November and the discussion between Junior Minister Paisley and Commissioner Hubner when they addressed the IBEC-CBI Joint Business Council in October. During the November visit the Junior Ministers were accompanied by a delegation of senior officials from a number of departments. The aim of the visit was to discuss priorities and develop ideas for increased participation in European opportunities and prepare the ground for the Taskforce visit.

The Taskforce's visit represented an unprecedented opportunity for Northern Ireland. We also want to assure those workers in Limavady that we are doing everything that we can to minimise hardship. We will be exploring with the European Commission how they can help the Executive create an innovative and competitive economy.

The closure of Seagate in Limavady results from structural changes in world trade patterns. Changes which have created a cost gap compared with the company's Asian competitors.

President Barroso proposed the European Globalisation Fund to help workers experiencing the negative consequences of globalisation. He intended it as a sign of solidarity from those benefiting from open trade to those who suddenly lose their jobs. The Fund was launched in January 2007 and provides one-off time-limited individual support to complement the actions of national governments.

The Executive wants to alleviate hardship as best we can and to help redundant workers find other jobs as quickly as possible. The Globalisation Fund can assist with job search provision, personalised retraining, promoting entrepreneurship, self-employment and special allowances.

Child Poverty Figures

Mr Cobain asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the methods used to calculate child poverty figures. (AQW 2735/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The current UK Government pledge to eradicate child poverty is measured by a tiered approach, based on: a relative income poverty measure: an absolute poverty measure: and a mixed income and material deprivation measure.

- (i) **Relative income poverty:** A child is defined as living in relative income poverty if the household in which he/she lives has an equivalised income that is less than 60% of the contemporary median income level for all households in the UK. Equivalisation is the process by which household income is adjusted to account for variation in household size and composition.

The median income is the mid point of all household incomes. In other words, if all household incomes were placed in order from lowest to highest then half of all households would have an income above the median amount and half below.

Household income in relation to the UK child poverty target is on a before housing cost basis. Household rates, which are treated as a tax in HBAI NI are deducted from household income on the before housing cost basis. Relative income child poverty can also be calculated on an after housing cost basis.

- (ii) **Absolute child poverty:** This is a measure of whether the poorest families are seeing their incomes rise in real terms. The baseline year for the UK child poverty target is 1998/99. The 1998/99 UK median is adjusted year on year for inflation and a child living in a household with an income less than 60% of the 1998/99 median

value adjusted for inflation is defined as living in absolute poverty.

- (iii) **Material deprivation and low income combined:** This measure is defined as a lack of income and material deprivation. Material deprivation and low income combined provides a wider measure of people's living standards. This measure is currently being developed by the Department for Social Development.

OFMDFM are currently examining the issue of poverty measures to ensure that the measures used are effective in identifying those most at need.

Integrated Development Fund

Ms J McCann asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the amount of money from the Integrated Development Fund which has been drawn down for projects approved in the area defined by the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Taskforce Report 2002. (AQO 1499/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: To date, 15 projects in the West Belfast / Greater Shankill area have received offers of support from the Integrated Development Fund with a total commitment of £17.69m (£11.46m capital and £6.23m resource). The spend to the end of this financial year is forecast to be £8.1m (£2.3m capital and £5.8m resource.)

Bill of Rights

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland; and to detail the process for consultation. (AQW 2832/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Responsibility for developing proposals on a Bill of Rights rests with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission as it has the statutory authority to consult and to advise on a Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights Forum will make recommendations on a Bill of Rights to the Commission and it in turn will make recommendations to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has no direct role in the development of proposals on a Bill of Rights.

EU Goods and Services Directive

Mr Storey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to the answer to AQW 1827/08, if in considering the results of the consultation on implementing the European Union Goods and Services Directive, favourable consideration

will be given to extending the exceptions to include (i) events organised by churches or religious organisations that take place away from the church precinct; (ii) commercial or charitable shops, cafes or other businesses organised by churches or religious organisations; and (iii) individuals working in the health professions who have religious or moral based conscientious objections to this Directive. (AQW 2878/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Legislation to implement the European Union Goods and Services Directive is now being taken forward by the Government Equalities Office on a UK-wide basis. Decisions on policy proposals to implement the Directive will now be taken by UK Ministers. The public consultation responses and the committee's consultations response have both been forwarded to that office to ensure that they are fully aware of issues raised.

Bill of Rights

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of the concerns detailed in the December issue of the Church of Ireland Gazette, in relation to the Bill of Rights proposals for Northern Ireland. (AQW 2945/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Responsibility for developing proposals on the Bill of Rights rests with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission as it has the statutory authority to consult and advise on a Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights Forum will make recommendations on a Bill of Rights to the Commission and it in turn will make recommendations to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has no direct role in the development of proposals on a Bill of Rights. It would therefore not be appropriate to comment on this issue at this time.

Hospitality Expenditure

Mr Moutray asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the Office's total expenditure on hospitality and entertainment in each of the last five years. (AQW 3137/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The following table sets out the Department's expenditure on hospitality and entertainment for each of the last five financial years:

Description	2002/03 (£)	2003/04 (£)	2004/05 (£)	2005/06 (£)	2006/07 (£)
Hospitality and Entertainment	149,993	93,703	63,974	71,599	78,523

Gender Equality

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail its plan to provide gender equality opportunities, in particular equality of opportunity for women in all sectors of society. (AQW 3160/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: A plan to promote gender equality opportunities for women and men in Northern Ireland is set out in the Gender Equality Strategy 2006-2016. Copies of the Strategy are available in the Assembly Library. The Strategy can also be downloaded from the OFMDFM website at <http://www.ofmdfmni.gov.uk/genderequalitystrategy2006-2016.pdf>. The implementation of the cross-departmental Gender Equality Strategy is one of the key actions of the Programme for Government, under Public Service Agreement (PSA) 7.

Meetings with MEPs

Mr Ross asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the number of meetings held with each of the 3 MEPs from Northern Ireland; and (ii) the purpose of these meetings, since the restoration of devolution in May 2007. (AQW 3278/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Since 8 May 2007, the First Minister, deputy First Minister and Junior Ministers have held one meeting with Mr Jim Nicholson MEP and one meeting with Ms Bairbre de Brún MEP. The purpose of these meetings was to discuss EU matters, including the Executive's engagement with the EU and the establishment of the Barroso Taskforce. Ministers have written to Mr Allister offering him the opportunity to meet with them; however to date no meeting has taken place.

Ministers also met Ms de Brún at an event in the Office of the NI Executive Brussels (ONIEB), to which all three MEPs were invited, to mark the First Minister and deputy First Ministers' trip to Brussels on 9 January 2008.

OFMDFM officials working in the Office of the NI Executive Brussels (ONIEB) have also attended various meetings with the MEPs since 8 May 2007, as detailed in the table below:

Date	MEP	Purpose
8 May 2007	Jim Allister	MEP met InvestNI and ONIEB official to be briefed on InvestNI inward investment efforts in Benelux and France.

Date	MEP	Purpose
15 May 2007	Jim Nicholson	Lunch meeting; general EU policy discussion and update.
12 June 2007	Jim Nicholson	ONIEB official in attendance at reception in EP to mark Sir Reg Empey's visit, and dinner for various NI contacts.
13 June 2007	Bairbre de Brún	ONIEB official accompanied DEL Minister on courtesy call to MEP in Brussels.
3 July 2007	Jim Nicholson	Meeting to discuss general EU policy issues and update.
7 August 2007	Jim Allister	Meeting to discuss general EU policy issues.
10 October 2007	Jim Allister	ONIEB official accompanied DSD Minister to meeting with MEP for discussion on general policy issues.
22 November 2007	Jim Allister, Jim Nicholson and Bairbre de Brún (3 separate meetings)	Each MEP held a separate meeting with ONIEB officials and other NICS officials involved in European Commission Taskforce.
24 January 2008	Jim Allister, Jim Nicholson	MEPs attended InvestNI Aerospace celebration and reception at ONIEB. Attendance by a range of industry, EU Commission and diplomatic representatives.
30 January 2008	Jim Allister	MEP addressed group of visiting NICS staff at the ONIEB for the purpose of EU training.
31 January 2008	Bairbre de Brún	MEP addressed group of visiting NICS staff at the ONIEB for the purpose of EU Training.

Press Release

Mr Savage asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the reasons why (i) references to 'IRA Volunteer' and 'Active Service' were included in a press release issued from the Northern Ireland Executive on Monday 28 January; and (ii) the press release was removed from the Northern Ireland Executive website on Tuesday 29 January 2008.

(AQW 3461/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: This was not a Northern Ireland Executive press

release. It was written by the Commissioners designate. As they had just been appointed and had no machinery for delivering press releases, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister as a matter of courtesy merely facilitated the Commissioners in disseminating their own statement.

There was never any intention of their statement appearing on the OFMDFM website and its publication on the website was an administrative error. Once this error was identified the Commissioners' statement was removed from the site.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Rural Development Programme

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what percentage of funds in relation to the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 will be allocated to cross-border projects. (AQW 3046/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): A budget of £4,996,050, equating to 5% of the overall Axis 3 budget has been allocated to the co-operation projects measure in the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2007 – 13.

This Budget will cover all co-operation projects whether within Northern Ireland, cross-border, with other EU member states or outside the European Union.

Rural Connect Advisors

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what role the Rural Connect advisors will have in the implementation of the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013.

(AQW 3047/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Rural Connect Advisors who played an important part in the delivery of the previous Rural Development Programme, are now known as Rural Enterprise Advisers. This term more accurately reflects their main current role which is supporting the development of new and existing diversified farm businesses. However, they continue to provide a communication and collaboration channel between DARD business areas and other agencies.

While the precise mechanism and responsibilities for each of the partners involved in the delivery of the

new Rural Development Programme 2007-13 is still being developed, I expect the Rural Enterprise Advisers will continue to play a significant role. They will be engaging with stakeholders, communicating and explaining the measures, initiatives and schemes, and directing potential beneficiaries to the most appropriate programmes when they are open for application. In addition they will continue to provide support for those who plan to or have diversified their farm business.

Royal Navy

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the involvement of the Royal Navy in the enforcement of fishing regulations for the fishing industry. (AQW 3084/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The primary role of the Fishery Protection Squadron of the British Royal Navy is enforcement of its national and EU fisheries legislation within its own national Fishery Limits. This is undertaken by three River class offshore patrol vessels and one Hunt class minesweeper under the direction of the Marine and Fisheries Agency operations room in London which will allocate tasking in the southern North Sea, English Channel, South West Approaches and the Irish Sea. Subject to availability these vessels may also be called upon to support the DARD Fisheries Inspectorate in their sea going enforcement work in the Irish Sea.

At sea the ships will monitor fishing activity and conduct inspections of fishing vessels of all nationalities by delivering qualified British Sea Fisheries Officers to a fishing vessel to examine the vessels' catch, fishing gear and paperwork. In 2007 the Royal Navy spent 809 days at sea of which 81 were in the Irish Sea where they conducted 74 inspections of fishing vessels from the North.

Single Farm Payments

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the payment schedule issued by her department for the payment of the 2007 Single Farm Payments. (AQW 3094/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The timetable announced on 22 November 2007, in relation to the 2007 Single Farm Payment Scheme, set payment targets for December 2007 and January 2008, above the performance achieved in the previous year.

I am pleased to say that the pre-Christmas target of 79% was exceeded with 79.3% (30,925) of payments completed. By the end of December this had increased

to 80.9% (31,575). This means that 1,659 more farmers received full payment in December 2007 than in December 2006.

The target of 83%, of payments to be completed in January 2008, has also been exceeded with a total of 85.7% (33,440) made. This means that 1,374 more farmers received full payment by the end of January 2008 than in the same period in 2007.

Rivers Agency

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of requests for help and assistance, made to the Rivers Agency, in relation to flooding over the Christmas and New Year period, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 3114/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Rivers Agency received 10 requests for help and assistance in relation to flooding over the period 22 December 2007 to 2 January 2008. The Agency does not hold the information broken down by parliamentary constituency but is able to report by local Council area.

Derry City and District Council – 7 calls received, Coleraine Borough Council – 2 calls received and Down District Council – 1 call received.

Divisional Veterinary Office

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide details of those properties in Newtownards that are being considered as alternative sites for the relocation of the Veterinary Office. (AQW 3143/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As the relocation of Newtownards Divisional Veterinary Office is a property related matter, this is a matter for DFP and not DARD.

Meetings with MEPs

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the number of meetings she has had with each of the 3 Northern Ireland MEP's since May 2007; and (ii) the purpose of these meetings. (AQW 3202/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Since May 2007, I have met once with Jim Nicholson MEP to discuss the problems facing the mushroom industry and other agricultural topics. I have met twice with Bairbre de Brun MEP in Brussels as part of my ongoing engagement with Europe. When

in Brussels I have been pro active in seeking meetings with all our local MEPs.

Divisional Veterinary Office

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide an update in relation to the future of the Divisional Veterinary Office at Robert Street, Newtownards. (AQW 3304/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As the closure of Newtownards Divisional Veterinary Office and its relocation is a property related matter, this is a matter for DFP and not DARD.

Red Meat Task Force

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide an update of the work carried out by her department in relation to the implementation of the recommendations of the Red Meat Task Force. (AQW 3309/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Implementing the strategy will have major implications for the industry as a whole, requiring the main players to take on increasingly important roles for the industry. The Report identified actions for each of the main players and DARD is actively playing its part in implementing the Report's recommendations.

I recently met with Commissioner Fischer Boel and took the opportunity to bring the findings of the Red Meat Task Force report to her attention. The difficulties facing the North's red meat industry make it all the more important that we have a level playing field when it comes to competition by ensuring full decoupling of support across the EU and by ensuring that imports meet the same high standards as domestic production.

I have met with three of the major retailers with plans to meet another very soon, and wrote to them about the issue of rising costs for producers. While I have no direct influence over retail prices, I believe however, that lower prices for consumers should not mean lower prices for local producers.

The Report identifies models of production that could form the basis of sustainable production. The Task Force recently established two Working Groups, both led by DARD officials to consider (a) how best to target efforts to develop commercially viable models of beef production and (b) to scope practical options, linked to broader social and environmental considerations, which might support suckler beef and hill sheep farmers.

My Department is also looking at ways of assisting processors in identifying new and niche markets and

working with them to identify and secure efficiency savings which can be passed along the supply chain to benefit all involved, including producers.

We will continue to play an active role in the work of the Task Force in developing more constructive relationships within the supply chain and I will continue to engage fully with all parts of that chain. The continuation of the Task Force work is vital in developing a cohesive plan for the future sustainability of our industry.

Rural Development Programme Fund

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the commencement date; and (ii) proposed timetable, for the delivery of the £500 million Rural Development Programme Fund. (AQO 1677/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme 2007 to 2013 received initial approval from the European Commission's Committee on Rural Development on 24 July 2007 and was one of the first programmes to be approved. Formal European Commission approval was received on 27 September 2007.

Processing and Marketing under Axis 1 opened on 12 December 2007 and first payments are expected to be made in the autumn. The other measures under Axis 1 are planned to be open in the summer.

Under Axis 2 the 2007 Less Favoured Area Compensatory allowances have been paid and the First Afforestation and Forest Environment payments are underway.

The Axis 3 measures will be delivered through a partnership between Joint Council Clusters and new Local Action Groups. Work on establishment of the Joint Clusters has progressed well. Every Council has agreed at a full Council meeting to participate in a clustering arrangement. There will be 7 in all. These agreed Clusters are:

1. Antrim, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey;
2. Ballymena, Ballymoney, Coleraine, Larne and Moyle;
3. Ards, Banbridge, Down and North Down;
4. Armagh, Craigavon, and Newry & Mourne;
5. Magherafelt, Cookstown, Dungannon and Enniskillen;
6. Omagh, Strabane, Derry and Limavady; and
7. Belfast, Castlereagh and Lisburn.

The Joint Clusters must now animate their areas as a precursor to competitively selecting a Local Action Group (LAG) and programme funding is being made available to Joint Clusters for the express purposes of animating the various rural actors in the cluster area: the competitive selection of Local Action Groups; and for the development of Local Development Strategies. The Antrim, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey cluster (called GROW) is in receipt of animation funding and an invitation has issue to the Ards, Banbridge, Down and North Down cluster to submit an application for animation funding. It is hoped that invitations to 2 more clusters will issue shortly.

Local Action Groups are expected to be in operation by summer of this year and opening for calls.

Plant Health Strategy

Mr Brolly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to confirm whether or not the issue of an all-Ireland plant health strategy will be on the agenda at the next meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council agricultural sectoral meeting. (AQO 1712/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I can confirm that I plan to have the issue of an all Ireland plant health strategy included on the agenda for the next North South Ministerial Council agricultural sectoral meeting.

My Department has now completed a plant health strategy for the North which includes a section on North/South co-operation consistent with the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food's (DAFF's) plant health strategies. I envisage extending the scope of this document in partnership with DAFF, to encompass an all-island approach. I look forward to discussing these matters with my Southern colleagues at the next meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council agricultural sectoral meeting.

Whiterock Stream

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the proposed drainage improvement scheme for Whiterock stream. (AQO 1762/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Whiterock Stream is a tributary of the Blackstaff River therefore the proposed works will improve drainage in the Blackstaff catchment.

The proposed scheme on the Blackstaff River relates to the repair or refurbishment of a 20 metre masonry - arch culvert which passes under the Glen Road close to St Teresa's Primary School. Emergency

works were carried out in November 2005 after the collapse of the roof of the culvert which resulted in a collapse of the road surface itself and severe traffic disruption. The works now proposed will provide a permanent repair to prevent further collapse in what is a particularly busy thoroughfare.

It is proposed to re-line the culvert without excavating in the roadway or footpaths, thereby avoiding the difficulties presented by underground services and traffic management. This will effect cost savings and reduce disruption. Some excavation will be necessary within the grounds of the nearby primary school for access purposes but this is not expected to be extensive.

The works on the Whiterock Road stream will consist of the replacement of structurally defective 450mm culvert with 600mm diameter heavy duty reinforced concrete pipes. The works involve the excavation in roads and footpaths on both the Whiterock and Springfield Roads and are required to reduce the risk of flooding and liabilities due to the possible collapse of structurally defective pipelines.

Beef and Sheep Advisers

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of beef and sheep advisers offering advice to the farming community. (AQO 1657/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department currently has 12 beef and sheep advisers offering advice to the farming community, (3 Senior advisers and 9 advisers). These staff, known as Beef and Sheep Development Advisers, are managed by the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise, (CAFRE) and are based at 10 DARD offices throughout NI.

Budget

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the implications for her department of the Budget. (AQO 1705/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: DARD's Budget Resource allocation is £233.5m/£237.8m/£244.7m which represents an increase of £14.6m/£25.0m/£37.7m on a roll forward of the 2007/08 baseline which represents increases of 2.9%, 1.3% and 2.9% respectively. The Resource settlement will enable DARD to continue to strive to achieve the vision and strategic goals set out in its 5 year Strategic Plan to 2011. DARD will continue to seek to improve performance in the market place through its people and business development programmes at CAFRE, the delivery of agri-food

scientific programmes by AFBI and through the provision of processing and marketing grants.

Funding will be provided for the new NI Rural Development Programme (NIRDP) 2007-13 which includes a range of initiatives targeted at the farming industry and rural communities and improving the environment and countryside. The settlement will also fund a raft of rural development anti-poverty measures aimed at capacity building in rural areas and allow the enhancement of animal, fish and plant health and welfare by lowering animal disease levels through our TB/Brucellosis action programme and development of an All-Island Animal Health Strategy. DARD will be able to continue to seek to develop a more sustainable environment through further increasing the public and private forest area, the development of more sustainable fisheries and flood protection measures through the Rivers Agency.

DARD will also benefit from net Capital/Capital Grant allocations of £83.6m/£28.6m/-£171.0m. The year 3 allocation is net of a £200m receipt for the sale of land at Crossnacreevy. The allocations would allow DARD to fund all of its highest priority Capital pressures over the three years. However, they do not enable any Capital support to be provided to the industry to meet any proposals that may be forthcoming in respect of the Red Meat Taskforce report and Rivers Agency allocations fall short of what is required for flood alleviation and flood defence in 2009/10, 2010/11 by £1.2m and £1.1m.

Fishing Industry

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the financial assistance she will provide to the fishing industry following the outcome of the recent EU Fisheries Council.

(AQO 1736/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As I announced on 5 December 2007, fishermen will be able to avail of £25.5 million of financial assistance from the European Fisheries Fund later this year. This represents an investment of £12.76million from the EU which will be matched by a grant from DARD.

Funding will be available for all sectors of the industry – sea and inland fisheries, aquaculture businesses, producer organisations, and the processing and marketing sectors - as well as for fisheries areas. Eligible measures include support for the fishing fleet to become more fuel efficient, developing more sustainable fishing methods, safety, quality, aquaculture, ports and inland fishing.

My Department will shortly be issuing a consultation seeking views from stakeholders on how they wish to

see this funding invested in support of the local fishing industry.

Genetically Modified Crops

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her department's policy in relation to the growing of genetically modified agricultural crops. (AQO 1673/08)

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 of Ireland. The DOE has the statutory responsibility for the licensing of any GM trials, and recently consulted on the issue of co-existence. It is currently considering the responses.

There are currently no GM crops grown in the North. There are currently no GM crops approved for growing in the EC which would be suitable for our growing conditions. If a farmer wished to grow a GM crop in the future, they would have to apply to the Department of the Environment for a licence. If GM crops were to be grown in the North, DARD Quality Assurance Branch officials would be responsible for crop inspections.

Food Labelling

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the progress made in relation to the issue of food labelling in the service sector. (AQO 1707/08)

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. These require all operators in the supply chain down to retail level, but excluding food service, to label their beef with traceability and origin information. DARD inspectors, along with local authority Environmental Health Officers, ensure that all beef on sale at retail level 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. Extensive market research is also being carried out on the attitudes and preferences of local consumers. Although I haven't ruled out introducing legislation in this area, I do not want to add to the bureaucracy on the industry and this is why my Department is exploring the options under a voluntary scheme. The results of these studies will help inform

future policy decisions relating to origin labelling of beef in the food service sector.

My officials are liaising with the South and the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales to learn from their experiences in this area. This will help to identify potential problems and focus effort on achieving a worthwhile outcome.

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.

Projects in West Belfast

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail those projects in West Belfast, involving her department, that also involve the Water Service and the Environment and Heritage Service. (AQO 1765/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department has no specific projects at present in West Belfast involving co-operation with NI Water formerly Water Service and DOE Environment and Heritage Service (EHS).

Rural Development Programme

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide an update on the latest views of the oversight committee in relation to the establishment of delivery mechanisms for the new Rural Development Programme. (AQO 1709/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The oversight committee, chaired by John Kelly has met on 2 occasions and has been given a full progress report by DARD Officials on the implementation of new delivery mechanisms for Axis 3. The Committee has also received copies of written procedures to be followed by the new structures in relation to setting up Local Action Groups and drawing up area rural development strategies. The Committee has indicated that it is content with progress to date. Another meeting is scheduled for early February.

Electronic Tagging

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has to bring

forward an electronic tagging system for cattle.
(AQO 1700/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department has carried out a pilot trial of Electronic Identification and Data Transfer in a number of our meat plants in recent years. This trial has demonstrated that where there is a commitment to make it work, the technology is viable in a commercial environment. It also confirmed the feasibility of integrating the recording of animals' presence in meat plants onto the APHIS system semi-automatically. Similar trials have been carried out in Great Britain, with similar results.

Among the benefits cited for integrated Electronic Identification and Data Transfer systems are reduced labour input, improved transcription of data, enhanced animal welfare through less stressful handling procedures, reduced risk of injury to animal handlers, and simpler inputs into farm management and benchmarking packages.

It is also commonly agreed however that electronic identification presents most benefits and may only be justifiable on economic grounds, where there is widespread uptake in the livestock production and marketing chain by the majority of cattle farmers, livestock markets and meat plants - as has occurred, for example, in Australia.

However, the Department has no powers to mandate the use of electronic identification for cattle, as this is not provided for in European Law, which at present requires two visibly readable eartags in each bovine animal.

The Department is however providing substantial technical input into a cross-industry body which has been set up to explore the possibilities of moving to electronic identification of cattle here on a voluntary

basis. It is expected that this group will report in the near future.

Forest Service Land

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the criteria used in deciding to dispose of Forest Service land at Pomeroy, to facilitate a proposal by Pomeroy Community Development Limited.
(AQO 1696/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The decision to dispose of 0.9 hectares of land at Pomeroy Forest was taken following the granting of outline planning permission for the land to be used for an Enterprise Park. The scale of the proposed disposal does not prejudice any strategic Forest Service interest in Pomeroy Forest. The sale of the land is subject to obtaining the best value for its proposed use, as determined by Land and Property Services, the receipt of any timber compensation costs and the completion of contracts.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Hospitality Expenditure

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the department's total expenditure on hospitality and entertainment in each of the last five years.
(AQW 3152/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): The information requested is set out below.

	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
DCAL	£36,055.66	£21,408.68	£22,259.89	£28,392.79	£29,081.28
PRONI	£3,279.19	£2,742.18	£1,252.33	£2,963.24	£948.16
OSNI	£24,378.00	£30,024.00	£30,620.00	£33,642.00	£28,455.00
Total	£63,712.85	£54,174.86	£54,132.22	£64,998.03	£58,484.44

Intercultural Exchange

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to the answer to AQW 2305/08, what consideration he has given to the participation of Northern Ireland in the European Year of Intercultural Exchange.
(AQW 3172/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: DCAL has disseminated information about the Year of

Intercultural Dialogue to its NDPBs and other outside agencies.

Irish-Language Act

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm whether or not he, or his department, invited the Orange Order to make a

submission to the consultation process for an Irish-Language Act; and to detail the individuals and organisations that he, or his department, specifically invited to make a submission on this matter.

(AQW 3206/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The 1st consultation was launched on the 13th December 2006 under Direct Rule Ministers, with the 2nd consultation launched on the 13th March 2007, also under Direct Rule Ministers. As stipulated in the Department's Equality Scheme these public consultations are drawn to the attention of Section 75 groups and to the general public through advertising in the Irish News, The Newsletter and The Belfast Telegraph. Neither I, nor my departmental officials invited any particular individual or interest group to make a submission to this public consultation.

Political Representation

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the political representation present at a meeting in Stormont on 22 January 2008 at which the Minister, members of the Milk Cup organizing committee, North Derry/Londonderry farmers, Coleraine Football Club, and Coleraine Borough Council were present to discuss the long term future of the Milk Cup.

(AQW 3258/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The following political representatives were present at the meeting on Tuesday 22nd January 2008 in Parliament Buildings:

- The Mayor of Coleraine Borough Council
Alderman Maurice Bradley (DUP - Coleraine East)
- Councillor Adrian McQuillan MLA
Coleraine Borough Council (DUP - Bann) and
MLA for East Londonderry
- Alderman George Robinson MLA
Limavady Borough Council (DUP – Limavady
Town) and MLA for East Londonderry

Comprehensive Spending Review

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) his department's bids in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review; and (ii) the amount of funding that has been allocated against them in the Budget 2008-11.

(AQW 3302/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Tables 1 & 2 attached provides the list of resource and capital bids submitted to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review. Tables 3 & 4 attached provides the Budget 2008-11 funding allocated to the Department

of Culture Arts and Leisure across the objective and spending areas. The Budget 2008-11 settlement was such that DFP did not specifically approve or reject bids but acknowledged that it was appropriate to increase the total funding available to DCAL to discharge its functions.

Salmon Catches

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of salmon recorded caught in Northern Ireland rivers in (i) 2005; (ii) 2006; and (iii) 2007.

(AQW 3347/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Please see below estimated total catch figures for salmon caught in rivers in Northern Ireland in 2005 and 2006. The 2007 salmon catch is still being collated and will not be validated until 6 March 2008.

Year	Total NI Rod Catch
2005	5732
2006	4340

Salmon Catches

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of salmon recorded caught in the sea in (i) 2005; (ii) 2006; and (iii) 2007.

(AQW 3348/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Please see below estimated total catch figures for salmon caught in the sea off Northern Ireland in 2005 and 2006. The 2007 salmon catch is still being collated and will not be validated until 6 March 2008.

Year	Total NI Net Catch
2005	16006
2006	8548

Salmon Catches

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he is taking to address the fall in the numbers of salmon caught in rivers and lakes.

(AQW 3415/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department implements a salmon management plan drawn up by fisheries scientists and drawing on findings from the River Bush salmon research project. The core concept of the plan is to establish spawning targets at a river and regional level. The central aim of

management is to ensure that in most rivers in most years sufficient adult salmon are spawning to maximise output from freshwater. Index rivers are monitored and where levels are not being attained the problems are researched and possible remedial measures are proposed.

Management measures over recent years have included a voluntary buyout of commercial fisheries, regulation of commercial fishing and angling exploitation, and both direct and indirect funding and implementation of habitat protection and restoration programmes.

A management strategy dealing with the decline in populations of salmon for the period 2008 - 2012 is nearing completion and shall be submitted to the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation (NASCO) shortly.

Colmcille Organisation

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm the date on which his department, and its counterparts in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, will transfer the Colmcille organisation to Foras na Gaeilge and Bòrd na Gàidhlig. (AQW 3455/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Bòrd na Gàidhlig is already responsible for administering the Scottish Government's funding for Colmcille. I am still considering the position of transferring the DCAL portion of Colmcille's funding to Foras na Gaeilge therefore no date has yet been agreed for the transfer to take place. Any decisions regarding the transfer of funding will have to be agreed and ratified not only by the Sponsor Department Ministers but also Finance ministers, north and south and by the North South Ministerial Council.

Gaeltacht Quarter Steering Group

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to list the members of the Gaeltacht Quarter Steering Group; and to detail (i) the number of meetings of the Steering Group; and (ii) the dates on which they were held. (AQW 3460/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The current membership of the Gaeltacht Quarter Steering Group is as follows,

Name	Organization
Cllr Michael Browne	Belfast City Council
Noel Cornick	Dept of Enterprise, Trade and Investment
Michael Flannigan	Foram Gnó

Name	Organization
Teresa Holland	West Belfast Partnership Board
Cllr William Humphrey	Belfast City Council
Colin Jackson	The Royal Group of Hospitals
Edgar Jardine	Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure
Ciarán Mackel	Forbairt Feirste
Micheál Martin	St Mary's University College
Jake MacSiacaís	Forbairt Feirste
Tony McCusker	An Ceathrú Gaeltachta Teo (Chairman)
Janet Muller	Pobal
Eimear Ní Mhathúna	Cultúrlann / An Ceathrú Gaeltachta Teo
Seán Ó Cearnaigh	Foras na Gaeilge
Mark O'Donnell	Department of Social Development
Sean Paul O'Hare	Féile and Phobail
Philib Ó Ruanaí	Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaichta
Patrick Savage	The Planning Service
Liam Stone	Pobal

An information session for members of the Gaeltacht Quarter Steering Group was held on 25th January 2007 and the inaugural meeting of the Group took place on 25th October 2007. No further meetings have taken place.

Less Popular Sports

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action he is taking to promote activity in less popular sports. (AQW 3477/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Responsibility for promoting activity in individual sports rests with the relevant governing bodies. However, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) in partnership with Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), is currently developing a new ten year Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation. The purpose of the Strategy is to promote activity in all sports in Northern Ireland. It is hoped that a final Strategy will be ready later this spring.

Irish Rugby Football Union

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm outline the equality and inclusiveness policies that were required to be submitted by the Irish Rugby Football Union before funding was provided to it, in each of the last 10 years. (AQW 3525/08)

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. Before funding is provided, Ulster Rugby is required to submit to SNI an equity policy for approval as appropriate to current legislation. This condition has been applied by SNI since 2000.

Equality and Inclusiveness

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the penalties that Sport NI can impose on an organisation that it has provided with funding, but which does not operate and comply with equality and inclusiveness policies. (AQW 3526/08)

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. If an applicant is successful in receiving funding from SNI, they will be issued with both general and specific terms and conditions relating to the award. These terms and conditions include a requirement to submit to SNI an equity policy for approval as appropriate to current legislation. SNI reserves the right to withhold/clawback funding should an applicant fail to adhere to these terms and conditions.

Rugby Funding

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail whether or not (i) the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU); or (ii) the Ulster Branch of the IRFU, are currently in discussions with his department in relation to future funding; and to detail (a) the purpose of the funding; (b) the amount of funding; (c) the equality implications to be considered; and (d) how the equality implications will be monitored. (AQW 3527/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), which is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding, have met with Ulster Rugby at its request to discuss the possibility of future funding. During these meetings Ulster Rugby indicated that the purpose of the funding being sought is to ensure the sustainability of its community rugby programme. Ulster Rugby is currently preparing a business case to SNI for this funding. It will not be possible to confirm the amount of funding or consider the equality implications until the business case is completed. Any equality implications which may arise will be monitored in accordance with the relevant Equality Commission for Northern Ireland guidance.

Building Projects at Ravenhill Rugby Ground

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2483/08, whether or not he will provide copies of all documentation in relation to this funding, including business cases and equality impact assessment reports, to the Assembly Library. (AQW 3535/08)

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. However, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will review what documentation it may hold in relation to this funding with a view to placing any relevant material in the Assembly Library.

Irish Rugby Football Union

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm whether or not his department has provided funding to the Irish Rugby Football Union to assist in the creation and remuneration of posts within the organisation, during the last ten years; and to provide details of (i) the nature of the posts that were funded; and (ii) the precise dates when this funding was provided. (AQW 3563/08)

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. Details of posts receiving exchequer funding from SNI and dates of duration of award are set out in the tables below:

INVESTING IN SPORT PROGRAMME (2003 TO 2006)

Duration of Award	Total Award Value (£)	Posts Funded
1/4/03 – 31/3/04	18,750.00	Domestic Rugby Development Manager
1/4/03 – 31/3/04	20,600.00	Club/Volunteer Development Manager
1/4/04 – 31/3/05	19,750.00	Domestic Rugby Development Manager
1/4/04 – 31/3/05	20,250.00	Club/Volunteer Development Manager
1/4/05 – 31/3/06	22,479.17	Domestic Rugby Development Manager
1/4/05 – 31/3/06	23,045.00	Club/Volunteer Development Manager

INVESTING IN GOVERNING BODY PLANS (2006 TO 2009)

Duration of Award	Total Award Value (£)	Posts Funded
1/9/06 – 31/3/07	11,465.00	Club/Volunteer Development Manager
1/4/06 – 31/8/06	11,117.00	Domestic Manager
1/4/07 – 31/3/08	19,860.00	Club/Volunteer Development Manager
1/4/08 – 31/3/09	20,573.00	Club/Volunteer Development Manager

COMMUNITY RUGBY PROGRAMME (2005 TO 2008)

Duration of Award	Total Award Value (£)	Posts Funded
1/4/05 – 31/3/06	300,000.00	1 Youth Dev Manager 1 Women's Rugby Dev Officer 1 Referee's Dev Manager 20 Development Officers (P/T) 11 Community Rugby Dev Officers
1/4/06 – 31/3/07	600,000.00	As above plus 1 Registration Officer
1/4/08 – 31/3/08	600,000.00	As above plus 1 P/T Administrator and 1 Development Officer Manager

Sports Stadium Safety Programme

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (i) to outline how the draft budget will impact on the Sports Stadium Safety Programme; (ii) how much of the £30 million investment recommended by the Scott Report in 1997 has been made; (iii) how much is available for investment in the 2008-2011 period; and (iv) to outline the implications of failing to make the recommended improvements. (AQO 1740/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Stadia Safety Programme is financed and administered by Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) which is responsible for the development of sport including the distribution of funding. The funding allocation for sport recently announced in the budget for 2008/2011 should allow SNI to continue its Stadia Safety Programme. Up to 31 December 2007 SNI has made full awards of £4,411,222 under this programme.

The recently approved capital budget for sport is £31.2m in 2008/09, £36.4m in 2009/10 and £44m in 2010/11. We are currently in discussions with SNI about the allocation of this budget including the

amount to be allocated for the improvement of safety at sports grounds.

The Scott Report, completed in April 1996, was a review of the legislative controls for health and safety at sports grounds in Northern Ireland. Whilst it made recommendations for improvements it did not make recommendations on the level of investment required to improve safety standards at sports stadia here.

The implications of failing to make the improvements recommended in the Scott Report will mean that the safety arrangements at our larger venues will fall short of recognised guidance and levels of safety and spectator comfort here will be considered below those enjoyed in the rest of the UK.

2012 Olympic Games

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide an update on funding for the Elite Facilities Capital Programme for the 2012 Olympic Games. (AQO 1718/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In March 2006, the then Minister for Sport, David Hanson MP announced that approximately £50m had been provisionally allocated for high priority sports infrastructure projects.

Since then, two separate competitions have been held, seeking expressions of interest from anyone interested in developing elite Olympic and Paralympic facilities in Northern Ireland.

The 2008/2011 Budget provides circa £145m for all sport including £111.6m for capital funding. We are currently in discussion with Sport Northern Ireland about the allocation of the capital budget and planning for the delivery of the Elite Facilities Programme.

It is still my objective that Northern Ireland will have a minimum of 10 new or upgraded facilities that will support Northern Ireland player/athlete development in Olympic and Paralympic sports.

2012 Olympic Games

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, further to the reduction in the allocation of funding for Olympic Centres of Excellence, to confirm whether or not his department will meet its target to deliver 10 Olympic Centres of Excellence. (AQO 1781/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In March 2006, the then Minister for Sport, David Hanson MP announced that approximately £50m had been provisionally allocated for high priority sports infrastructure projects.

Since then, two separate competitions have been held, seeking expressions of interest from anyone interested in developing elite Olympic and Paralympic facilities in Northern Ireland.

The 2008/2011 Budget provides circa £145m for all sport including £111.6m for capital funding. We are currently in discussion with Sport Northern Ireland about the allocation of the capital budget and planning for the delivery of the Elite Facilities Programme.

It is still my objective that Northern Ireland will have a minimum of 10 new or upgraded facilities that will support Northern Ireland player/athlete development in Olympic and Paralympic sports.

Irish and Ulster-Scots Spending

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the anticipated levels of spending by his department on (i) Irish; and (ii) Ulster Scots in each of the next three years. (AQO 1661/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The anticipated levels of funding from my Department for the next three years in relation to Irish and Ulster-Scots are as follows:

	08-09	09-10	10-11
Ulster Scots			
Ulster-Scots Agency	£2.542 m	£2.769 m	£2.996 m
Proposed Ulster-Scots Academy	£2.4 m	£4.295 m	£2.738 m
Totals	£4.942m	£7.064m	£5.734m
Irish			
Foras na Gaeilge	£3.594 m	£3.666 m	£3.738 m
Irish Language Broadcast Fund	£3 m	-	-
Colmcille	£0.2 m	£0.2 m	£0.2 m
Gaeltacht Quarter* (Integrated Development Fund)*	£0.728 m	£0.133 m	£0.133 m
An Gaeláras	£0.863 m**	-	-
Totals	£8.385 m	£3.999 m	£4.171 m

* projected expenditure over four year period June 2007 to June 2010

** includes £0.5m IDF allocation

Promotion of Healthy Lifestyle Initiatives

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the work of the (i) Gaelic Athletic Association; (ii) Irish Rugby Football Union; and (iii)

Irish Football Association, in promoting physical health, wellness and lifestyle initiatives. (AQO 1790/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) and the Irish Football Association (IFA) are responsible for the promotion and development of the sports of Gaelic Games, Rugby Football and Association Football respectively. All three organisations run a range of programmes that are designed to encourage as many people as possible to take up their sports on a regular basis. These include:

- Grass-roots youth programmes to encourage more young people (boys, girls, people with disabilities) to develop basic movement skills and take up Gaelic, Rugby and Soccer on a regular basis
- Coaching development and club accreditation programmes
- Partnerships with schools, colleges of further education and district councils to promote their sports across the whole community and to encourage individuals to join Gaelic, Rugby and Soccer clubs
- In the case of the GAA, the development of a health and wellness programme for members and partnership with the Cardiac Risk in the Young charity to promote the screening of young people for heart defects

All of these programmes in my view contribute significantly to the public health agenda by encouraging people of all ages to take up healthy sporting activities on a sustained and regular basis.

Library Opening Hours

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide details on the possible reduction of opening hours for libraries in Belfast. (AQO 1773/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I understand that the Belfast Education and Library Board is currently considering the delivery of library services for next year, and one option includes a possible reduction in opening hours for libraries in Belfast.

Since the draft budget I have secured an additional £500k for the public library service which will be distributed across the five Boards. Boards will shortly be notified of their individual allocations.

Boards are responsible for balancing competing priorities and determining how best to deliver public library services from within available resources.

Unlocking Creativity Initiative

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the micro businesses that have been developed as a result of the Unlocking Creativity Initiative, in the past three years. (AQO 1716/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Under the Unlocking Creativity initiative, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure operated a Creativity Seed Fund from 2001/2 to 2003/04 and during that time 21 awards of financial support were made to businesses.

Since the end of the Creativity Seed Fund in March 2004, the Department has had no funding streams to support the development of businesses.

Therefore, I am now pleased to have secured an allocation of £5m from the Innovation Fund for a Creative Industries Seed Fund for the three years 2008/09 to 2011/12 to help grow the creative industries.

One Book Project

Mr Brady asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to report on the One Book Project that is being promoted by the Library Service. (AQO 1778/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The 'One Book Project' is a Community Reading Project which aims to encourage reading and awareness of the Public Library Service across Northern Ireland amongst all age groups. The object is to get as many people as possible to read one particular book and to participate in related activities.

This year the chosen book is "The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas" by John Boyne. The scheme has been very successful with 5000 people having borrowed the book from Public Libraries by December 2007.

Unlocking Creativity Initiative

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the educational attainment outputs that have resulted from the Unlocking Creativity Initiative, in the past three years. (AQO 1715/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Under the Unlocking Creativity initiative, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has provided financial support for innovative educational projects undertaken by Creative Youth Partnerships and the three Creative Learning Centres - the Nerve Centre, Studio On and the AmmA Centre.

The Education and Training Inspectorate have evaluated both of these programmes and conclude that they produce work of a very high quality in supporting

and encouraging creativity across the school curriculum.

The Department of Education is embedding Creativity in the revised school curriculum, and this is being introduced on a phased basis from September 2007.

Being Creative is one of the other skills which are statutory from Foundation to Key Stage 4 and which will be developed across the curriculum within the various areas of learning.

Through the implementation of the FE Means Business Strategy, the Department for Employment and Learning supports the "Unlocking Creativity" initiative and is working to embed creativity, employability, adaptability and entrepreneurship in all aspects of the Further Education curriculum. Over 100 courses in creativity-related subjects are now offered across Northern Ireland's FE sector.

Between 2003/04 and 2005/06 (academic years) the number of qualifications being obtained in the Northern Ireland FE sector in 'creative' subjects has increased by 77%, with significant increases in entry level and level 1 qualifications.

The Nerve Centre in partnership with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, has developed the GCE AS and A2 Level in Moving Image Arts, which is the first public examination in the UK to be examined entirely on-line. Provisional results for 2007 indicate that of the 241 AS entries, 72.2% achieved A-C grades and of the 116 A2 entries, 86.2% achieved A-C grades.

Craft Development Unit

Mr Cobain asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (i) to outline the work of the Craft Development Unit over the past four years; (ii) to detail the amount of money the Craft Development Unit has accessed from the creativity seed fund since 2002; and (iii) to detail the number of craft businesses that have resulted from the activities of the Craft Development Unit. (AQO 1728/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Craft Development Unit was formally constituted as Crafts Development Northern Ireland in August 2004. It began operating as Craft Northern Ireland on 1 June 2005. Craft NI is the regional development agency for the craft sector.

One of its key initiatives is its business incubation programme Making It which provides business advice and practical support to promote sustainability in craft businesses. Craft NI also provides professional development opportunities, research and industry intelligence and showcases local crafts at international exhibitions. Craft NI has also published "A Future in

the Making”, combining a socio-economic survey of the craft sector and an advocacy document on why the crafts matter.

Craft NI has not received any funding from the Creativity Seed Fund. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure provided Craft NI with £32,510 in 2005/06 to assist with costs associated with a move to new premises. Its current programmes are funded primarily by the Arts Council and Invest NI.

Craft NI's Making It programme has helped to support the establishment of 19 new craft businesses.

Belfast Festival

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the basis for the funding he is proposing to give the Belfast Festival at Queens, over the next three years. (AQO 1772/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will be providing the following funding for Belfast Festival at Queen's over the next three years:

Year	Amount
2008/09	£125,000
2009/10	£100,000
2010/11	£ 75,000

These amounts have been determined following consideration of the three year business plan for the festival submitted to the Department by the Queen's University of Belfast.

Music Industry Commission

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the financial assistance he has provided to the Northern Ireland Music Industry Commission in the last three years. (AQO 1783/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In 2006/07 the Arts Council awarded the Northern Ireland Music Industry Commission (NIMIC) £30,000 through the Rediscover Northern Ireland Programme.

In 2007/08 the Arts Council awarded NIMIC £20,000 through its Arts Development Fund.

The Arts Council has also provided lottery funding to NIMIC amounting to £140,610 over the 3 year period 2005/06 to 2007/08.

The Department of Culture, Arts & Leisure has agreed to provide £20,000 to NIMIC to showcase Northern Ireland music talent at the International exhibition, South by South West in Austin, Texas in March 2008.

EDUCATION

Classroom Assistants

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of people employed as classroom assistants in (i) 2003/2004; (ii) 2004/2005; (iii) 2005/2006; and (iv) 2006/2007, broken down by Education and Library Board. (AQW 2263/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): The five Education and Library Boards (the Boards) have provided the following information on the number of classroom assistants employed at 1 January each year since 2003. The information relates only to classroom assistants employed by the Boards and therefore excludes those employed by the Boards of Governors of Voluntary Grammar Schools, Grant Maintained Integrated Schools and grant-aided Irish Medium Schools.

Board	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Belfast Board	696	714	757	863	977
Western Board	892	968	1099	1126	1225
North Eastern Board	952	1088	1210	1250	1291
South Eastern Board	1182	1304	1365	1334	1282
Southern Board	1083	1298	1467	1474	1572
Total	4805	5372	5898	6047	6347

Primary School at Carrick

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Education to give a timescale for the commencement of construction of the new primary school at Carrick, Warrenpoint. (AQW 3056/08)

The Minister of Education: A submission from the school's consultants setting out the contract document information and costs is still awaited by the Department. In addition, it is likely that the acquisition/vesting of the additional land required for the new school will not be completed until later in the spring. As a result it is anticipated that it would be late spring or summer before construction work could start on site.

School Closures

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of (a) primary; and (b) post-primary, school closures in the Western Education and Library Board area, in each of the last 5 years; and (ii) the

pupil enrolment in each school, at the time of closure.
(AQW 3099/08)

The Minister of Education:

PRIMARY SCHOOLS

In the last five years, 2003 to 2007 inclusive, five primary schools and a preparatory department at a voluntary grammar school were closed in the Western Education and Library Board area.

PRIMARY SCHOOL CLOSURES

School	Date of Closure	Enrolment In Year of Closure
Earl of Erne PS, Enniskillen	August 2003	13
Maydown & Strathfoyle PS	August 2003	47
St Joseph's PS, Fintona	August 2003	7
Foyle & Londonderry College Prep. Dept.	August 2003	9
St Mary's PS, (Laught), Drumquin	August 2003	10
Stragowna PS, Kinawley	August 2003	15

In addition, in 2005, three primary schools amalgamated to form Cooley Primary School.

PRIMARY SCHOOLS CLOSED DUE TO AMALGAMATIONS

School	Date Of Amalgamation	Enrolment
Dervaghroy PS, Sixmilecross	Feb 2005	22
Hutton PS, Beragh	Feb 2005	29
Sixmilecross PS	Feb 2005	91

Dungiven Controlled Primary School was also closed in August 2007, as the first phase of an amalgamation with Burnfoot and Largy Primary Schools. Its enrolment was 17.

POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Over the five year period, two post-primary schools were closed.

POST-PRIMARY SCHOOL CLOSURES

School	Date of Closure	Enrolment
Templemore Sec. School	August 2003	152
St Joseph's High School (HS), Plumbridge	August 2007	85

There have also been three amalgamations involving seven schools. In Derry, Clondermot High School and Faughan Valley amalgamated to form Lisneal College; in Fermanagh, the Duke of Westminster High School

and Enniskillen High School amalgamated to form Devenish College; and in Strabane, St Colman's High School, Our Lady of Mercy High School and Convent Grammar School amalgamated to become Holy Cross College.

POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS CLOSED DUE TO AMALGAMATIONS

School	Date of Amalgamation	Enrolment
Clondermot HS	August 2004	637
Faughan Valley HS	August 2004	449
Duke of Westminster HS, Kesh	August 2004	174
Enniskillen HS	August 2004	591
St Colman's HS, Strabane	August 2005	686
Our Lady of Mercy HS, Strabane	August 2005	300
Convent Grammar, Strabane	August 2005	595

Note: The enrolments are from the October School Census for the relevant school year.

Qualifications Passes

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Education to confirm the number of GCSE and A-level qualifications passes achieved by pupils in (i) Northern Ireland; (ii) England; (iii) Scotland; and (iv) Wales, in the 2006/2007 academic year.

(AQW 3177/08)

The Minister of Education: The latest available fully validated data for the North of Ireland relates to the 2005/06 academic year. Data relating to the 2006/07 academic year for the North of Ireland will be available at the beginning of March and will be placed on the Department's website as in previous years.

	Number of pupils achieving 1 or more GCSEs (or equivalent) at A*-G	Percentage of pupils achieving 1 or more GCSEs (or equivalent) at A*-G	Number of pupils achieving 2 or more A levels (or equivalent) at A-E	Percentage of pupils achieving 2 or more A levels (or equivalent) at A-E
North of Ireland	23,985	97	11,477	98
England	631,580	98	167,159	96
Wales	36,217	93	10,076	94
Scotland	58,693	96	n/a ¹	n/a ¹

1. In Scotland, there are no direct equivalents to the number of pupils achieving 2 or more A levels at grades A-E.

Meetings with MEPs

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of meetings she has had with each of the 3 Northern Ireland MEP's since May 2007; and (ii) the purpose of these meetings. (AQW 3199/08)

The Minister of Education: To date, I have not attended any meetings with any of the 3 local MEP's nor have I been invited to do so.

Free School Meals

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the discussions she has had with the Social Security Agency to address the issue of the non-take up of free school meals. (AQW 3228/08)

The Minister of Education: The Education and Library Boards, who are responsible for the award of free school meals, are in regular contact with the Social Security Agency as part of the ongoing process of encouraging eligible pupils to take up their entitlement to free meals.

In addition, the Department of Education and the Boards have had preliminary discussions with the Agency regarding the provision of electronic access to the Department of Work and Pensions' Customer Information System which holds data on people in receipt of the relevant qualifying benefits. This would facilitate the more efficient processing of free school meals applications and allow Boards to target those who do not come forward to apply for entitlement.

Early Years Centre

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether or not funding will be provided for the I Can Early Years Centre, Ballynahinch, in 2008-2009; and to detail what actions she is taking to ensure the long term stability of the service. (AQW 3236/08)

The Minister of Education: The I Can Early Years Centre, which is attached to Ballynahinch Primary School, is funded jointly by the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. The Department of Education provides no direct funding for the Centre and any decision on the future of the Centre lies with SEELB.

The Chief Executive of SEELB has informed me that SEELB is engaged in high level discussions with the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust regarding funding for I CAN for the 2008/09 financial year.

Independent Integrated Secondary Schools

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail what precedent exists to permit an Education and Library Board to provide financial support to Independent Integrated secondary schools. (AQW 3260/08)

The Minister of Education: Education and Library Boards have no legislative power to provide financial support to independent schools.

The current location of Rowallane Integrated College is in temporary accommodation on a leased site at Belvoir Park Hospital Estate. The South Eastern Education and Library Board has not provided any monies in preparing the site.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board has not invested any monies in the school in the past three years. The school is funded by the Integrated Education Fund.

Rowallane Independent Integrated College

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the current location of Rowallane Independent Integrated College; and (ii) the amount invested by the South Eastern Education and Library Board in preparing this site. (AQW 3261/08)

The Minister of Education: Education and Library Boards have no legislative power to provide financial support to independent schools.

The current location of Rowallane Integrated College is in temporary accommodation on a leased site at Belvoir Park Hospital Estate. The South Eastern Education and Library Board has not provided any monies in preparing the site.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board has not invested any monies in the school in the past three years. The school is funded by the Integrated Education Fund.

Rowallane Independent Integrated College

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount invested by the South Eastern Education and Library Board in Rowallane Independent Integrated Secondary School, in the past three years. (AQW 3262/08)

The Minister of Education: Education and Library Boards have no legislative power to provide financial support to independent schools.

The current location of Rowallane Integrated College is in temporary accommodation on a leased

site at Belvoir Park Hospital Estate. The South Eastern Education and Library Board has not provided any monies in preparing the site.

The South Eastern Education and Library Board has not invested any monies in the school in the past three years. The school is funded by the Integrated Education Fund.

South Eastern Education and Library Board

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether or not she is planning to meet with the former members of the South Eastern Education and Library Board. (AQW 3365/08)

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.

I have undertaken, as a first step, to meet with a delegation of Board members to confirm their readiness to take up their former responsibilities and to deliver those effectively. I plan to schedule the meeting in the near future.

Pay Dispute

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on the classroom assistants' pay dispute; and to detail the dates on which the relevant business cases were delivered to her department by the Education and Library Boards. (AQW 3373/08)

The Minister of Education: A collective agreement on the Management Side offer was reached at a meeting of the Joint Negotiating Council on 30 November 2007, through a unanimous vote on the Management Side and a majority vote on the Trade Union Side. While NIPSA voted against the proposed offer, under the Constitution of the JNC, the Agreement is binding on the Boards. I am advised that the rules and Constitution of the JNC have been agreed by all parties, including NIPSA. Letters were sent to all classroom assistants by their respective Boards in December 2007 explaining the terms of the agreement and inviting their acceptance by 31 March 2008.

A draft business case relating to the change to historical terms and conditions was submitted to the Department in October 2007 and the final business case was received on 6 December 2007.

Classroom Assistants

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of classroom assistants, who are members of each relevant trade union, in relation to the recent ballot on industrial action. (AQW 3421/08)

The Minister of Education: I am advised by the education and library boards that they do not have the information requested. The boards are aware only of the numbers who opt to pay their trade union subscriptions through the payroll system, but this does not take account of those members who pay their subscriptions by direct debit. It is solely each trade union which can confirm its actual membership.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Staff Undergoing Disciplinary Procedures

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2326/08, what comparison he has made of (i) the totality of disciplinary cases resulting from unacceptable sickness records across all Government departments, including Executive agencies; and (ii) the percentages of total staff across all departments, including Executive agencies, who fall within the scope of his reply. (AQW 2849/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The Department for Employment and Learning does not routinely compare the total figures and percentages of disciplinary cases resulting from unacceptable sickness records across all other departments and their Executive agencies. The answer to AQW 2326/08 indicated that the apparent disparity between the figures for DEL and for other departments as presented in the response to AQW 1629/08 can be explained because Executive Agency figures, with the exception of DARD, were not included, and the figures were not presented in terms of percentages of total staff falling within the scope of the replies. All Government departments apply the same policies and procedures relating to managing attendance and DEL monitors the level of warnings and dismissals applying to its own staff. Each disciplinary case is considered in its own context and circumstances against the guidance set out in the NICS policies and procedures.

Information Technology Students

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of part-time

post-graduate students enrolled in information technology courses at (i) Queen's University, Belfast; and (ii) each campus of the University of Ulster.
(AQW 3021/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The number of part-time post-graduate students enrolled in information technology courses at (i) Queen's University, Belfast; and (ii) each campus of the University of Ulster in 2006/07 is shown in the table below.

Queen's University, Belfast		60
	Belfast	0
University of Ulster	Coleraine	5
	Jordanstown	80
	Magee	15
Total		155

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

Notes: Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5. Due to rounding, the sum of numbers do not match the total shown.

Seagoe Technologies

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what actions he is taking to support workers affected by the loss of 40 jobs at Seagoe Technologies back into employment; and to detail the support his department is offering to Seagoe Technologies in securing the other 300 jobs at the plant.
(AQW 3111/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Department has contacted Seagoe Technologies Ltd and will assist those who receive redundancy notices to find alternative employment. The Department, in partnership with the Social Security Agency and other organisations, will provide information and advice on employment opportunities, job search, training and education options, careers and benefits. This will be provided on-site if required.

Invest NI, which has had a long association with Seagoe Technologies, is working with senior management on a number of issues directly related to the future of the plant. These include enhancing manufacturing efficiency through lean manufacturing and business improvement techniques, together with investigation and development of new products to widen the company's product range with a focus on high energy efficiency and renewable technologies.

Bursaries

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of students in Northern Ireland who are not claiming bursaries from their universities.
(AQW 3187/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Bursaries are awarded based on the student's residual household income. Students must therefore have applied to have income assessed through the relevant Education and Library Board (ELB) and consented for the details of this assessment to be shared with the relevant institution via the Student Loans Company. Should this information be withheld by the student or their sponsor, it is not possible for the institution to determine the student's eligibility for a bursary. As such it is difficult to provide accurate statistics in relation to the number of students who may have failed to fully complete this process. Students are not required to apply for bursaries since they are awarded automatically, based on the rules that each university has set up with the Student Loans Company.

Available statistics for the academic year 2006/7 show that 1,074 students at Queen's University had received full or half bursaries of £1100 or £600. An additional 299 students were entitled to £100 Sports & Books bursaries. At the University of Ulster, 981 students had been awarded bursaries of £1020, £610 or £305 in the same academic year.

Meetings with MEPs

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the number of meetings he has had with each of the 3 Northern Ireland MEP's since May 2007; and (ii) the purpose of these meetings.
(AQW 3200/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Since taking Ministerial office, I have held one meeting with Jim Nicholson MEP, and one with Bairbre de Brún MEP.

Both meetings took place during a visit to the European Parliament in June 2007, and discussion centred on DEL's relationship with the European Parliament.

I have not held any meetings with Jim Allister MEP.

'Essential Skills'

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of programmes for 'Essential Skills' in literacy and numeracy that are being supported by his department, within the

community and voluntary sector in North Belfast.
(AQW 3284/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

There are currently 21 courses for 'Essential Skills' in literacy and numeracy being delivered within the community and voluntary sector in North Belfast. A further three courses are planned to commence shortly.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) his department's bids in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review; and (ii) the amount of funding that has been allocated against them in the Budget 2008-11. (AQW 3305/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The information requested by the Member has been placed in the Assembly Library.

'Training for Success'

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the amount of the additional resources, allocated in the draft Budget statement on 22 January 2008 for further education, that will be spent on 'Training for Success'. (AQW 3333/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

I can confirm that no resources from the Further Education allocation will be spent on Training for Success.

Night Class Enrolments

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the numbers enrolled in night class courses in the East Derry/Londonderry constituency, broken down by campus, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 3389/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Enrolments on night class courses in Further Education Colleges located within the East Londonderry Constituency from 2001/02 to 2005/06 are detailed below

Academic year	Causeway Institute	Limavady College	Total
2001/02	2,699	2,075	4,774
2002/03	3,036	1,979	5,015
2003/04	1,788	2,011	3,799
2004/05	2,868	1,993	4,861

Academic year	Causeway Institute	Limavady College	Total
2005/06	3,159	2,271	5,430

Source: Further Education Statistical Record

Note: Breakdown at individual campus level is not available. Whilst the main Causeway Institute campus is located within the East Londonderry Constituency, the totals include a proportionately small number of enrolments attending outreach centres delivered by this institute outside this constituency.

Apprenticeships

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the average wage for apprentices who are (i) under 21 with less than 6 months' experience; (ii) under 21 with more than 6 months' experience; (iii) over 21 with less than 6 months' experience; and (iv) over 21 with more than 6 months' experience. (AQW 3391/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Under Training for Success (the Department for Employment and Learning's Apprenticeship training scheme), all apprentices are employed from the outset by individual employers. Apprentices are remunerated by their individual employers and the level of remuneration is as agreed between the apprentice and the employer. The Department does not keep information on the average wage for apprentices.

Information Technology Graduates

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give his assessment of the scale of current excess demands by employers for information technology graduates and technicians. (AQW 3429/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: It is not possible to provide an accurate assessment of the current gap between the demand and supply of information technology graduates and technicians. Employer demand varies throughout the year depending on current vacancies and covers a wide range of occupations including software developers, computer engineers and operations technicians.

While it is not therefore possible to provide an accurate snapshot of the current position, information is available at a strategic level about the skills shortage issues facing the ICT industry in Northern Ireland.

The process of identifying skills shortages and developing plans of action to address such shortages is led by a network of 25 Sector Skills Councils (SSCs). E-skills UK, as the SSC for the IT and Telecoms industry, is the voice of employers for all IT-related strategic skills issues in Northern Ireland and across the UK.

In March 2007, E-skills produced a comprehensive analysis of current skills supply in Northern Ireland's IT sector and outlined a series of actions to address the issues identified.

In the context of that analysis it is estimated that 1610 new entrants are needed each year to replace those leaving the IT workforce -this demand is currently met from a variety of sources including new graduates, people moving from other sectors and those returning to the workforce. They also identified a need for an additional 360 new recruits each year to support the predicted growth of the sector.

Their analysis and plan of action was produced in conjunction with a number of partners including employers, Momentum (the ICT Trade Federation for Northern Ireland), Department of Education, education providers, InvestNI and my Department.

To complement this activity, DEL has also established a Future Skills Action Group for the ICT Sector. This group is made up of representatives of industry, other Government departments, E-skills and Momentum.

As a result of the workings of this group, DEL is currently leading the development of an action plan focused on the short term needs of the sector, in particular the shortage of appropriately qualified IT professionals. This plan is being developed in partnership with E-skills, Momentum and InvestNI.

Match Funding

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail what action his department will take to assist projects, successful in securing European Social Fund (2007-2013) funding, in securing Match Funding; to confirm whether or not his department can contribute to the Match Funding from non-European funding streams; and to confirm whether or not his department has initiated any dialogue with other departments or bodies, to secure Match Funding. (AQW 3595/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Northern Ireland European Social Fund (NIESF) Programme 2007-13 will provide projects with 65% programme funding, made up of 40% from EU Funds and 25% contribution from my Department. The remaining 35% 'match funding' must be secured independently from other public sources by the project promoters. This is the same procedure used for previous ESF Programmes.

My Department's role in the process is to advise other Departments of successful applications and thereby alert them to the opportunities for match funding. It would not be appropriate for my officials to become

involved directly in discussions between project promoters and potential providers of matched funding.

My Department may contribute to match funding when a project meets specific policy objectives of the Department.

Grants for the Long-Term Unemployed

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the grants available to train the long-term unemployed in traditional trades. (AQW 3636/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Training for Success is the Department for Employment and Learning's apprenticeship scheme for young people aged 16-24. Under this provision, technical and professional frameworks are developed by Sector Skills Councils, to address the skills needs of that particular sector. If an apprenticeship framework is developed by a Sector Skills Council which includes a particular trade, then the Department will fund the provision of training for an apprentice in that trade.

Within the New Deal programmes, participants may have the opportunity to undertake an NVQ Level 2 in certain occupational areas which reflect employers' skills needs and/or job vacancies. All employers recruiting New Deal participants qualify for a subsidy of up to £75 a week, for the first six months of employment.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Tourism Funding

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the tourism funding his department has provided in the East Antrim constituency in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 2936/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): The East Antrim constituency area forms a key part of the Causeway Coast and Glens Signature Project, one strand of which is the Causeway Coast and Glens Tourism Masterplan which provides the overarching tourism strategy for the area.

The financial assistance in the table below has been offered by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Invest NI in the last three financial years to tourism projects wholly within the East Antrim constituency.

2005/06	2006/07	2007/08 to date	Total
£219,000	£130,000	£102,250	£451,250

In addition, the East Antrim constituency area benefits from a significant element of funding which is allocated to the Signature Project area in general. This includes £410,807 spent on the Causeway Coastal Route in 2006/07 and 2007/08.

During the period April 2005 to March 2008, financial assistance of £492,229 has also been made available to the Causeway Coast & Glens Regional Tourism Partnership, whose remit covers an area that includes the whole of the East Antrim constituency.

Hightown Bridge

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what actions he is taking to assist businesses and traders in Glengormley and Mallusk who will be affected by the closure of the Hightown bridge. (AQW 3117/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Hightown Bridge closed on 27 January 2008 to allow for its demolition and reconstruction. While the reconstruction is due to be completed within one year of the closure, the contractor is targeting the re-opening of the road before Christmas 2008.

Officials in my Department's Roads Service have undertaken a detailed assessment of a range of options to facilitate traffic during construction and the only feasible option is to close the Hightown Bridge.

On 7 January 2008, I announced a package of measures to accommodate the travelling public and alleviate disruption to traders and businesses in the Glengormley and Mallusk areas during the closure. These measures include the provision of traffic signals at the Scullions Road/ Sandyknowes junction, with additional traffic monitoring cameras on the diversion route; additional buses for the Hightown and Mayfield areas; a breakdown recovery service covering Sandyknowes Roundabout and Scullions Road and the ongoing management of traffic signals on the diversion route to minimise congestion and delays. Additional signing to local businesses on the Hightown Road will also be provided.

You may also be interested to know that in relation to compensation, no statutory provision exists for the payment of compensation to businesses that currently enjoy the patronage of passing traffic.

With regard to possible assistance from other Departments, I have also been informed by the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Peter Robinson, that rates relief is administered by Land and Property

Services (LPS), an agency within DFP, in respect of both relief through valuation reduction and application of a hardship relief scheme. Valuation reductions are considered on a case by case basis with regard to the amount and duration of disruption.

If the Hightown Bridge closure does not last for more than a year, I am advised by Mr Robinson that homeowners and business occupiers are unlikely to be successful with an application for reduction in the rateable valuation. Their decisions can be appealed to the Valuation Tribunal or Lands Tribunal, according to the type of property.

The hardship relief scheme provides support for non-domestic ratepayers (businesses and organisations) who are affected by some form of crisis. The hardship must be caused by exceptional and unforeseen circumstances. Therefore, it is not possible to provide a definitive list of cases which would qualify for hardship relief. However, all applications for hardship relief will be considered on their own merits. Applications are available on request from LPS.

Mr Dodds, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, has informed me that the focus of his Department's Invest NI is on assisting its clients to become more competitive in their business practices and assisting them to develop an increased focus on enterprise, innovation and exports. In doing so, the agency maintains close contact with its client companies across the North, including those in the Mallusk and Glengormley areas, where to date no clients have reported any negative impact as a result of the closure of the Hightown Bridge.

I appreciate that the temporary closure will mean longer journey times for those using the diversionary route and I fully understand the concerns of traders and businesses, in the Glengormley and Mallusk areas. However, I trust you will accept that all reasonable steps are being taken to mitigate the inconvenience caused.

Hospitality Expenditure

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the department's total expenditure on hospitality and entertainment, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3136/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The total spent by the Department of Enterprise Trade & Investment on hospitality and entertainment from 2002-03 to 2006-07 is £117,744.78.

The analysis by year is as follows:

	£
2002-03	27,460.51

	£
2003-04	24,550.87
2004-05	23,812.79
2005-06	19,102.02
2006-07	22,818.59
Total	117,744.78

Jobs Creation

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of jobs created in (i) the Ards Borough Council area; (ii) the Strangford constituency; and (iii) Northern Ireland, from foreign direct investment, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 3180/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI, of itself, does not create jobs. It provides assistance, both financial and non-financial, in support of viable development projects from its clients; projects that are undertaken to strengthen international competitiveness. This may, in certain circumstances, lead to additional job creation.

The number of jobs promoted and safeguarded as a result of inward investment projects, both first-time and expansion, assisted by Invest NI since 2002/03 in Ards Borough Council, Strangford Parliamentary Constituency and Northern Ireland as a whole, is presented in the table below.

These figures relate to Invest NI's externally-owned clients only, which are exclusively drawn from the manufacturing and international tradeable service industry sectors. The figures do not reflect inward investment that may have been secured in other sectors, including retail and distribution.

Constituency boundaries do not represent self-contained labour markets and a project assisted in a particular location has the potential to create benefits across a much wider area. Northern Ireland is a relatively small place and evidence indicates that many investments draw their workforce from areas beyond constituency and council area boundaries

Jobs Promoted through foreign direct investment projects (2002/03 – 2006/07) in Ards Borough Council, Strangford Parliamentary Constituency and Northern Ireland

Year	Ards		Strangford		Northern Ireland	
	New	Safeguarded	New	Safeguarded	New	Safeguarded
2002/03	70	0	70	0	1,033	3,015
2003/04	5	0	5	0	2,153	2,670
2004/05	0	0	19	0	3,467	1,312
2005/06	0	0	0	0	3,100	3,281
2006/07	20	16	20	16	3,451	204
Total	95	16	114	16	13,204	10,482

- 1) A number of the projects assisted will have been in both Strangford constituency and Ards Council area
- 2) New jobs represents the number of jobs expected to be created by the project and safeguarded jobs represent those jobs that would have been lost if the project was not supported

Foreign Direct Investment

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the estimated total value of investment from foreign direct investment in the (i) Ards Borough Council area; and (ii) Strangford constituency, in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 3181/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The table below provides the value of investment from foreign direct investment projects, both first-time and expansion, assisted by Invest NI in each of the last 5 years to both Ards Borough Council and Strangford Constituency.

These figures relate to Invest NI's externally-owned clients only, which are exclusively drawn from the manufacturing and international tradeable service industry sectors. The figures do not reflect inward investment that may have been secured in other sectors, including retail and distribution.

Constituency boundaries do not represent self-contained labour markets and a project assisted in a particular location has the potential to create benefits across a much wider area. Northern Ireland is a relatively small place and evidence indicates that many investments draw their workforce from areas beyond constituency and council area boundaries

Planned Foreign Direct Investment (£) in Invest NI Assisted Projects (2002/03 – 2006/07) in Ards Borough Council and Strangford Parliamentary Constituency

Year	Ards	Strangford
2002/03	2,826,378	2,826,378
2003/04	9,750	9,750
2004/05	62,500	776,500
2006/07	6,622,000	6,622,000
Total	9,520,628	10,234,628

1. A number of the projects assisted will have been in both Strangford constituency and Ards Council area
2. Planned Investment includes assistance offered by Invest NI

Global Point Business Park

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the costs of acquiring a site at Global Point Business Park, Newtownabbey, as determined by his department and Invest NI.

(AQW 3217/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI land at Global Point Business Park is currently being marketed for lease to Invest NI Client Companies at £500,000 per acre.

Invest NI land and buildings are sold at current market value as determined by Land and Property Services. This cost is deemed to be representative of the current market value reflecting both the strength of the market in this general location and taking into account the leasehold tenure offered by INI to their client companies

Global Point Business Park

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail his department's involvement in the development of the Global Point Business Park; and to provide an update on this development.

(AQW 3220/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The land at Ballyhenry, now known as Global Point Business Park, came into public ownership in the early 1970s. As there was already an ample supply of suitable industrial land in the area this land was held as a strategic reserve.

In 1997, to support a bid to capture a major inward investment project, work was started to develop the internal infrastructure on the site. However, it was announced in 1999 that the major inward project would not proceed.

In order to make use of the infrastructure that was in place, various initiatives were made to encourage the private sector to support economic development on

the park. However, on each occasion the private sector partners did not proceed with their proposals.

The most recent public private joint venture initiative was launched in 2002. Its aim was to develop the site as an international business park capable of supporting up to 10,000 jobs. However, overall planning permission for the site could not easily be achieved, primarily due to traffic management concerns, and the initiative collapsed in 2004.

Invest NI continued to work closely with Planning Service through the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) team to ensure that the site could be developed to meet the needs of its client companies.

In 2006, responding to an upsurge in demand for property solutions from its clients, Invest NI concluded that it needed to plan for the release of further serviced sites in the general locale, as its land in North Belfast and Mallusk, in particular, was fast diminishing. After a period of further and detailed discussions, an acceptable way forward was agreed. Planning permission was granted on 15 January 2008.

In line with its property policy, Invest NI is now marketing the park to existing and prospective clients and is confident that the park, in common with its other property holdings right across Northern Ireland, will attract considerable interest.

Reconnect Scheme

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the amount of money that was allocated for grants; and (ii) the amount of money that has been distributed, under the Reconnect Scheme; and what consideration he has given to extending this scheme. (AQW 3245/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: To date £7.4m has been allocated by means of Letters of Offer for grants under the Reconnect Scheme, £4.2m of this allocation has been paid out in grants to 31 January 2008.

The Reconnect scheme will need to be evaluated before any decisions in respect of further phases can be made. Any future support for a household renewables scheme going forward will need to take into account changing market conditions, value for money and the effect on competitiveness

Comprehensive Spending Review

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) his department's bids in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review; and

(ii) the amount of funding that has been allocated against them in the Budget 2008-11. (AQW 3306/08)

and Capital bids and the amount of funding that has been allocated in the Budget 2008-11.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
I attach as Annexes tables showing DETI's Resource

DEPARTMENT OF ENTERPRISE, TRADE & INVESTMENT - RESOURCE BIDS / ALLOCATIONS

	2008-09		2008-09		2008-09	
Objective and Spending Area	£m Bids	£m Allocations	£m Bids	£m Allocations	£m Bids	£m Allocations
Objective A						
Economic Development, Policy & Research	1,070	90	1,083	913	1,851	1,727
Economic Infrastructure/Minerals	2,233	200	2,056	1,775	1,993	1,710
Invest Northern Ireland	22,396	16,096	23,090	19,658	24,271	24,271
Development of Tourism	4,865	3,865	3,830	3,830	4,315	4,315
Tourism Ireland Ltd	3,554	2,100	3,384	3,384	3,931	3,931
N/S Body - InterTradeIreland	818	0	1,351	1,351	1,724	1,724
EU Support for Economic Development	0	0	0	0	0	0
Business Regulatory Services	1,314	470	2,511	2,511	2,793	2,793
Health & Safety Executive for NI	2,629	69	2,298	2,298	2,571	2,571
Total Objective A	38,879	22,890	39,603	35,720	43,449	43,042
EU Peace Programme Match Funding	2,565	2,565	0	0	0	0
Total	41,444	25,455	39,603	35,720	43,449	43,042

Notes: Resource bids were made against 2007/08 Resource baselines rolled forward into the Budget period with Integrated Development Fund, Priority Funding Packages, EU Interreg match funding and EU Peace match funding removed.

The allocation of the funding to InterTradeIreland is subject to the approval, by the sponsoring Departments and Ministers, of an acceptable Corporate Plan and Annual Operating Plans. This allocation will also be considered in the context of the outcome of the review of North/South implementation bodies and areas of co-operation.

DEPARTMENT OF ENTERPRISE, TRADE & INVESTMENT - CAPITAL BIDS / ALLOCATIONS

	2008-09		2009-10		2010-11	
Capital Investment Pillars/Measures	£'000 Bids	£'000 Allocations	£'000 Bids	£'000 Allocations	£'000 Bids	£'000 Allocations
Networks Pillar						
Telecommunications	1,390	1,390	6,100	6,100	4,100	4,100
Energy	6,000	6,000	7,900	7,900	4,450	4,450
Productive Pillar						
Enterprise & Innovation	26,275	26,275	51,402	51,402	49,752	49,752
Tourism	5,286	5,286	22,500	22,500	19,875	19,875
Total Capital Investment	38,951	38,951	87,902	87,902	78,177	78,177

Note: Capital bids were made against a zero baseline.

Global Point Business Park

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether or not he plans to offer incentives to attract tenants to Global Point Business Park, Glengormley. (AQW 3322/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
All of the land owned by my Department, including that which will become available within Global Point, is reserved solely for Invest NI's clients, both existing and prospective.

In order for land to be sold, clients must present an immediate, demonstrable and viable business need.

Projects are often, but not exclusively, supported by a range of financial and non-financial incentives. The land is sold at current market value.

The demand for affordable serviced sites is high. 2007/08 will see a record year for Invest NI property sales, with over 120 acres sold. Global Point will free up a fresh stock of serviced sites, reacting to the diminishing stock in South Antrim generally, and North Belfast and Mallusk in particular. The land will initially be marketed at £500,000 per acre.

I have every confidence that Global Point will attract development projects from Invest NI clients over a reasonable timeframe. I have no plans to offer specific incentives to attract tenants to the park.

Tourists

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide a breakdown of the nationalities of tourists who visited Northern Ireland in the last 12 months. (AQW 3345/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Final visitor figures for 2007, including estimates for individual countries, will not be available until May 2008 and will identify country of residence rather than nationality.

The information currently available is the preliminary estimated breakdown of visitors to Northern Ireland in 2007 by main market area. This is set out in the table below:

Main Market Area:	All Visits (Estimated)
Great Britain	1,263,000
Irish Republic	301,000
Mainland Europe	254,000
North America	166,000
Elsewhere	67,000
Total:	2,051,000

Trip to Brussels

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide a report on his recent trip to Brussels. (AQW 3399/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I had the privilege of hosting a Reception at the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels on the 24th of January 2008 to mark 100 years of aviation innovation in Northern Ireland. Short Brothers, one of the world's oldest aircraft companies, was founded in 1908 and celebrates its centenary this year.

The significance of this important aviation milestone provided an ideal platform from which to further promote Northern Ireland's impressive credentials as a major force in world aviation; with an annual turnover of some £800 million, much of it exported, and employment across a diverse range of companies, of some 8,500.

The Brussels event was attended by 60 targeted individuals with an interest in transportation including aviation policy, research and development, regional development and government.

I am confident that the Reception, at which representatives of local aerospace companies and from the European Commission also spoke, achieved its objective in terms of further heightening awareness of Northern Ireland as a key player within the UK's aerospace industry. This is extremely important as we continue to strive to secure further investment in this vitally important part of our regional economy.

Economic Disadvantage

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what is meant by 'an area of economic disadvantage', in relation to PSA1 objective 2. (AQW 3408/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: This refers to those areas identified on the disadvantaged area maps developed by DETI. Based on data from the income and employment domains of the 2005 Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure, the current DETI maps identify Derry, Strabane, Omagh, Cookstown, Newry and Mourne and Dungannon Council areas, together with pockets of Belfast, as the focus for Departmental policies and programmes which can contribute towards tackling disadvantage. The detailed maps are available on the DETI website at www.deti.ni.gov.uk

Economically Inactive People

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of economically inactive people in Derry/Londonderry, between the ages of 18 and 24, in terms of both employment and training. (AQW 3468/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The closest approximation to the figures requested comes from the January –December 2006 Labour Force Survey (LFS). At that time, it was estimated that there were 12,000 people aged 18-24 in Derry District Council area and the economic status of these people is shown in the table below.

ECONOMIC STATUS OF THOSE AGED 18-24 IN DERRY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA

Economic Status	Number ¹
In Employment	5,000
Unemployed	1,000
Economically Inactive	5,000
Economically inactive and - In Full-time Education ²	3,000
- Not in Full-time Education ²	2,000

1 These estimates are based on small sample sizes and are therefore subject to a higher than usual degree of sampling variability. They should therefore be treated with caution.

2 Information on those economically inactive and in part-time education/training is not available.

Figures may not sum due to rounding.

Source: NI Labour Force Survey (LFS)

ENVIRONMENT**Environmental Protection Agency**

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to give her assessment on the impact an Environmental Protection Agency would have on the Planning Service. (AQW 2839/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): No decision has been made as to whether or not an Environmental Protection Agency will be established. However, I am concerned that if an Environmental Protection Agency were implemented with the functions and responsibilities that REGNI recommends, the planning decision making process could be slowed down.

Road Deaths

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment for her assessment of the level of road deaths in 2007. (AQW 3096/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The provisional total for the number of people killed on the roads in Northern Ireland during 2007 is 112. This represents a reduction of 11% on the 2006 figure of 126, and equals the figure recorded in 1947, which was the lowest since records began in 1931. Five children died in 2007, again the lowest on record.

Significant progress has been made but there is much more that we can do and I am particularly concerned that the number of motorcyclists killed last year increased from 14 to 25. That is why I have instigated a review of the Road Safety Strategy and

am seeking new measures to complement those that we already know are working.

Table 1 below provides the 2007 provisional fatality statistics by road user type for all road users. Table 2 provides the 2007 provisional fatality statistics by gender for all road users.

TABLE 1: ROAD TRAFFIC FATALITY STATISTICS 2007 (ALL ROAD USERS)

	Under 16	Adult	Total
Pedestrian	3	13	16
Driver	0	44	44
Passenger	2	22	24
Pedal Cyclist	0	2	2
Motorcyclist	0	25	25
Pillion Passenger	0	1	1
Total	5	107	112

TABLE 2: ROAD TRAFFIC FATALITY STATISTICS 2007 (GENDER)

	Male	Female	Total
Pedestrian	11	5	16
Driver	35	9	44
Passenger	16	8	24
Pedal Cyclist	2	0	2
Motorcyclist	25	0	25
Pillion Passenger	0	1	1
Total	89	23	112

Hospitality Expenditure

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the department's total expenditure on hospitality and entertainment, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3139/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The table below sets out the total cost of hospitality and entertainment in my Department in each of the last five years.

Year	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Total	£8,273	£11,804	£10,600	£21,118	£11,615

Sewer Hotspots

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration he has given to designating sewer hotspots, similar to the sewerage treatment hotspots currently in existence. (AQW 3154/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I have no plans to designate further areas either as sewer or sewage treatment hotspots.

The Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) will continue to assess and comment on the environmental implications of planning applications on an individual basis.

EHS works closely with Northern Ireland Water to identify solutions for sewer system upgrades and to prioritise the work. The upgrading of 7 sewer systems has been completed with work continuing in a further 9 areas.

Belfast City Airport

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on the progress of the Review of the 1997 Belfast City Airport Planning Agreement. (AQW 3207/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The George Best Belfast City Airport authorities requested a review of the 1997 Planning Agreement in July 2004 in the context of removing the seats-for-sale provision. My Department consulted widely on the proposed review, including holding an Examination in Public (EiP) in June 2006.

My officials have been considering the way forward following an announcement by the then Minister in December 2006 that the Department largely accepted the EiP's panel report. Unfortunately, the EiP panel's recommendations were the subject of a Judicial Review challenge during 2007 which delayed the matter.

My Department hopes to finalise the revised agreement shortly following consultation with the Airport Forum and the local councils.

Health Impact Assessment

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment if she will give an assurance that a Health Impact Assessment will be carried out on the application to extend the runway at George Best Belfast City Airport. (AQW 3208/08)

The Minister of the Environment: An application for an extension to the runway at George Best Belfast City Airport has not been received by Planning Service, however one is expected. Any application will

require an Environmental Impact Statement and the agents for the airport have requested a scoping exercise for the proposal under the Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (NI) 1999 in order to gauge what will have to be included in any statement.

I can assure you that any Environmental Impact Statement submitted will have to address all aspects of the environment likely to be significantly affected by the development. Planning Service will consult with agencies such as the

Northern Ireland Health and Safety Executive and the Environmental Health Department of Belfast City Council to ensure these issues have been adequately addressed.

Ulster Farm By-Products

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) legal proceedings brought by her department against Ulster Farm By-Products, Glenavy; and (ii) the outcomes of these proceedings. (AQW 3222/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has taken 6 prosecutions against Ulster Farm By-Products under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 for offences involving water pollution. Details, including the fines imposed by the Magistrates Court, are as follows:

Date of Incident	Outcome of Court Case
13 February 2002	£750 + costs
11 March 2003	£750 + costs
05 August 2003	£1,000 + costs
18 March 2004	£1,250 + costs
30 November 2004	£4,500 + costs
26 April 2005	£3,600 + costs

A further case under the Pollution Prevention and Control (NI) Regulations 2003 is with the Courts at present and I therefore cannot comment about that case at this time.

Recycling Banks

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to list the locations of Tetra Pak recycling banks; and to detail what plans she has to install these at other locations. (AQW 3235/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Tetra Pak recycling banks have been installed in 22 District Council areas where they are located alongside other recycling bank facilities. A list of locations is attached

at Annex A. Omagh, and Dungannon and South Tyrone District Councils operate kerbside collections and recycling banks are soon to be installed at 5 recycling points in Banbridge District. Limavady District has no facilities at present.

The installation of Tetra Pak recycling banks is a contractual matter between the supplier and respective District Council. The Department's only responsibility is to monitor civic amenity sites.

Antrim

1. Newpark HRC, Orchard Way, Newpark, Antrim, BT41 2RU.
2. Craigmore HRC, Clonkeen Road, Randalstown, Antrim, BT41 3JL.
3. Crumlin HRC, Railway Yard, Main Street, Crumlin, Antrim, BT29 4UP.
4. Tidal, Toome House, 55 Main Street, Toome, Antrim, BT41 3TF.
5. 12 Milestone Shopping Complex, Belfast Road, Templepatrick, BT39 OAT.

Ards

1. Newtownards HWRC, 151 Quarry Heights, North Road, Newtownards, BT23 7SZ.

Armagh

1. Station Road Recycling Centre, Station Road, Armagh, Co Armagh, BT61 7JD.
2. Markethill Recycling Centre, Markethill Business Centre, Fairgreen, Markethill, Co Armagh, BT60 1PW.
3. Keady Recycling Centre, Unit 17, Keady Business Centrem, Annvale Road, Keady, Co Armagh, BT60 2RP.
4. Tandragee Recycling Centre, Madden Road, Tandragee, Co Armagh, BT62 2DG.
5. Richhill Leisure Centre, Richhill Pavillion, New Line, Richhill, Co Armagh, BT61 9AD.

Ballymena

1. Clough Vets carpark, Springmount road, Omagh.
2. Ahoghill Playing Fields carpark, Cardonaghy Road, Ahoghill.
3. Parochial Hall carpark, Lisamanny Road, Martinstown.
4. Broughshane Community Centre, Kockan Road, Broughshane, BT43 7LE.
5. Waveney Road Depot, 80 Galgorm Road, Ballymena, BT42 1AB.

Ballymoney

1. Knock Road Civic Amenity Site, 44 Knock Road, BT53 6LX.
2. Crosstagherty Civic Amenity Site, 8 Burnquarter Road, BT53 7EN.

Belfast City

1. Blackstaff Way Recycling Centre, 1 Blackstaff Way, Belfast, BT11 9DT.
2. Alexandra Park Recycling Centre, 180 Alexandra Park Avenue, Belfast, BT15 3GJ.
3. Palmerston Road Recycling Centre, 2-4 Palmerston Road, Belfast, BT4 1QA.
4. Ormeau Recycling Centre, 6 Park Road, Belfast, BT7 2FX.
5. Clara Street Recycling Centre, 1-35 Clara Street, BT5 5GB.

Carrickfergus

1. Bring Site Whitehead, Castleview Road, Whitehead, BT38 9NA.
2. Harbour Car Park, Marine Highway, Carrickfergus, BT38 7FG.
3. C.A. Site, 10 Marshallstown Road, Carrickfergus, BT38 9DE.

Castlereagh

1. Cregagh Road HRC, Cregagh Road, Belfast, BT6 9EY.
2. Carryduff HRC, Comber Road, Carryduff, BT8 8AN.
3. Cregagh Youth Community Centre, Mount Merrion Avenue, Belfast, BT6 0FG.

Coleraine

1. Portrush Recycling Centre, Cause Way Street, BT56 8NL.
2. Kilrea Civic Amenity Site, Lisnagrot Road, BT51 5SE.
3. Garvagh Civic Amenity Site, Limavady Road, Garvagh, BT51 5EB.
4. Coleraine Civic Amenity Site, The Depot, Gateside Road, BT52 2PB.
5. Castlerock Civic Amenity Site, Reeland Road, BT51 4TR.

Cookstown

1. Cookstown CA Site, Molesworth Street, BT80 8PA.
2. Moneymore CA Site, Moneyhaw Road, BT45 7XJ.

Craigavon

1. Newline Civic Amenity Site, Tandragee Road, Co Armagh, BT66 8TA.
2. Fairgreen Civic Amenity Site, Duke Street, Co Armagh, BT62 3EX.

Derry

1. Pennyburn CA Site, Unit 23, Pennyburn Industrial Estate, BT48 0LU.
2. Brandywell CA Site, Lonemoor Road, BT48 9LB.
3. Glandermott Road CA Site, 37 Glendermott Road, Waterside, BT47 6BG.
4. Claudy CA Site, Learmount Road, Claudy, BT47 4AQ.
5. Strathfoyle Household Recycling Centre, Temple Road, Strathfoyle BT47.

Down

1. Cloonagh Road HRC, Cloonagh Road, Downpatrick, BT30 6LJ.
2. Drumanakelly HRC, Demesne Road, Seaforde, BT30 8SE.
3. Bann Road HRC, Bann Road, Castlewellan, BT30.

Fermanagh

1. Drummee Integrated Waste Management Facility, Drummee, Derrygonnelly Road, Enniskillen, BT74 7EY.
2. Kesh Recycling Site, Dromard Road, Kesh, BT93 1TE.
3. Lisnaskea Recycling Site, Kilypaddy Road, Lisnaskea, BT92 0HE.
4. Belleek Recycling Site, Station Road, Belleek, BT93 3FX.
5. Irvinestown Recycling Site, Enniskillen Road, Irvinestown, BT94 1GP.

Larne

1. Islandmagee Bring Centre, Islandmagee Community Centre, Middle Road, Islandmagee, BT40.
2. Glenarm HRC, Dickeystown Road, Glenarm, BT44.
3. Drains Bay Bring Centre, Coast Road, Larne, BT40.
4. Redlands HRC, Harbour Highway, Larne, BT40.

Lisburn

1. Drumlough Landfill Site, Dromera Road, Hillsborough, BT26 6QA.

2. The Cutts CA Site, Derriagh, BT17 9HN.
3. Hillsborough Forest Park, Lisburn.
4. Village Service Station, Moira, BT67 0LE.

Magherafelt

1. Maghera Civic Amenity Site, Station Road Industrial Estate, Station Road, Maghera, BT46 5BS.
2. Castledawson Civic Amenity Site, Moyola Road, Castledawson, BT45 8AN.
3. Draperstown Civic Amenity Site, Sperrin Industrial Estate, Magherafelt Road, Draperstown, BT45 7AF.
4. Bellaghy Community Recycling Point, Gulladuff Road, Bellaghy, BT45 5QF.
5. Tobermore Community Recycling Point, Lisnamuck Road, Tobermore, BT45 8LW.

Moyle

1. Carneatly Amenity Site, 55 Moyarget Road, Ballycastle, BT54 6HL.
2. Sheskburn House, 7 Mary Street, Ballycastle, BT54 6QH.
3. Bushmills Community Centre, Dunluce Road, Bushmills, BT57 8QG.
4. McKillops Spar, 2 Coast road, Cushendall, BT44 0RU.
5. Armoy Riverside Play Area, Church Road, Armoy, BT53 8XQ.

Newry

1. Newry CAS, Chapel Road, Newry, Co Down, BT34 2QE.
2. Warrenpoint CAS, Upper Dromore Road, Warrenpoint, Co Down, BT34 3PN.
3. Kilkeel CAS, Ballymageough Road, Kilkeel, Co Down, BT34 4HW.
4. Carnlough CAS, Quarter Road, Carnlough, Newry, Co Down, BT35 7EE.
5. Newtownhamilton CAS, Newry Road, Newtownhamilton, Co Armagh, BT35 0AG.
6. Augnagun Landfill and CAS, Chapel Hill Road, Mayobridge, BT34 2EX.
7. Hilltown CAS, Rostrevor Road, Hilltown, Co Down, BT34 5TZ.

Newtownabbey

1. Bruslee RC, Belfast Road, Newtownabbey, BT39 9LS.

North Down

1. Rathgael HRC, Balloo Avenue, Bangor, BT19 7QY.
2. Hollywood Civic Amenity Site, Sullivan Close, Hollywood.

Strabane

1. Buryhill road Recycling Centre, Dunnamanagh, Strabane, BT82 0NR.
2. Spar, 12-14 Lower Strabane Road, Castlederg, BT81 7AZ.
3. ASDA, Branch Road, Strabane, BT82 8EQ.
4. Douglas Road Recycling Centre, Newtownstewart Strabane, BT78 4NE.
5. Fox Lodge Cricket Club, 414 Victoria Road, Ballymagorry, Co Tyrone, Strabane, BT82 0AT.

Road Tax

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the income from road tax, accumulated from all vehicles in Northern Ireland, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3241/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The amount of vehicle excise duty collected (net of duty refunded) in Northern Ireland in each of the last 3 financial years is:

2004/05	£122 million
2005/06	£130 million
2006/07	£134 million

Planning Service

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an assessment of the level of experience of staff working in the Planning Service. (AQW 3271/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The table below sets out the average length of service in the NICS for planners at each of the Professional and Technical grades. It is not possible to reflect any additional experience that staff may have gained outside the NICS through employment in the private sector or in other local planning authorities in GB or the Republic of Ireland.

The Planning Service is enhancing the experience of its specialist staff through investment in training and Continuing Professional Development.

PROFESSIONAL & TECHNICAL STAFF IN THE PLANNING SERVICE

Grade	Number	Average Years (NICS)
TG1	3	30.58
TPA	12	3.50
PTO	148	7.80
HPTO	179	9.98
SPTO	90	14.62
PPTO	43	25.66
GRADE 6	10	29.99
GRADE 5 (Director)	2	34.71
Total	487	12.04

Single Library Authority

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the influence the establishment of a single Library Authority will have on local government reform, in the context of the Review of Public Administration. (AQW 3272/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Following the publication of the emerging findings of the review of the RPA decisions, as they relate to local government, a number of stakeholder events were held to provide the opportunity for focused discussion of the initial proposals. Stakeholders were also invited to submit written comments on the emerging findings and initial proposals, if they felt that this was appropriate. During this engagement process a number of stakeholders put forward views on the future provision of library services.

These views are being considered by the Executive Sub Committee, which I chair, and the Executive as a whole will make the final decisions on which functions transfer to local government, when it receives a report from the Executive Sub Committee.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of applications for (i) single housing developments; and (ii) multiple housing developments, that have been approved for Carrinduff since the adoption of Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP). (AQW 3289/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 (BMAP) which was published in November 2004 is still in draft form and is currently the subject of a Public Inquiry

conducted by the Planning Appeals Commission which is due to finish in late April 2008. The purpose of the Public Inquiry is to hear representations made to the Department during the Public Consultation period following publication of BMAP. The PAC will consider the issues raised at the Public Inquiry and report its findings back to Planning Service and the findings will be considered before BMAP is adopted, however in the interim BMAP is still a material consideration in determining planning applications.

From the publication of BMAP until December 2007 three approvals have been granted for single dwellings within Carryduff. This figure excludes any approvals granted for replacement dwellings. In the same period 18 approvals have been granted for multiple dwellings.

BMAP does not set any specific targets for new housing development in Carryduff. The Plan allocates housing growth potential to the town and the Department monitors development through its annual Land Use Availability Survey. In BMAP the potential housing yield is approximately 1400 units. In response to the publication of the Revised Housing Growth Indicators by the Department for Regional Development, the Department, in a paper published in June 2007, put forward a revised allocation of approximately 2000 units. This revised allocation is a matter that has been debated as part of the Inquiry process into the plan and is now a matter for the Planning Appeals Commission to consider.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm whether or not targets set for new housing developments in Carryduff, under the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP), have been met. (AQW 3290/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 (BMAP) which was published in November 2004 is still in draft form and is currently the subject of a Public Inquiry conducted by the Planning Appeals Commission which is due to finish in late April 2008. The purpose of the Public Inquiry is to hear representations made to the Department during the Public Consultation period following publication of BMAP. The PAC will consider the issues raised at the Public Inquiry and report its findings back to Planning Service and the findings will be considered before BMAP is adopted, however in the interim BMAP is still a material consideration in determining planning applications.

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Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of the Environment to detail her plans to extend the current new housing development allocation for Carryduff before or beyond 2015/2025. (AQW 3291/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 (BMAP) which was published in November 2004 is still in draft form and is currently the subject of a Public Inquiry conducted by the Planning Appeals Commission which is due to finish in late April 2008. The purpose of the Public Inquiry is to hear representations made to the Department during the Public Consultation period following publication of BMAP. The PAC will consider the issues raised at the Public Inquiry and report its findings back to Planning Service and the findings will be considered before BMAP is adopted, however in the interim BMAP is still a material consideration in determining planning applications.

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as part of the Inquiry process into the plan and is now a matter for the Planning Appeals Commission to consider.

The Sperrins Area

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has (i) to review the area designated as the Sperrins Area of Natural Beauty; and (ii) to consult with the surrounding community as part of this review. (AQW 3311/08)

The Minister of the Environment: A review of Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is nearly complete. This review has been conducted in accordance with the Department's policy statement on protected landscapes published in 2003.

Although not required to do so by legislation, the Department, through Environment and Heritage Service, made available a leaflet in the Sperrin area clearly explaining the AONB proposals and inviting comment. It also advertised and held four public meetings. The Department will take account of the comments received in writing and at meetings in reaching any decision to designate.

The consultation process, specified in the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands Order 1985, requires the Department to consult with the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside (CNCC) and the relevant councils. Consultations with the seven relevant councils are now complete. CNCC will be asked to comment on the Department's recommendations, which will take account of public comments received.

Retail Designation Plan

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of the Environment to provide a timescale within which the conclusions of the Craigavon town centre Boundaries and Retail Designation Plan will be made public. (AQW 3397/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) forwarded its report on the Public Examination, held to consider objections to the draft Craigavon Town Centre Boundaries & Retail Designations Plan, to the Department on 31 December 2007. The Department is currently seeking comment on the Report from relevant consultees.

Following receipt of these consultation responses, Planning Service intends to proceed to Plan adoption by late Spring 2008. This will involve the publication of an Adopted Plan, an Adoption Statement and the PAC report on the Public Examination.

Shooting Sports

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what assessment her department has made of the contribution made to the economy by shooting sports. (AQW 3418/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has not undertaken an assessment of the economic value to Northern Ireland of shooting sports.

My Department is however aware of a report jointly published in 2006 by the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, Countryside Alliance, the Country Land and Business Association and the Game Conservancy Trust. The report indicates that shooting contributes £1.6 billion per annum to the UK economy, including £45m in Northern Ireland.

Planning Policy

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to give a timescale within which she will make a statement in relation to the review of provisions within Planning Policy Statement 14. (AQW 3488/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I indicated in my Statement of 25 October, that I intended to reissue a revised draft PPS 14 in April 2008. Good progress has been made and we are on target to deliver a revised draft by the end of April.

Quarrying in Belfast Hills

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration her department is giving to ending quarrying in the Belfast hills. (AQW 3504/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 (BMAP) recognises that the 'Belfast Hills' are a striking landscape feature which provide Belfast City with its unique natural setting. The 'Hills' are regarded as one of Northern Ireland's finest assets and are designated in BMAP as greenbelt, an Area of High Scenic Value and an Area of Constraint on Mineral Development in order to protect the setting of the Metropolitan Urban Area.

The Department cannot end quarrying in the Belfast hills by the revocation of existing planning permissions. What can be done is greater controls put in place to ensure that a sustainable approach is further developed which protects and conserves the countryside and in particular this important asset.

The draft BMAP 2015 acknowledges the role minerals development has in the provision of employment and its necessity for the construction

industry, however, it also recognises the significant impact that quarrying can have on the countryside and the need for a sustainable approach that protects and conserves the countryside. With this in mind Policy COU 8 of draft BMAP proposes that planning permission will not be granted for extraction and/or processing of minerals within the Area of Constraint on Minerals Development. (ACMD)

The Department has also introduced legislation through The Planning (Reform) Northern Ireland (Order) 2006 to carry out an initial review of old mineral permissions (ROMPS) in line with the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. This review will not provide the Department with powers to close an existing working quarry through the revocation of planning permission; it will however provide the Department with greater control on established quarries by reviewing their planning conditions and ensuring these are updated in line with current legislation and working practises.

Mullaghglass Landfill Site

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 470/07, to confirm whether or not the owners of Mullaghglass landfill site have complied with condition 20 of their planning permission; and if not, to detail what enforcement action her department will take. (AQW 3505/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Planning permission for Mullaghglass Landfill site was granted subject to a number of conditions, among them condition 20 requiring that a footway be constructed, before the site becomes operational, along a section of the Mullaghglass Road fronting the site and adjacent properties.

A planning application was submitted in March 2007 seeking approval to construct the footway. This application remains under consideration with Planning Service.

The owners of Mullaghglass landfill site have not yet complied with condition 20 of the planning permission. However their actions to date, in terms of progressing the planning application, would indicate that it is their intention to construct the footway, subject to planning permission.

It would not be expedient for Planning Service to pursue enforcement action in this particular case when it is actively considering a planning application for works which would resolve the current breach of planning control. However the specific enforcement actions that Planning Service might resort to should the need arise include breach of condition notices, enforcement notices and stop notices.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Non-Pensionable Bonuses

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to the answer to AQW 2145/08, to detail (i) the total amount paid out in non-pensionable bonuses in each of the last three years; and (ii) the reasons for the awarding of these bonuses.

(AQW 2855/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson):

(i) Non-Pensionable Bonuses paid in last 3 years

DFP

Year	NCB	Special Bonus
2005/06	£104,108	£61,125
2006/07	£696,223	£154,437
2007/08	£554,610	£70,990

(ii) the reasons for awarding.

Non-consolidated, non-pensionable bonuses (NCB) for non-industrial civil servants are determined by a formal assessment of overall in-year performance. For staff below the Senior Civil Service (SCS), the levels of bonuses are agreed each year via pay negotiations with Trade Union Side, while for SCS staff they are determined in accordance with the terms of the annual recommendations of the Senior Salaries Review Board, as endorsed by Government.

Special Bonuses will be used to reward exceptional performance in particularly demanding tasks or situations during the course of the year or where good performance was achieved under particularly adverse conditions.

Land and Property Services

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in relation to the £51m of rate debt currently owed to Land and Property Services, to detail (i) the amount of rate debt owed each year, for the last 5 years, by (a) domestic customers; and (b) non-domestic customers; and (ii) the amount of rate debt written off in each of the last 5 years; and to detail the mechanisms to deal with rate debt. (AQW 3100/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel:

(i) Table 1 below shows the rating debt (arrears) carried forward as at 1 April for each of the last five rating years. Figures showing a breakdown for how much of this debt related to

the domestic sector and how much to the non-domestic sector are not available.

TABLE 1. RATE ARREARS FROM 2002/2003 TO 2006/2007

2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
£22M	£24.6M	£35.2M	£48.7M	£88.3M

- (ii) Table 2 shows the amounts of rating debt written-off in each of the last five financial years. It also shows the amounts written off as percentages of the rate arrears for that year. Debts are only written off after all available means of recovery have been exhausted.

TABLE 2. RATING DEBT WRITTEN-OFF FROM 2002/2003 TO 2006/2007 (ALSO SHOWN AS A PERCENTAGE OF THE RATE ARREARS FOR THAT YEAR)

2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
£1.3M (5.9%)	£2.0M (8.1%)	£1.9M (5.4%)	£1.5M (3.1%)	£1.3M (1.4%)

- (iii) Land and Property Services currently use the following rate recovery process to pursue the payment of outstanding rate arrears.

- The issue of payment reminders;
- Proceedings in the Magistrates' Court to secure a decree for the debt;
- Enforcement of the decree through the Enforcement of Judgements Office; and
- Bankruptcy and or liquidation proceedings through the High Court .

During this rating year 32,577 instalment payment reminders and 84,871 final payment notices issued. A total of 17,500 summonses for the Magistrates' Courts also issued and almost 500 bankruptcy or liquidation cases are under consideration.

Efficiency Savings

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm whether or not almost half the efficiency savings proposed in his department come from an accountancy reallocation of monies already being received; and to state if this is (i) an accepted practice across Government departments; and (ii) within Whitehall guidelines for efficiency savings.

(AQW 3101/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Over the CSR period my Department is taking forward the most wide ranging reform of public services seen for a generation. At the heart of this reform programme is a commitment to developing world class public services that will not only support the needs of the economy but will bring benefits to wider society here in

Northern Ireland. Delivering efficiency within public services is central to both the Programme for Government and the Budget over the next three years, and I am establishing a Performance Efficiency Delivery Unit to examine the scope for Departments, including my own, to deliver savings over and above the 3% which has been set.

In excess of 40% of the funding allocated to my Department over the CSR period is required to support the delivery of the key NICS reform programmes on behalf of all NICS Departments. The process of benefits realisation associated with these programmes will extend beyond the CSR period as projects are implemented and service delivery is stabilised. Consequently qualitative and quantitative value for money savings are expected to materialise over the longer term.

Against this backdrop, the efficiency target of £14m by 2010-11 represents a significant challenge. Despite this, my Department has identified, and is committed to delivering efficiencies of at least £14.8m by 2010-11, thereby finding savings which are 5% above the set target.

Of the total efficiencies identified by 2010-11, £5.7m (38.5%) relates to the recognition of income associated with recouping the cost of collection of District Rates on behalf of District Councils. In relation to whether this is accepted practice across departments and falls within Whitehall guidelines, income represents a significant component of DFP's budget and in this context the investigation and subsequent recognition of this income released £5.7m of additional resources for reallocation to priority services across the NI Block. This represents a legitimate cash releasing action and has been included in my Department's Efficiency Delivery Plan on this basis.

In addition, as a result of work being taken forward by my Department in reforming the delivery arrangements by SEUPB for the new Peace III and Interreg ivA programmes further efficiency savings of £10m have been identified over the life of the programmes. The delivery of these savings were agreed at the North South Ministerial Council meeting on 7 November 2007 and monitoring arrangements will be put in place to ensure that the savings are delivered as planned. This represents a further example and commitment by my Department in terms of promoting efficiency and effectiveness across the wider administration of public services in Northern Ireland.

Hightown Bridge

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm whether or not his department will provide rates relief to businesses and homeowners in Mallusk and Glengormley, to compensate for the

year-long closure of the Hightown bridge.
(AQW 3116/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Rates relief is administered by Land and Property Services (LPS), an Agency within DFP, in respect of both relief through valuation reduction and application of a hardship relief scheme.

Valuation reductions are considered on a case by case basis with regard to the amount and duration of disruption.

If the Hightown bridge closure does not last for longer than a year I am advised by LPS that homeowners and business occupiers are unlikely to be successful with an application for reduction in the rateable valuation. Their decisions can be appealed to the Valuation Tribunal or Lands Tribunal according to the type of property.

The hardship relief scheme provides support for non-domestic ratepayers (businesses and organisations) who are affected by some form of crisis. The hardship must be caused by exceptional and unforeseen circumstances. Therefore, it is not possible to provide a definitive list of cases which would qualify for hardship relief.

However, all applications for hardship relief will be considered on their own merits. Applications are available on request from LPS.

Rates Relief

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of instances when rates relief has been provided to (i) businesses; and (ii) local communities, in each of the last 5 years, to compensate for disruption caused by major infrastructure building programmes.
(AQW 3118/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There are no instances in the last five years where rates relief has been awarded to businesses or local communities to compensate for disruption caused by major infrastructure building programmes.

Forkhill Army Base

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the proposals in relation to the former Forkhill Army Base that are contained in the outline business case from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.
(AQW 3129/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has recently submitted two business cases to DFP for the acquisition and proposed development of the former Forkhill military base. The business cases

are currently subject to consideration and discussion between departments - at official level.

I understand that DARD would intend to take the lead in the development of the former Forkhill military base proposed in the business case. The scheme is of course, subject to approval of the business cases in the usual manner.

I also understand that DARD intends to make a bid in the February Monitoring Round for the £4.5m required for the purchase by DSD of the former Forkhill Military Base. Ministers will have an opportunity to consider the matter in that context.

Forkhill Army Base

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether or not the lead role to develop the former Forkhill Army Base will be allocated to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of the Outline Business Case.
(AQW 3135/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has recently submitted two business cases to DFP for the acquisition and proposed development of the former Forkhill military base. The business cases are currently subject to consideration and discussion between departments - at official level.

I understand that DARD would intend to take the lead in the development of the former Forkhill military base proposed in the business case. The scheme is of course, subject to approval of the business cases in the usual manner.

I also understand that DARD intends to make a bid in the February Monitoring Round for the £4.5m required for the purchase by DSD of the former Forkhill Military Base. Ministers will have an opportunity to consider the matter in that context.

Regional Economic Strategy

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on the timescale for a Regional Economic Strategy in relation to the Spring 2008 Investment Conference.
(AQW 3173/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The current draft Regional Economic Strategy (RES) reflects the aspirations of the previous Direct Rule Ministers. There is therefore a need to radically rewrite the document to reflect the Assembly and Executive's economic goals for Northern Ireland, as set out in the Programme for Government and Final Budget.

The redrafting of the RES will now take place in parallel with the second Varney Review. The recommendations of this Review will be highly relevant to the future economic development of Northern Ireland and it would therefore not be appropriate to finalise the RES before this review completes. Sir David Varney is scheduled to report on his second Review in advance of the NI/US Investment Conference scheduled for May 2008. The RES will therefore not be finalised until after the Investment Conference.

Childcare Vouchers

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail what actions he is taking to make the salary sacrifice scheme for Childcare Vouchers available to Northern Ireland Civil Service staff. (AQW 3195/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Northern Ireland Civil Service is committed to introducing a salary sacrifice childcare voucher scheme and work has been underway for sometime to ensure that it can be delivered as part of the new payroll system which will become operational later this year.

Migrant Workers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of births to migrant workers, in each of the last three years. (AQW 3218/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Information is not collected on the birth certificate on whether the parents are migrant workers; however the country of birth of the mother and father are given indicating that they were at some time migrants to Northern Ireland. The table attached gives the number of births registered by the mother's and father's country of birth for the years 2004 to 2006.

Country of Birth of Parents	2004	2005	2006
Either lone parent or both parents from Northern Ireland	17,149	17,138	17,570
Either lone parent or both parents from Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland	624	613	622
Either lone parent or both parents from the Rest of World	676	619	921
One parent from Northern Ireland and one parent from Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland	2,935	2,994	3,116

Country of Birth of Parents	2004	2005	2006
One parent from Northern Ireland and one parent from the Rest of World	783	817	897
One parent from Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland and one parent from the Rest of World	151	147	146
Total	22,318	22,328	23,272

*Rest of the world excludes the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

Forkhill Army Base

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm whether or not he will provide financial assistance for the proposed development of the former Forkhill army base. (AQW 3225/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has recently submitted two business cases to DFP for the acquisition and proposed development of the former Forkhill military base. The business cases are currently subject to consideration and discussion between departments - at official level.

I understand that DARD would intend to take the lead in the development of the former Forkhill military base proposed in the business case. The scheme is of course, subject to approval of the business cases in the usual manner.

I also understand that DARD intends to make a bid in the February Monitoring Round for the £4.5m required for the purchase by DSD of the former Forkhill Military Base. Ministers will have an opportunity to consider the matter in that context.

Rates Review

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of references there have been for rates review, for each parliamentary constituency, in the last financial year. (AQW 3227/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The total number of application based valuation reviews registered by the Valuation & Lands Agency (now Land & Property Services) in the financial year 2006-2007 was 45,075.

A breakdown of the numbers by case type and parliamentary constituency is set out in the Table below.

Parliamentary Constituency	Domestic Cases (Capital Value)	Domestic Cases (NAV)	Non Domestic Cases (NAV)	Totals
Belfast East	1,682	414	306	2,402
Belfast North	943	443	408	1,794
Belfast South	2,215	832	432	3,479
Belfast West	552	366	218	1,136
East Antrim	1,509	272	187	1,968
East Londonderry	1,550	1,111	408	3,069
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	1,335	701	538	2,574
Foyle	1,085	566	327	1,978
Lagan Valley	2,216	527	426	3,169
Mid Ulster	1,039	820	444	2,303
Newry & Armagh	1,439	653	488	2,580
North Antrim	1,697	258	341	2,296
North Down	2,344	561	173	3,078
South Antrim	1,664	266	289	2,219
South Down	1,898	497	470	2,865
Strangford	2,457	630	287	3,374
Upper Bann	1,616	724	392	2,732
West Tyrone	825	886	348	2,059
Totals	28,066	10,527	6,482	45,075

Payment of Rates

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail what steps he is taking to ensure that checks are made so that (i) letters demanding payment of rates are not issued to; and (ii) debt proceedings are not taken against, people who are in receipt of Income Support. (AQW 3231/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Land and Property Services will only know that a ratepayer is in receipt of Income Support if they are informed, usually when the ratepayer applies for Housing Benefit.

Those claimants who receive full Income Support are often entitled to full Housing Benefit, and in these cases there will be no rates to pay, and rate demands will not be issued. If a claimant is not entitled to full Housing Benefit, rate demands are issued advising them of their liability, less any Housing Benefit/Rate Relief awarded.

All rating staff have access to information about the current status of such claims, and collection and recovery

staff will not take any action until a claim has been assessed. However, once a claim has been assessed, if for any reason a balance remains outstanding, a rate demand will issue. For example, there may be rates due for a period prior to the claim, or as a result of a change in circumstances.

Land and Property Services will not knowingly issue legal proceedings against customers receiving Income Support, but letters may issue and recovery action start in unidentified cases.

Once known, the staff in Land and Property Services have been trained to deal with these types of cases sympathetically by –

- assisting the ratepayer to claim Housing Benefit
- making suitable arrangements regarding the payment of outstanding rates
- deferring recovery action.

Renewable Energy

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline (i) current building regulations for the inclusion of renewable energy in building construction; (ii) what percentage of energy consumption in each property should come from renewable energy; and (iii) whether or not any changes to the regulations are planned. (AQW 3249/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Current building regulations adopt a “whole building approach” to carbon emissions using a methodology that sets a target carbon emission rate to be met or bettered by the building. It is up to the designer to determine whether or not to use low or zero carbon technologies to help achieve the target. The target is stretching enough to encourage builders to install renewable technologies, while giving builders the flexibility to explore all energy efficiency measures. The Regulations do not contain any specific requirements for the inclusion of renewable energy in building construction, nor do they require that a percentage of a building’s energy come from renewable sources. Amendments to the primary legislation will be introduced shortly to the Assembly that will introduce a power that will permit future regulations to require a percentage of a building’s energy use to come from renewable sources when it is appropriate to do so.

Officials will be going out to public consultation soon on proposed changes to Parts D (Structure) and J (Solid waste in buildings) of the building regulations. In addition, I have asked officials to begin work on a revision of Part F (Conservation of fuel and power) that will require a reduction in carbon emissions from buildings by a further 25%.

Peace III Funds

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action he is taking to ensure that there is greater clarity and direction from the Special European Union Programmes Body in relation to (i) the amount of funding; (ii) process to be followed; and (iii) timescales to be adhered to, by bodies seeking to access Peace III funding. (AQW 3265/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) is required to provide clear advice on all aspects of PEACE funding. SEUPB will continue to encourage suitable funding applications from throughout the eligible area.

Under the local government element of Theme 1.1, Building Positive Relations at the Local Level, SEUPB has requested that local authorities group themselves into clusters, and that these clusters agree and submit Peace and Reconciliation Action Plans by the end of March 2008. SEUPB, as PEACE III Managing Authority, provided local authorities with detailed guidelines on the production of these Action Plans in July 2007. The plans will, upon submission, be closely assessed against the agreed selection criteria. The amount of funding allocated to each cluster will be dependant on the quality of the Action Plan submitted.

In relation to the other PEACE III Themes, two are currently open to applications. The regional element of Theme 1.1 opened on 28 January 2007. This is a rolling call and SEUPB will advertise a closing date later in the year. Theme 2.1, Creating Shared Public Spaces, opened on 15 November 2007. It will close in February 2008 and will reopen at a later date in the programming period. Information on processes to be followed by applicants is available on the SEUPB website (www.seupb.eu).

Peace III Funds

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the reasons for a one year delay in the Peace III programme; and to confirm that funding contracts, due to be released in early 2008, are being moved back to the end of this current year.[R] (AQW 3266/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There has been no delay to the start of the PEACE III Programme. The new Programme is already open. The PEACE III Programme was approved by the European Commission on 6 November 2007 and the first call for applications under Theme 2.1, Creating Shared Public Spaces, was launched on 15 November 2007.

Contracts for the delivery of funding under Theme 1.1, Building Positive Relations at the Local Level, will follow the submission and assessment of Peace

and Reconciliation Action Plans. The Action Plans are due to be submitted by local authority clusters to SEUPB by the end of March 2008. This deadline is 3 months later than originally planned and was revised from late 2007 in order to permit the finalising of the cluster arrangements.

Peace III Funds

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm who has lead responsibility in managing Peace III funding; and to detail what action is being taken to ensure that applications are submitted and processed within an acceptable timescale. (AQW 3267/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) has lead responsibility for the PEACE III Programme.

Within SEUPB the Joint Technical Secretariat (JTS) has responsibility for implementation of the majority of the programme's Themes. However, a consortium comprising the Community Relations Council and Border Action has been contracted to act as Implementing Body for the Theme Acknowledging and Dealing with the Past. The work of programme implementation includes promotion of available funding opportunities and encouraging suitable project applications. Applications for funding can already be made to the Programme. SEUPB is working with local government clusters to receive their action plans by the end of March.

SEUPB is committed to providing a high standard of service to all applicants, and has developed Service Delivery Standards which set out the timeframes within which project promoters can expect applications to be processed. These range from 10 weeks for applications for small grants under £20,000, to 30 weeks for the largest applications for funding in excess of £350,000.

Peace III Funds

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the exact amount of funds available, per cluster area, under Peace III; and to confirm (i) that a sum of 10 million euro was the first indicative amount; and (ii) that this figure, for the Newtownabbey, Carrickfergus and Larne cluster areas, now equates to £1.4 million to be distributed over two years. (AQW 3268/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: No amounts have yet been allocated to any local authority. The allocations to each cluster will be dependant on the quality of Peace and Reconciliation Action Plans submitted. The Action Plans are due to be submitted by the end of March 2008, when they will be assessed

against the selection criteria which were agreed by the two Member States and the Northern Ireland Executive.

For illustrative purposes, SEUPB's July 2007 guidance to local authorities provided an indicative total allocation to local action plans in the range €40-60 million. This indicative total related to the first tranche of local action plan funding (2008-2010) only.

SEUPB has also advised local authority clusters to use the relevant PEACE II Extension Local Strategy Partnership (LSP) allocations as a guide to the level of funding that might be available to them. No amounts can be confirmed until Action Plans are received and assessed.

Meetings with MEPs

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the number of meetings he has had with each of the 3 MEPs from Northern Ireland; and (ii) the purpose of these meetings, since the restoration of devolution in May 2007. (AQW 3279/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In my capacity as Minister for Finance and Personnel I have had no meetings with any of the 3 MEPs from Northern Ireland since the restoration of devolution

Civil Service

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps are being taken to ensure that current vacancies within the Northern Ireland Civil Service are filled quickly in order to improve the efficiency of his department. (AQW 3292/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department of Finance and Personnel is responsible for ensuring that the correct policies and procedures are in place to allow Departments to fill vacancies as and when they require. The policies on recruitment to and promotion within the NICS are reviewed on an ongoing basis and processes streamlined to ensure that candidates are selected on the basis of fair and open competition in line with the NICS Codes of Practice and Equal Opportunities Policy Statement and in accordance with the Equality Commission's Codes of Practice. In all cases the objective is to make appointments as expeditiously as possible.

Water Supply

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm whether or not people who live in rural areas, who are not connected to the mains water supply, will be entitled to a rebate of the water

charge element that is incorporated into their rates bill. (AQW 3316/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: While regional rate revenue makes a significant contribution to financing the cost of water and sewerage services, the annual regional domestic rates bill for each household does not include a specific charge in respect of these services. Thus the question of a rebate does not arise.

However, the Executive has accepted the Independent Water Review Panel's recommendation that, from 2008/09, this contribution (which it estimated at around £109m per annum) should be fully recognised. This will be explained to domestic ratepayers when they receive their rates bill for 2008/09 and in April 2009 (the date of introduction of direct domestic charges for water and sewerage services) when the regional domestic rate will be reduced by an average of £160 per rate paying household. This approach recognises the current financing arrangements and will clearly address the concerns of ratepayers about the issue of paying twice for water and sewerage services

Childcare Vouchers

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give an assurance that he will introduce the Salary Sacrifice scheme for Childcare Vouchers prior to 1 April 2008. (AQW 3337/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Northern Ireland Civil Service is committed to introducing a salary sacrifice childcare voucher scheme and work has been underway for sometime to ensure that it can be delivered as part of the new payroll system which will become operational later this year. The new system is in the final stages of development and testing and is likely to be introduced before the summer.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) his department's bids in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review; and (ii) the amount of funding that has been allocated against them in the Budget 2008-11. (AQW 3360/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Bids submitted by the Department of Finance & Personnel in the Comprehensive Spending Review are set out in the attached table. The subsequent table shows the allocations received by the Department. Capital bids and allocations, which have been subject to the Investment Strategy NI process, have been included in these tables.

CSR 2007	£000s					
Requested	2008-09		2009-10		2010-11	
	Res	Capital	Res	Capital	Res	Capital
*Inflationary Pressures	2,580	-	5,260	-	7,060	-
Account NI	8,600	2,413	5,800	4,831	5,900	100
*e-HR Programme	1,500	6,500	-	3,750	-	-
*ICT Shared Services Centre	6,350	6,420	6,600	8,600	7,100	8,600
*NI Direct	2,300	500	3,000	500	3,700	1,000
Procurement ICT	-	270	-	230	-	250
Capital Projects & Carbon Neutrality	1,000	12,700	4,000	4,400	4,000	4,400
Central Energy Efficiency Fund	-	5,000	-	5,000	-	5,000
Census 2011	1,760	-	1,730	-	4,770	-
NISRA Line of Business ICT Systems	-	860	-	1,160	-	1,000
Non Domestic Revaluation	1,200	-	1,300	-	1,000	-
LPS Line of Business Systems	185	2,300	900	1,100	1,000	1,000
LPS Data Model	-	400	-	1,500	-	500
LPS Systems Integration	-	-	-	1,250	-	1,250
LPS Land Registration Infrastructure	-	1,450	-	1,000	-	1,000
Tribunal, Commissions & Other Bodies	1,030	-	1,055	-	1,080	-
	26,505	38,813	29,645	33,321	35,610	24,100

* These relate to Civil Service reform projects which will now be addressed through in year flexibility.

CSR 2007	£000s					
Allocated	2008-09		2009-10		2010-11	
	Res	Capital	Res	Capital	Res	Capital
Account NI	-	2,410	-	4,800	-	100
Procurement ICT	-	270	-	230	-	250
e-HR Programme	-	6,500	-	3,750	-	-
ICT Shared Service Centre	-	4,700	-	6,620	-	7,300
Network Maintenance	-	300	-	300	-	300
Accommodation Capital Works	-	11,000	-	3,000	-	3,000
Central Energy Efficiency Fund	-	2,000	-	2,000	-	2,000
NISRA Line of Business ICT Systems	-	820	-	1,000	-	1,000
CENSUS 2011	1,200	-	1,200	-	4,200	-
LPS Line of Business Systems	-	2,000	-	1,000	-	1,000
LPS Systems Integration	-	-	-	-	-	1,050
LPS Non Domestic Revaluation	1,100	-	1,100	-	700	-
	2,300	30,000	2,300	22,700	4,900	16,000

Childcare Vouchers

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give an assurance that he will introduce

the Salary Sacrifice scheme for childcare vouchers prior to 1 April 2008. (AQW 3437/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Northern Ireland Civil Service is committed to

introducing a salary sacrifice childcare voucher scheme and work has been underway for sometime to ensure that it can be delivered as part of the new payroll system which will become operational later this year. The new system is in the final stages of development and testing and is likely to be introduced before the summer.

Childcare Vouchers

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to explain why the introduction of a Salary Sacrifice scheme for childcare vouchers has been screened out of a requirement to conduct an Equality Impact Assessment. (AQW 3438/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It was concluded that the introduction of this scheme would have a low impact on equality of opportunity. It was recognised that parents and guardians who use unregistered childcare may be adversely affected as they are precluded from using the childcare voucher scheme. However, the requirement that the vouchers can only be used to pay for registered childcare is not one my Department can alter as it is laid down by HM Revenue and Customs as a condition of the tax and National Insurance contributions exemption.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Minor Injuries Unit

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not there are proposals to close the minor injuries unit at the Ards Hospital; and to detail the number of people that have used the minor injuries unit in each of the last three years. (AQW 3086/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): All Departments must achieve 3% efficiency targets per annum across the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) period in line with Executive agreement. For DHSSPS this amounts to £118/£233/£344m expressed cumulatively and therefore all services and all provision must be kept under review.

Trusts must achieve 3% per annum efficiency savings and so I have asked all Trusts to give me their proposals on how CSR efficiencies should be delivered. In developing their proposals, I have specifically asked for efficiencies, not cuts, and that the implications for staff and patients are fully explained. I have not yet

received fully worked up proposals from Trusts and I will not be making decisions on Trust efficiency proposals until all these implications are clearly established.

Several members of the Assembly have been strongly advocating efficiencies. It is incumbent on us to take the opportunity now to look across the new Trusts and to reshape services where they can be provided more efficiently and effectively. Where monies are freed up, we will invest them into new service developments for the benefit of patients and clients across Northern Ireland.

The number of attendances at Ards Minor Injuries Unit over the last three years is detailed in the table below.

Year	New Attendances ¹	Review Attendances ²	Total Attendances
2004-2005	7,977	1,657	9,634
2005-2006	8,571	1,896	10,467
2006-2007	8,968	2,019	10,987

Source: South Eastern HSC Trust

- 1 A new attendance is the first of a series or the only attendance at a department for accident and emergency services in the hospital.
- 2 A review attendance is any subsequent attendance for the same condition at the same department.

Ambulance Service

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of emergency requests for ambulances made in the (i) Cookstown District Council; and (ii) Magherafelt District Council areas, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3108/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is as follows:

	2005		2006		2007	
	Calls Received	Calls Attended	Calls Received	Calls Attended	Calls Received	Calls Attended
Cookstown DC	1559	1395	1870	1562	2015	1840
Magherafelt DC	1538	1378	1879	1713	2165	2039

The discrepancy between calls received and attended is as a result of hoax/malicious calls or callers hanging up before giving details.

Minor Injuries Unit

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm (i) whether or not the future of the Minor Injuries Unit at Ards Hospital is presently under review; and (ii) it has been under review since he took office. (AQW 3122/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: All Departments must achieve 3% efficiency targets per annum across the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) period in line with Executive agreement. For DHSSPS this amounts to £118/£233/£344m expressed cumulatively and therefore all services and all provision must be kept under review.

Trusts must achieve 3% per annum efficiency savings and so I have asked all Trusts to give me their proposals on how CSR efficiencies should be delivered. In developing their proposals, I have specifically asked for efficiencies, not cuts, and that the implications for staff and patients are fully explained. I have not yet received fully worked up proposals from Trusts and I will not be making decisions on Trust efficiency proposals until all these implications are clearly established.

Several members of the Assembly have been strongly advocating efficiencies. It is incumbent on us to take the opportunity now to look across the new Trusts and to reshape services where they can be provided more efficiently and effectively. Where monies are freed up, we will invest them into new service developments for the benefit of patients and clients across Northern Ireland.

Administration Expenditure

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of the Department's budget, in both monetary and percentage terms, that has been spent on administration, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3125/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below shows the requested information for the latest five years available.

Year	Administration £m	Total Budget £m	Percentage spent on Administration
2001/02	240.7	2,380.2	10.11%
2002/03	265.1	2,673.7	9.92%
2003/04	284.9	2,942.8	9.68%
2004/05	310.0	3,241.2	9.56%
2005/06	328.9	3,459.0	9.51%

The administration costs relate to Trusts, Boards, Central Services Agency and the Department (including the NIHSS Estates Agency). The administration costs of other bodies such as special agencies are not covered since the costs are expected to be small and could not readily be separately identified.

In all cases the administration costs cover staff costs and specific administrative expenses but the departmental figures also include more general expenses such as the cost of accommodation.

Social Workers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of social workers in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust that were on duty over the Christmas and New Year period. (AQW 3145/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: South Eastern Trust has a contract with the Emergency duty team based in Knockbracken Healthcare Park to provide emergency Social Work services in the evening and weekends and during statutory holiday periods.

Over the Christmas and New Year period there are three statutory holidays - 25th December, 26th December and January 1st. and Social Work Services were coordinated through the Emergency Duty team from 5pm on Monday 24th December to 9am on Thursday 27th December and from 5pm on Monday 31st January to 9am on Wednesday 2nd January.

There were a total of 20 Social Workers covering duty across this period on a rota basis.

Social Workers in Residential Childcare units were also on duty on a rota basis during this period – a total of 40 qualified staff.

The table below details the number of Social workers who were on duty on the three days during this period that are not statutory holidays. This is presented by programme of Care and totals 345.5 staff

Programme of Care	Thursday 27 th December 2007	Friday 28 th December 2007	Monday 31 st December 2007
Children's Disability	5 Social Workers 1 Senior social Worker	7 Social Workers 1 Senior Social Worker	7 Social Workers 1 Senior Social Worker

Programme of Care	Thursday 27 th December 2007	Friday 28 th December 2007	Monday 31 st December 2007
Adult Disability	5 Social workers 2 Senior Social Workers 1 Senior Manager	5 Social Workers 2 Senior Social workers 1 Senior Manager	5 Social Workers 2 Senior social Workers 1 Senior Manager
Children's Services	28 Social workers 5 Senior Social Workers 2 Assistant Principal Social Workers 1 Senior Manager	27 Social workers 5 Senior Social Workers 2 Assistant Principal Social Workers 1 Senior Manager	28 Social workers 5 Senior Social Workers 3 Assistant Principal Social Workers 1 Senior Manager
Mental Health	5 Social Workers 1 Senior Social worker	5 Social Workers 1 Senior Social worker	12 Social Workers 1 Senior Social worker
Primary Care	17 Social Workers 2 Social Work Manager	13 social Work Managers 2 social work manager	11.5 Social Workers 2 Social Work Managers
Hospital Social Work	17 Social Workers	17 Social Workers	16 Social Workers
Residential Childcare.	19 Social Workers 2 Senior Social Workers	17 Social Workers 3 Senior Social workers	25 Social Workers 3 Senior Social Workers

New General Hospital

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not any consultations have been carried out, in conjunction with the Health Services Executive in the Republic of Ireland, in relation to the proposal for a new general hospital in the North East; and to outline (i) the findings of the consultation; and (ii) additional co-operation work needed. (AQW 3161/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have had no formal consultation on the issue of the location for the new North East Regional Hospital in the Republic of Ireland. The decision on any new hospital in the North East of the Republic of Ireland lies with authorities in the RoI. At official level some publicly available information on the profile of

hospital services in Northern Ireland has been provided to the Health Service Executive in the RoI at their request. My responsibility is to secure acute services for the population of Northern Ireland as set out in Developing Better Services.

I am committed to closer collaboration on a North South basis where it is in the mutual interest of both jurisdictions and my Department is currently undertaking a joint feasibility study with the Department of Health and Children to consider further areas for North South co-operation which could offer mutual benefits to both populations.

Private Patients

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total amount of fees, owed by private patients, that has been written off as bad debt, in each of the Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQW 3186/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information, for the 2006/07 financial year, is detailed in the table below:

HSC Trust	Bad Debt Amount £
Belfast	22676
Northern	3224
Southern	1962
South Eastern	5803
Western	8671*
Ambulance Service	919

* Western Trust had conducted a purge on debts in 2006/07 resulting in a higher than usual number of write-offs.

Clostridium Difficile

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether or not he intends to initiate a Public Inquiry into the recent outbreak of clostridium difficile, and the resultant deaths of 16 people, including 10 patients at the Antrim Area Hospital. (AQW 3196/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have asked the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority to carry out an independent review on the Antrim Area Hospital outbreak as soon as the outbreak has been contained. Lessons drawn from the RQIA report will be acted on in order to reduce the risk of occurrence of such a outbreak in any hospital in Northern Ireland.

In the meantime the Trust has put in place a robust action plan which includes: reviewing antibiotic use; containment of infected patients, and an intensive cleaning regime.

My Department already has a number of policies in place to tackle healthcare associated infections. In September 2007 I announced targets for reducing MRSA and clostridium difficile. This is the first time that such targets have been set. In response to the Antrim outbreak, on 25 January I announced an extensive package of further measures aimed at fighting healthcare-associated infections. These include: single rooms for new hospitals to improve privacy and hygiene; unannounced inspections of all hospitals; a dress code for all health care staff; a regional hand hygiene campaign; rapid response cleaning teams at all hospitals; funding for a pharmacist in each Trust to promote safer prescribing of antibiotics; and quarterly publication of Trusts' infection control performance.

Clostridium Difficile

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what steps he has taken to determine the cause of the outbreak of clostridium difficile in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 3197/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have asked the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority to carry out an independent review on the Antrim Area Hospital outbreak as soon as the outbreak has been contained. Lessons drawn from the RQIA report will be acted on in order to reduce the risk of occurrence of such a outbreak in any hospital in Northern Ireland.

In the meantime the Trust has put in place a robust action plan which includes: reviewing antibiotic use; containment of infected patients, and an intensive cleaning regime.

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Clostridium Difficile

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what actions he has taken to tackle the recent outbreak of clostridium difficile in Antrim hospitals; and what measures he has put in place to prevent a recurrence. (AQW 3198/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have asked the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority to carry out an independent review on the Antrim Area Hospital outbreak as soon as the outbreak has been contained. Lessons drawn from the RQIA report will be acted on in order to reduce the risk of occurrence of such a outbreak in any hospital in Northern Ireland.

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My Department already has a number of policies in place to tackle healthcare associated infections. In September 2007 I announced targets for reducing MRSA and clostridium difficile. This is the first time that such targets have been set. In response to the Antrim outbreak, on 25 January I announced an extensive package of further measures aimed at fighting healthcare-associated infections. These include: single rooms for new hospitals to improve privacy and hygiene; unannounced inspections of all hospitals; a dress code for all health care staff; a regional hand hygiene campaign; rapid response cleaning teams at all hospitals; funding for a pharmacist in each Trust to promote safer prescribing of antibiotics; and quarterly publication of Trusts' infection control performance.

Occupational Therapist

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average waiting time for a home visit by an Occupational Therapist, in relation to Home Disability Building Adaptations Assessments in the (i) Craigavon Borough Council area; and (ii) Banbridge District Council area, in each of the last 2 years, broken down by electoral ward. (AQW 3205/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the average waiting time for a home visit by an Occupational Therapist in relation to Home Disability Building Adaptations Assessments is not collected centrally.

Community Information Branch (CIB) within the Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety, requested the information from the Southern Health

and Social Care Trust (SHSCT). The information provided by the SHSCT is detailed below.

Information on waiting lists and waiting times for a home visit by an Occupational Therapist is not collected in a way that enables identification of those visits that relate only to Home Disability Building Adaptations Assessments. The figures below refer to waiting lists and times for home visits by Occupational Therapists in all capacities, including those waiting for a home visit by an Occupational Therapist in relation to Home Disability Building Adaptations Assessments.

Information on home visits from Occupational Therapists is not collected in a form that would allow average waiting times to be calculated. However, the numbers of people on the waiting list and the longest time someone has been waiting are available at Craigavon and Banbridge legacy Trust level and are outlined overleaf. Figures could not be disaggregated by either Council area or ward level.

Year End	Total Waiting List	Longest Waiting Time
December 2005	695	15 months
December 2006	598	12 months
December 2007	330	26 weeks

On January 28th 2008 225 adults were waiting for an Occupational Therapy home visit; 109 were waiting 0-6 weeks, 74 were waiting between 6 and 13 weeks and 42 were waiting between 13 and 21 weeks. No clients were waiting over 21 weeks.

Mater Hospital

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not a covenant agreement exists that prevents the closure of the Mater Hospital. (AQW 3210/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Mater Infirmorum Hospital came into the NHS on 1 January 1972 under conditions specified in a Deed of Arrangement, with the then Ministry of Health and Social Services, members of the Mater hospital Board of Management and the Hospital trustees.

The Deed includes, among other things, provision for the leasing of the hospital to the Ministry subject to the terms and conditions contained in the schedule to the Deed.

A specific covenant in the lease requires the Department to only use the premises for the provision of hospital and specialist services. The written consent of the Trustees is required for any other use of the premises.

Migrant Workers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of migrant workers that have had babies delivered by (i) natural means; and (ii) caesarean section, in each of the last three years. (AQW 3226/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of migrant workers that have had babies delivered by (i) natural means; and (ii) caesarean section is unavailable.

Information on 'mode of delivery' is recorded on the Child Health System operated by each of the four Health Boards. However, the information recorded on this system cannot identify migrant workers.

Hope Centre

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the current funding provided to the Hope Centre, Ballymena; and (ii) what action he is taking to ensure that no jobs are lost at the centre. (AQW 3234/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: (i) Following the publication of the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs (NSD) in May 2006, the Department asked the four local Drug and Alcohol Co-Ordination Teams (DACT) to develop local action plans in support the key priorities and outcomes within the NSD, and to address local need. The DACTs subsequently tendered for organisations to help them deliver on the locally agreed outcomes contained in these action plans.

The Hope Centre submitted a successful bid in respect of the Northern Drug and Alcohol Co-Ordination Team (NDACT) Action Plan's outcome regarding the provision of support to communities dealing specifically with alcohol and drug issues, and appropriate family support networks and services. As a result, the Hope Centre received funding of approximately £115,000 from October 2006 to March 2008.

(ii) In respect of the NSD, the allocation of funding to local organisations and services is the responsibility of the relevant Health and Social Services Board/DACT. NDACT has now evaluated its local action plan, and following this process the Hope Centre has been offered (and has accepted) an extension of the contract outlined above until 31 March 09.

I understand that the Hope Centre has made a request to the NDACT to use an underspend to fund some core posts within the organisation for a further two months while they seek other potential funding streams. These requests are currently being given full consideration. The Hope Centre has also made a bid for funding

from the Northern Health and Social Services Board's Voluntary and Community Small Grant Scheme – again this is being considered and it is hoped they will be informed of the decision in the next 3-4 weeks.

Number of Doctors Employed

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of doctors presently employed by the Health Service in Northern Ireland and how this number has changed over the past 10 years. (AQW 3250/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is provided in the table below by category of medical doctor.

	As at September 1997		As at September 2007		Percentage change 1997-2007	
	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE
Consultants	843	781.0	1,283	1,213.5	52.2%	55.4%
Career Grade Doctors	473	256	610	437	29.0%	71.0%
Training Grade Doctors	1,262	1,223	1,837	1,820	45.6%	48.8%
Total	2,578	2,259.7	3,730	3,470.4	44.7%	53.6%

Source: Human Resource Management System (HRMS)

Table Notes:

1. Career Grade Doctors include staff grades, associate specialists, hospital practitioners, medical officers and medical practitioners.
2. Training Grade Doctors include house officers, registrars and clinical research fellows.
3. The figures above include medical doctors who may not be practicing but are still graded as such on HRMS and working in an advisory/managerial role.
4. WTE = whole time equivalent of staff.
5. The figures above exclude dental officers/ practitioners.

Number of Nurses Employed

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of nurses presently employed by the Health Service in Northern Ireland and how this number has changed over the past 10 years. (AQW 3251/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is provided in the table below.

	As at September 1997		As at September 2007		Percentage change 1997-2007	
	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE
Qualified Nurses	12,967	11,058.2	16,172	13,793.1	24.7%	24.7%
Nursing Support Staff	3,799	3,253.0	4,818	4,126.5	26.8%	26.8%
Total	16,766	14,311.6	20,990	17,919.6	25.2%	25.2%

Source: Human Resource Management System.

Table Notes:

1. Qualified Nurses includes midwives, district nurses, health visitors, community psychiatric nurses, school nurses and other qualified nurses.
2. The figures exclude nurse bank staff and student nurses.
3. WTE = whole time equivalent of staff. The whole time equivalent of staff is calculated by aggregating the total number of hours that staff in a grade are contracted to work, and dividing by the standard hours for that grade. In this way, part-time staff are converted into an equivalent number of 'whole-time' staff.

Education Programme

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration he has given to (i) the delivery of the Human Papilloma Virus immunization programme through second level education; and (ii) the need for an education programme on cervical cancer and immunization. (AQW 3252/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has convened a working group, led by a senior medical officer to plan the implementation of the HPV immunisation programme. One of the first tasks of the group is to consider the feasibility of delivering this as a school-based programme, as recommended by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. My Department will make a decision on this in the near future.

The working group is also considering education and training on cervical cancer and immunisation as part of the planning for the HPV programme, as I want to achieve the highest possible uptake rate for this immunisation among the young girls we are targeting. Communication and information will be an integral part of the programme.

Sexual Health Services

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration he has

given to the range of conditions caused by the Human Papilloma Virus, in addition to cervical cancer, and the pressure they place on sexual health services; and what assurance he can give that full consideration will be given to these conditions when deciding on a preferred vaccine. (AQW 3253/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The human papilloma viruses (HPVs) are a group of more than 100 different types of virus. They are given numbers to distinguish them. HPVs can be transmitted through intimate contact, including sexual intercourse. I am aware that HPV 6 and HPV 11 can cause genital warts. These two are sometimes referred to as 'low risk' because they are not associated with cervical cancer. However some types of HPV can increase the risk of developing cervical cancer particularly numbers 16 and 18, and the primary objective of the HPV programme is to reduce the incidence of cervical cancer in women which claims 30-40 lives each year in Northern Ireland.

The two vaccines licensed and available in the UK are

- Cervarix, which covers Types 16, 18, and
- Gardasil, which covers Types 16, 18, 6, 11

The decision on which of these vaccines to use will be made using a single, national competitive tendering process. The overriding factor in choosing a vaccine will be value for money. The tender documents will be issued in the next few weeks and a final decision will be taken as soon as possible so that the chosen supplier can produce the necessary amount of the vaccine in time for the launch of the programme in autumn this year.

Immunisation Programme

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give a timescale within which he intends to implement the Human Papilloma Virus Immunization programme; and to outline what plans he has to implement a catch-up programme. (AQW 3254/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: At the moment the HPV routine programme will be implemented in the autumn of this year for girls aged 12/13.

The catch-up programme for older girls up to the age of 18 will begin in the autumn of 2009 in line with plans in England and Wales.

Immunisation Programme

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the vaccines that are being considered to deliver the Human Papilloma

Virus Immunization programme; and to give a timescale within which a decision is likely to be made on the vaccine to be used. (AQW 3255/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The two vaccines that are being considered to deliver the Human Papilloma Virus Immunisation programme are Gardasil and Cervarix, both of which are licensed and protect against HPV Types 16 and 18, which cause 70% of cervical cancer cases.

The decision on which of these vaccines to use will be made using a single, national competitive tendering process. The overriding factor in choosing a vaccine will be value for money. The tender documents will be issued in the next few weeks and a final decision will be taken as soon as possible so that the chosen supplier can produce the necessary amount of the vaccine in time for the launch of the programme in autumn this year.

Minor Injuries Unit

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his plans for the future of the Ards and Bangor Minor Injuries Units. (AQW 3256/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: All Departments must achieve 3% efficiency targets per annum across the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) period in line with Executive agreement. For DHSSPS this amounts to £118/£233/£344m expressed cumulatively and therefore all services and all provision must be kept under review.

Trusts must achieve 3% per annum efficiency savings and so I have asked all Trusts to give me their proposals on how CSR efficiencies should be delivered. In developing their proposals, I have specifically asked for efficiencies, not cuts, and that the implications for staff and patients are fully explained. I have not yet received fully worked up proposals from Trusts and I will not be making decisions on Trust efficiency proposals until all the implications are clearly established.

Several members of the Assembly have been strongly advocating efficiencies. It is incumbent on us to take the opportunity now to look across the new Trusts and to reshape services where they can be provided more efficiently and effectively. Where monies are freed up, we will invest them into new service developments for the benefit of patients and clients across Northern Ireland.

Clostridium Difficile

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the handling of the recent outbreak of clostridium

difficile by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust; and to detail the reasons for the delay of six months, in which 16 associated deaths occurred, in informing the public of the situation. (AQW 3257/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have asked the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) to carry out an independent review on the Northern Trust outbreak as soon as it has been contained. In the meantime the Trust has put in place a robust action plan which includes: revising their antibiotic policy; isolation or cohorting of infected patients, reinforced strict implementation of infection control practices and an enhanced environmental cleaning regime. The RQIA review will consider all aspects of the management of the outbreak including whether the public should have been informed earlier.

Helicopter Pad

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not he plans to install a helicopter pad at the Ulster Hospital. (AQW 3269/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust are not planning to install a helicopter pad within the redevelopment of the Ulster Hospital.

The original helipad cannot be utilised because of on-going major capital works.

Alternative arrangements have been made in consultation with the Ministry of Defence to utilise the adjacent Tor Bank School grounds in the case of an emergency.

Meetings with MEPs

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of meetings he has had with each of the 3 MEPs from Northern Ireland; and (ii) the purpose of these meetings, since the restoration of devolution in May 2007. (AQW 3281/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can advise that from taking up office on 8 May 2007 I have not held any meetings with any of the MEPs, nor have I received any requests for meetings from any of them.

Care Services

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (i) community nurses; and (ii) lone workers, who provide

health and social care services in North Belfast.

(AQW 3283/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information is not available in respect of community nurses in the form requested and (ii) lone worker status of employees is not routinely recorded on trust information systems and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Figures for nurses who can be identified as working in the community, within the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust as a whole, are provided in the table below.

Staff Group	Headcount	WTE
District nurse	249	212.02
Health visitor	163	135.48
Community midwife	33	25.35
Community psychiatric nurse	17	15.6
Community learning disability nurse	36	35.26
Community mental health nurse	143	137.85
Community paediatric nurse	13	11.26
School nurse	56	42.15
Community treatment room/practice nurse	36	18.73
Community nurse	32	26.75
Total	778	660.45

Source: Belfast Health & Social Care Trust.

Table Notes:

1. The figures above include bank staff that cover for staffing shortfalls and fluctuating workloads.
2. WTE = whole time equivalent of staff. The whole time equivalent of staff is calculated by aggregating the total number of hours that staff in a grade are contracted to work, and dividing by the standard hours for that grade. In this way, part-time staff are converted into an equivalent number of 'whole-time' staff.

Caesarean Sections

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of caesarean sections that were performed in each maternity unit; and to outline how this compares with (i) Great Britain; and (ii) the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 3285/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below sets out the number of caesarean sections that were performed in each hospital in Northern Ireland in the Financial Year 2006/2007, the latest year for which information is available.

Hospital	Number of Caesarean Sections
Altnagelvin	553
Antrim	798
Causeway	254
Craigavon Area	1,140
Daisy Hill	586
Erne	240
Lagan Valley	176
Mater	316
Mid-Ulster	83
Royal Jubilee Maternity Service	1,849
Ulster	619
Northern Ireland	6,614

Source: Child Health System

Direct comparisons between this data and data for Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland cannot be made due to the lack of directly comparable and up-to-date published data for England, Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland.

However, data is available for the financial year 2005-06 for England and Scotland and for the calendar year 2004 for Wales and the Republic of Ireland. The table below provides the proportion of all births that were delivered by caesarean section in Northern Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland for the latest year available.

Country (Year)	Percentage of all Births delivered by Caesarean section
Northern Ireland (2006/2007)	28%
England (2005/2006)	23%
Scotland (2005/2006)	25%
Wales (2004)	25%
Republic of Ireland (2004)	24%

Tonsil Extractions

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average length of time children are waiting for tonsil extractions, in each of the last 3 years, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 3300/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is not possible to provide the average length of time children are waiting for tonsil extractions, in each of the last three years, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust area.

However, it is possible to detail the average length of time that children aged 16 years and under were waiting for inpatient admission for an intended primary procedure of excision of tonsil. The table below provides this information as at 30th September 2007, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust area.

Health and Social Care Trust Area	Average length of time in days waiting at 30th September 2007
Belfast	71
Northern	40
Southern	65
South Eastern	56
Western	92
Northern Ireland	70

Source: DHSSPSNI – Inpatient Waiting List September 2007

Tonsil Extractions

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of children who had tonsil extractions carried out in the Royal Victoria Hospital in each of the last 3 years; and (ii) the number of these children who were from the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 3301/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of tonsil extractions carried out on children aged 16 and under in the Royal Victoria Hospital and the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children in each of the last three years is shown below:

Year	Number of operations
2004/2005	456
2005/2006	379
2006/2007	456

None of these procedures were carried out on children who were from the Republic of Ireland.

It is possible that some people normally resident in the Republic of Ireland gave addresses in Northern Ireland when seeking treatment at hospitals in Northern Ireland.

Out-of-Hours Service

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide details of the consultation process carried out by the Western Health and Social Services Board in relation to the decision to move the out-of-hours service to Altnagelvin Hospital. (AQW 3314/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The co-location of out-of-hours services to the Altnagelvin site was part of a discussion document issued to over 600 community groups by the Western Health and Social Services Board in May 2004.

The consultation process on this document also included press releases, radio interviews and 10 public meetings (organised in conjunction with the Western Health and Social Services Council and Community Networks), as well as meetings with a range of interested parties including GPs, Health and Social Services Trusts and Derry City Council. Further discussions also took place with local politicians and councillors who made representations to WHSSB.

9,815 patients contacted the out-of-hours services in the Londonderry centre during the period October to December 2007 (2,851 in October, 2,960 in November and 4,004 in December). Of those 9,815 patients, 4,590 were asked to attend the out-of-hours centre and 348 were subsequently admitted to Altnagelvin Hospital as an immediate response to their attendance.

In addition, it should be noted that 753 patients were advised to attend Accident & Emergency at Altnagelvin Hospital, rather than the Londonderry centre, following telephone triage by the out-of-hours services, with a further 143 being advised to attend a specific hospital ward (also following telephone triage).

In 2006/07, the last full financial year, the cost of providing out-of-hours Services at the Londonderry centre was £1.6 million. The projected budget for 2008/09, the first full financial year at the Altnagelvin Hospital site, will be the cost of the service in 2006/07 uplifted for inflation plus anticipated moving expenses of £30,000.

Out-of-Hours Service

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients who (a) used the out-of-hours service in Derry/Londonderry; and (b) were admitted to hospital as an immediate response to their attendance, in (i) October; (ii) November; and (iii) December, in 2007. (AQW 3317/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The co-location of out-of-hours services to the Altnagelvin site was part of a discussion document issued to over 600 community groups by the Western Health and Social Services Board in May 2004.

The consultation process on this document also included press releases, radio interviews and 10 public meetings (organised in conjunction with the Western

Health and Social Services Council and Community Networks), as well as meetings with a range of interested parties including GPs, Health and Social Services Trusts and Derry City Council. Further discussions also took place with local politicians and councillors who made representations to WHSSB.

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Out-of-Hours Service

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the cost of the out-of-hours service in Derry/Londonderry in the last full financial year; and (ii) the projected budget for the first financial year, and any associated costings, in relation to the proposed move of the service to Altnagelvin Hospital. (AQW 3318/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The co-location of out-of-hours services to the Altnagelvin site was part of a discussion document issued to over 600 community groups by the Western Health and Social Services Board in May 2004.

The consultation process on this document also included press releases, radio interviews and 10 public meetings (organised in conjunction with the Western Health and Social Services Council and Community Networks), as well as meetings with a range of interested parties including GPs, Health and Social Services Trusts and Derry City Council. Further discussions also took place with local politicians and councillors who made representations to WHSSB.

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In 2006/07, the last full financial year, the cost of providing out-of-hours Services at the Londonderry centre was £1.6 million. The projected budget for 2008/09, the first full financial year at the Altnagelvin Hospital site, will be the cost of the service in 2006/07 uplifted for inflation plus anticipated moving expenses of £30,000.

Erne Hospital

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) what action he intends to take to prevent a recurrence of the back up of raw sewage into the medical ward at the Erne Hospital, which occurred on Monday 21 January 2008 as a result of heavy rainfall; and (ii) the implications these measures will have for infection control at the hospital.

(AQW 3323/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can confirm that a sewage overflow from a shower drain occurred at 2.00am on the 22nd January 2008 in medical ward 10 which is located on the second floor of the Erne Hospital Medical Rehabilitation Unit. The cause of this overflow was entirely unrelated to the heavy rainfall at that time.

Rather, it occurred as a result of inappropriate materials being disposed off via sluice sinks into the sewer system. This resulted in blockages in the pipework and the subsequent overflow through a shower drain.

The main sewer was cleared and the overflow was completely cleaned up by 6.00am on the same morning (ie 22nd January 2008). Nursing staff have been made aware of the cause of the incident and have been instructed to dispose of bulky materials in the appropriate manner.

Tyrone County Hospital

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not the medical wards at Tyrone County Hospital will

remain open until the new hospital is built.

(AQW 3326/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can confirm that we plan to retain the medical wards at Tyrone County Hospital until the enhanced local hospital in Omagh is built.

Erne Hospital

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the proposed expenditure on the refurbishment of the two theatres at the Erne Hospital.

(AQW 3329/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has given approval for £800,000 for the refurbishment of the two theatres at the Erne Hospital. The works to the Theatre Suite commenced on 10th December 2007 and practical completion is expected in May 2008.

New Acute Hospital

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the ongoing work at the new acute hospital in Enniskillen, and to confirm (i) whether or not the project is currently within budget and on target for the completion date; and (ii) whether or not any extra expenditure has been incurred to date, in securing stable foundations.

(AQW 3330/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Enabling Works Contract, for the New Acute Hospital in Enniskillen, is currently ongoing to prepare the site for the main hospital construction contract. The work involves re-levelling the contours of the site, diverting overhead electricity cables and establishing an entrance to the site from the main A32 Enniskillen to Irvinestown road.

The Project is currently within budget and on target for its programmed completion in April 2008.

The scope of the project does not include securing foundations but a landslip occurred on site on 13 September during a filling and levelling exercise. There has been no additional expenditure to date. However the future cost of rectification of the landslip damage will involve additional expense which will be addressed through the contract insurances in the first instance.

Eating Disorder Unit

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the

progress of plans to establish a 4-bed eating disorder unit. (AQW 3338/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As previously planned and following the allocation of additional funding my Department will now be engaging with Commissioners and Service Providers to develop a 4 bedded eating disorder unit as an initial step towards establishing a full in-patient eating disorder service for people with a severe eating disorder.

Eating Disorders

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current health care provision available to adolescents who are suffering from an eating disorder. (AQW 3339/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Services for adolescents who are suffering from an eating disorder are currently provided through Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. In 2007/08 an additional £0.5m was provided to enhance children and adolescent mental health services with eating disorder staff.

Vioxx Drug

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment he has made of the campaign launched by people affected by the withdrawn arthritis drug, Vioxx. (AQW 3340/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am aware that patients in the UK who have taken the drug Vioxx are challenging the decision by the American manufacturer Merck Inc to only compensate US patients affected by the drug.

I will monitor the situation in respect of UK citizens obtaining compensation from the manufacturer; however, I hope you will agree that it would not be appropriate for me or my Department to comment on a case which may end in the courts and subsequent litigation.

Clostridium Difficile Infections

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the protocols in place to manage clostridium difficile infections. (AQW 3366/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On 12 April 2007, the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Nursing Officer issued a letter headed 'the prevention of infection caused by Clostridium difficile' to all Trust Chief Executives;

Infection Prevention and Control Leads in the Trusts; Trust Medical Directors; Trust Nursing Directors, for dissemination to all nurses; Consultant Microbiologists; Infection Control Nurses; Regional Epidemiologists at CDSC (NI); Consultants in Communicable Disease Control in the HSS Boards and Directors of Public Health in the HSS Boards. This letter is available at www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/phhss_md_9-2007.pdf and was accompanied by a Good Practice Guide to Control of Clostridium difficile. The letter emphasises the need for Trust policies to cover:

- antibiotic prescribing policies to minimise the use of broad spectrum antibiotics;
- clinical protocols for the prompt diagnosis of infection caused by clostridium difficile in patients with diarrhea;
- isolation or cohorting of cases of infection caused by clostridium difficile and control of the movement of infected patients between wards and departments;
- enhanced infection control procedures for the nursing care of patients with infection caused by clostridium difficile, including emphasis on the need for handwashing after patient contact or handling bedpans etc;
- cleaning protocols which include increased environmental cleaning and the use of disinfectants e.g. chlorine-based in areas where there are clostridium difficile infected patients.

The Chief Medical Officer issued a further letter on 24 January 2008, in response to the increase in cases at Antrim Area Hospital, reminding clinicians of the need for heightened awareness of this condition; for policies and procedures to be in place to minimise the risk of infection caused by Clostridium difficile, and for management of cases. This letter is available at www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/hss-md-2008.pdf

Clostridium Difficile Infections

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the protocols in place at each Health and Social Care Trust in relation to the use of Broad-Spectrum Antibiotics, which can increase the incidence of clostridium difficile.

(AQW 3367/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On 25 January, I announced that an additional £9 million will be invested over the next three years in a bid to improve patient safety and, in particular, to reduce the spread of infections such as MRSA and clostridium difficile. Among the new initiatives that I have announced, there will be funding for a pharmacist in each Trust area to promote safer prescribing of antibiotics.

In addition, antibiotic prescribing policies specifically related to reducing the incidence and severity of *Clostridium difficile* infections will be made available to all prescribers.

These policies will include restrictions to the availability for use of some antibiotics, and a Consultant's approval will be required before these antibiotics will be released from Trust pharmacy departments. Certain acute infections will be exempted from this restriction.

The policies will be aimed at promoting appropriate antibiotic use, in particular by ensuring adherence to the following principles:

- they should only be prescribed when there is real evidence of need;
- the most appropriate type of antibiotic is selected to manage the patient's diagnosis, and
- they should be reviewed frequently (daily) and discontinued when no longer necessary.

Protocols in place at each Trust

The following protocols are in place in the Trusts.

Belfast Trust

General and specialist antimicrobial guidelines are available throughout the Belfast Trust. For example in the Belfast City Hospital, Empirical Antimicrobial Prescribing Recommendations have been disseminated to the medical staff. These specifically discourage the inappropriate use of the broad spectrum antibiotics known as the cephalosporins and quinolones, in order to contain the incidence of multi-resistant pathogens including *C. difficile*. Similar protocols are in place across the whole Belfast Trust, although different departments need to tailor their protocols to suit their own particular issues.

The Trust has established an antimicrobial resistance working group.

Southern Trust

The Southern Trust has comprehensive hospital and community antibiotic prescribing policies which focus on prescribing appropriate narrow spectrum antibiotics. These are updated and published regularly on the Trust intranet site and printed copies are available in each ward and department and distributed to all medical staff.

The Trust has developed a very restricted policy which is intended to further reduce the use of broad spectrum antibiotics and will be piloted in two wards from February 2008. Implementation of this policy will be monitored by the ward multidisciplinary team which includes ward medical staff, the microbiologist and pharmacist.

Education in relation to antibiotic prescribing is ongoing in the Trust and with General Practitioners in the Southern Trust area.

South Eastern Trust

In the South Eastern Trust an antimicrobial policy is in use which was developed in collaboration with the Craigavon Microbiologist. This includes a policy restricting the use of broad spectrum antibiotics to Consultant prescribing only (under Microbiologist advice) and is operational for a number of antimicrobial agents. Furthermore there is a policy for the controlled entry of new drugs into the Trust which includes new antibiotics. The current antimicrobial policy will be subject to review by the recently appointed Consultant Medical Microbiologist.

Western Trust

In the Western Trust Secondary Care Antimicrobial Guidelines were updated in December 2007. Copies of these guidelines are readily available for all prescribers. Training and awareness sessions on antibiotic prescribing are delivered to doctors. Pro-active antibiotic usage reviews are ongoing and are on the agenda of the Trust's Drugs and Therapeutics Committee. Targeted training sessions are delivered to doctors on antibiotic prescribing for specific infections, e.g. treatment of respiratory infections.

Northern Trust

In the Northern Trust locally tailored antimicrobial guidelines for secondary care have been in place since 1996. In 2000, in recognition of the contribution of second-, third- and fourth-generation cephalosporins to the development of *Clostridium difficile* Associated Diarrhoea, the United Hospitals Trust restricted the use of these agents, and formal antimicrobial guidance was put in place for Primary Care, Secondary Care and for Emergency Services for both Primary and Secondary Care. The antimicrobial guidance has been updated on a regular basis with respect to the results of local antimicrobial susceptibility patterns. In response to the current problem, the antimicrobial guidance has been reviewed and the use of Ciprofloxacin has been restricted. The newer fluoroquinolones have never been included in any of these policies.

The antimicrobial guidance is available in hard copy in the hospital wards and clinical areas, and on the desktop icons on PCs in the wards and clinical areas. Personal copies have been distributed to individual clinical staff. The Primary Care guidance is available on the Intranet and on the Northern Board Family Practitioner Unit Website. There have been regular audits on the use of antibiotics. The antibiotic prescriptions within the hospitals are subject to Consultant review at 72 hours and 7-10 days; should prolonged antimicrobial therapy be required the antibiotic prescription is subject to weekly Consultant

review. This process is monitored on a daily basis by the ward pharmacist, and formally audited.

Clostridium Difficile

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what actions he has taken to reassure the public, following the increasing numbers of cases of a more virulent form of Clostridium Difficile. (AQW 3368/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On 25 January 2008, I announced that I would be investing an additional £9 million over the next three years to improve patient safety and, in particular to reduce the spread of infections such as MRSA and Clostridium difficile. This additional funding will be used to put in place an extensive package of further measures aimed at fighting healthcare-associated infections, including: single rooms for new hospitals to improve privacy as well as hygiene; unannounced inspections of all hospitals; a regional dress code for all health care staff; a regional hand hygiene campaign; rapid response cleaning teams at all hospitals; funding for a pharmacist in each Trust to promote safer prescribing of antibiotics; and quarterly publication of Trusts' infection control performance.

I have also asked the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority, once the outbreak is over, to review the circumstances that led to the incident in Antrim Area Hospital, and make recommendations to the Trust and to the wider Health and Social Care family.

I believe that the measures that I have outlined, along with those already in places, will help to restore public confidence in our hospitals.

Mental-Health Issues

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cooperation taking place with other Government departments on mental health issues. (AQW 3381/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have established a Ministerial Group to oversee and drive forward the broad strategic changes required across Government and ensure that issues which require inter-Departmental co-operation are taken forward in a co-ordinated and consistent manner.

In addition, an Inter-Departmental Implementation Group, with similar representation at official level, has been established, chaired by a senior official in my Department.

These groups will be supplemented by a multi-tiered management structure within the health and social services itself, which will be representative of the strategic policy and commissioning process, those who deliver services in the Boards and Trusts and other stakeholders.

Hospital Accessibility

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the outcome of his discussions with the Minister for Regional Development in relation to accessibility for new hospitals in the South West. (AQW 3427/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On 4 December 2007 I met with the Minister for Regional Development to discuss access to the new acute hospital for the southwest. We had a constructive meeting during which we shared information on the planned hospital developments in Omagh and Enniskillen, and proposed improvements to the road infrastructure in West Tyrone and Fermanagh.

The Minister for Regional Development fully appreciates the benefits which road improvements could bring for those accessing services at the two new hospitals in the southwest.

Hospital Accessibility

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the discussions he has had with his Executive colleagues in relation to accessibility to a new South West acute hospital in Enniskillen. (AQW 3428/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The issue of accessibility has not been formally discussed with the current Executive. However, I have had a very constructive meeting with the Minister for Regional Development during which we discussed our respective plans for the development of a new acute hospital at Enniskillen and improvements in the road infrastructure in West Tyrone and Fermanagh.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Road Projects

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Regional Development to list the road projects in the Strangford constituency that have been (i) delayed; (ii) postponed; and (iii) cancelled, due to budget cuts. (AQW 2967/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I would advise that there have been no cuts in the budgets for road schemes planned to be undertaken in the Strangford Constituency during the current financial year.

Private Finance

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Regional Development to (i) detail the amount of private finance agreed for roads in the Strangford constituency; (ii) name the projects identified; and (iii) detail their start and completion dates, over the next five years.
(AQW 2968/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In response to AQW 2968/08, I can advise you that private finance for roads falls into two main categories:

1. Private Developments

New roads and enhancement of the existing road infrastructure may be provided by the private sector when they form part of private sector developments. For example, in addition to the provision of roads in new housing developments, it is sometimes necessary to alter, or enhance the existing road network, as a result of housing proposals. This work is usually carried out directly by the developers and to a timescale that is dependent on the actual development. Where appropriate, direct private finance for road provision can be agreed between Roads Service and developers, where it has also been a requirement that the provision is necessary as a result of a development proposal.

Within the Strangford constituency it is expected that many new roads, and alterations to the existing network, will be made over the next five years, as a direct result of proposed developments. The timing of this work will be entirely dependent on the private sector developers and no timescale can be given for it at this stage.

2. Roads Service Projects with Developer Contributions

You will be aware of the private sector involvement in the provision of the A20 Southern Distributor, a proposed road linking the Portaferry Road with the Comber Road and Blair Mayne Road South.

This scheme, which is being partly funded by Castlebawn Ltd, is currently progressing towards award of the contract.

As the level of developer contribution will be dependent on the contract price, I trust you will appreciate that I am not in a position to provide you with details of the level of funding, as requested. However, I am pleased to inform you that it is anticipated

that the scheme will commence in March 2008, with completion in approximately 12 months.

Crash Barriers

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm whether or not Roads Service will erect crash barriers on the Ballyeamon Road, Cushendall, following a recent fatal accident along this route.
(AQW 3011/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has carried out an initial survey of Ballyeamon Road, Cushendall and has identified a number of locations for further, more detailed, investigations to determine what safety measures, which will be designed in accordance with current standards, are appropriate for each location. The outcome of these detailed investigations will determine the feasibility of erecting road restraint systems on Ballyeamon Road.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail whether or not a cost benefit analysis was carried out before a private sector firm was used to rebrand the Water Service to Northern Ireland Water.
(AQW 3058/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that a rigorous procurement procedure was followed prior to the engagement of external consultants to support the project to rebrand the Water Service. This procedure included an evaluation of the estimated costs of the work against the anticipated benefits associated with creating a new brand for the company. It also took into account an assessment of the in-house availability of the specialist skills required to progress the project successfully.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what efforts were made by his department to establish an 'in house' committee to carry out the rebranding of the Water Service to Northern Ireland Water.
(AQW 3061/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that an in-house Committee was established to manage the project associated with the rebranding of the Water Service. Following a careful assessment of the requirements of the project, it was considered that the specialist knowledge and skills required to progress

the project successfully would not be available in-house. NIW therefore arranged for the engagement of consultants to undertake external brand research, design and development to support the project.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Regional Development, in relation to the pay and grading review of Northern Ireland Water, to detail why (i) executive staff were benchmarked against the salary levels of UK water companies; and (ii) all other staff were benchmarked against the top 100 companies in Northern Ireland. (AQW 3074/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the salary review for its Director posts, and some specific lower grade posts where specialist knowledge could potentially be sourced only from outside the North of Ireland, was benchmarked against the Utility Regulator in Britain. This was in line with attracting and retaining the commensurate executive skills to deliver the NIW organisational strategy. The salary review also took cognisance of the North's remuneration trends and data.

The remainder of staff within NIW were benchmarked against the North of Ireland's top 100 companies as it was recognised that these roles were typically recruited exclusively from the marketplace here.

NIW is satisfied that the methodology used to carry out these job evaluation and pay reviews was the most appropriate in terms of delivering value for money and recruiting and retaining a suitably skilled and motivated workforce.

Northern Ireland Water

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) all of the consultancy firms engaged by the Water Service in the rebranding exercise which created Northern Ireland Water; (ii) the specific work carried out by the consultants; and (iii) the costs for that work; and to confirm whether or not the work carried out by consultants was put out to tender before the consultants were appointed. (AQW 3076/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that two consultancy firms, Weber Shanwick and Being, were engaged by Water Service to support the rebranding exercise.

Weber Shandwick provided specialist brand and design consultancy together with implementation support in preparation for the inception of Northern Ireland Water. Being provided the expertise required

to create new and expanded intranet and internet websites for the company, including a user friendly bill payment facility for customers.

The work undertaken by Weber Shanwick cost £146,000 and the work by Being cost £75,000. Both consultants were engaged by Water Service through a rigorous procurement procedure which included a competitive tender and a selection process which took into account quality and price.

Disabled Parking

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of parking bays for disabled drivers that are in place in Armagh City; and to confirm whether or not his department will consider increasing this number. (AQW 3090/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: There are currently 31 on-street disabled persons parking bays, of which 7 are located in the city centre area with a further 22 places located in the off-street car parks. I am pleased to advise that my Department's Roads Service intends to increase the number of on-street disabled parking bays in the city centre area to 20.

This increase will be subject to the satisfactory completion of a Disabled Persons Parking Places Order and will be implemented as part of the upcoming Environmental Improvement scheme for the city. The aim is to provide at least one disabled parking bay per street thus improving accessibility in the city centre.

I would also confirm that requests for individual bays in the Armagh area as a whole will continue to be assessed as they are received.

Road Gritting

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm whether or not he will undertake a comprehensive review of road gritting criteria, particularly in relation to rural roads. (AQW 3091/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: You will be aware that a review of the winter service policy and procedures operated by my Department's Roads Service was carried out in 2001, following severe snow falls.

One of the key outcomes of the review, which was fully debated and accepted by the Assembly, was that the practice of targeting the limited resources available for this service on the busier main through routes should continue. Whilst I understand your concerns, there is a fine balance to be drawn between putting even more funds into salting and funding the many

other worthwhile demands on Roads Service, many of which are also safety related.

Roads Service salts main through routes carrying more than 1,500 vehicles per day and, in exceptional circumstances, roads with difficult topography carrying between 1,000 and 1,500 vehicles per day. The application of this policy ensures that 28% of the total road network, which carries around 80% of traffic, is salted, at an annual cost of approximately £5million. An extension of the salting schedule to cover 90% or 100% of traffic volumes would increase the cost to approximately £10million or £20million per annum respectively.

Arising from the 2001 review, however, the salting schedule has been increased by about 4%. The additional routes are determined by an increased weighting for buses and small settlements containing 100 dwellings or more now have salted links to roads on the main salted network.

In addition, salt bins/grit piles are provided at various rural locations for people to use on a "self-help" basis. While I have no plans at this time to review the winter service policy, Roads Service staff will continue to respond to requests from the public for assistance.

Speed Limits

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will consider reducing speed limits on rural roads, particularly single track roads.
(AQW 3093/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have no plans to reduce speed limits, generally, on rural roads.

I fully accept that driving at excessive speed, without regard to the pertaining conditions, is a major contributory factor in many deaths and serious injuries on our roads. However, whilst speed limits, in themselves, are a key source of information to road users and have a fundamental role to play in the overall approach to speed management, clearly influencing driver behaviour is key to reducing speed related collisions.

The national speed limit on single carriageway roads is 60mph (unless signed otherwise). This should not, however, be seen as a target speed and drivers should always drive according to the conditions. In fact, the geometric characteristics of many rural roads, particularly single track roads, mean that much slower speeds are clearly more appropriate. The Department of the Environment's advertising campaigns aim to get this message across to the travelling public.

My Department's Roads Service constantly examines the collision history of the road network to target appropriate engineering measures to stretches of road

with poor collision history. In cases where excessive speed has been identified, reducing speed limits is an option. However, signing and lining and the improvement of road layout and geometry can be equally effective.

Enforcement too has its part to play and PSNI robustly enforces speed limits on stretches of road where there is a correlation between speeding and collisions.

You will be aware that my Department has carried out a review of its approach to speed management and that this is currently with the Regional Development Committee for scrutiny. I look forward to hearing the Committee's views in due course.

Road Works

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the programme of works scheduled to take place on Belfast Road, Glenavy, to alleviate the flooding that occurs at this location; and to provide a timescale within which work will commence.

(AQW 3119/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the flooding on the Belfast Road, Glenavy, was caused by a blockage in an outlet pipe that discharged into a nearby river. Remedial work was carried out on 15 January 2008, to remove the blockage and the drainage system was considered to be operating normally.

I understand that during the recent periods of heavy rainfall, local officials found the drainage system to be working satisfactorily and there have been no further reports of flooding at this site. It is hoped that the matter is now resolved, however, officials will continue to monitor the site and consider if further action is needed.

Rural Footpaths

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the criteria for re-instating and upgrading footpaths in rural areas.
(AQW 3131/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Article 8 of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 places a duty on my Department's Roads Service to maintain all public roads in reasonable condition. To comply with this obligation, Roads Service has in place a set of maintenance standards, which establish the frequencies for road inspections dependent on traffic volumes, and specify response times for the repair of defects.

Inspection frequencies vary from daily cycles for motorways, to four-monthly cycles for carriageways

and footways carrying low volumes of traffic. Response times specified for the repair of defects are dependent on the severity of the defect and range from one calendar day, to the inclusion of the defect in the next work programme for that particular route.

In addition to response maintenance, Roads Service also implements a programme of planned maintenance on its existing rural and urban footway networks to ensure that these assets remain safe and serviceable to road users. Priorities are assessed on the basis of information obtained from condition surveys, other works programmes and professional engineering assessments and programmes are subsequently presented by Roads Service to the various District Councils at their Spring/Autumn meetings.

Hospitality Expenditure

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the department's total expenditure on hospitality and entertainment, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3138/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The following table sets out the amounts spent by the Department for Regional Development on hospitality in each of the last 5 years. There was no expenditure on entertainment.

Financial Year	Amount Spent on Hospitality
2002/03	£39,077
2003/04	£19,279
2004/05	£21,206
2005/06	£22,701
2006/07	£16,596

Drainage Area Study

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail a timescale for the commissioning, implementation and completion of the drainage area study for Comber. (AQW 3153/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that a combined Drainage Area Study for Comber and Newtownards is currently underway and is scheduled for completion in mid 2008. The Study aims to identify deficiencies within the sewerage system and to make recommendations for sewer improvements.

The sewer improvement recommendations resulting from the Study will be prioritised by Northern Ireland

Water and included in its capital works programme for the period beyond 2010.

Public Transport Infrastructure

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the whether or not he plans to develop the public transport infrastructure system (i) within the Colin area of West Belfast; and (ii) between the Colin area and Lisburn. (AQW 3166/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been informed by Translink that it has worked with the Colin Neighbourhood Partnership to develop a comprehensive action plan relating to public transport provision. The issues identified in that action plan were considered during the introduction of the Metro network in February 2005, which resulted in enhanced frequencies and the introduction of services connecting various estates, schools and community facilities. At that time improved timetable information was also provided at all bus stops in the area. I understand that recently a dedicated sub-group (on which Translink is represented) has been set up and is currently developing and assessing proposals for further improved links in the Colin area.

The Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (2015) identified the following public transportation infrastructure proposals which will be available to the residents of the Colin area (Twinbrook, Poleglass and Lagmore) in west Belfast:

- Quality Bus Corridors on the Falls Road, Springfield Road and Lisburn Road and the introduction of orbital bus routes;
- additional bus priority on other routes, including the M1 motorway; and
- park and ride facilities on the M1 corridor at Kennedy Way.

Since 2002, Roads Service has also completed work on public transport infrastructure in the west Belfast area, including 4.4km of priority lanes for buses, public hire taxis and cyclists, on the Andersonstown Road / Falls Road and the provision of 220 park and ride spaces at Blacks Road.

Feasibility studies for the development of a Rapid Transit Network for Belfast are nearing completion and include potential routes from Belfast City Centre into West Belfast. A number of differing alignments are being studied for a route in West Belfast including one along the Falls Road, Andersonstown Road, Stewartstown Road terminating at either Dairy Farm or the McKinsty Road area. Following completion of the current study, I will decide on the way forward with Executive colleagues.

Rural Community Transport

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the annual funding that is being made available for each of the 19 Rural Community Transport Partnerships in (i) 2007-2008; and (ii) 2008-2009. (AQW 3179/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: During the 2007-2008 financial year the Department for Regional Development made available a total of £1,899,470.34 to the 19 rural community transport partnerships supported by the Rural Transport Fund as follows:

Partnership	2007/08
Accessible Community Transport	£77,969.00
Armagh Rural Transport	£104,043.00
Coleraine Area Rural Transport	£96,214.00
Cookstown Rural Community Transport	£111,888.00
Down Armagh Rural Transport	£86,651.00
Down Community Transport	£95,712.00
Dungannon Community Transport	£84,483.00
Easilift	£121,095.34
Fermanagh And South Tyrone Rural Transport	£103,136.00
Foyle Connect	£51,483.00
Lagan Valley Rural Transport	£52,800.00
Rural Link	£124,193.70
North Antrim Community Transport	£135,000.00
Out & About Community Transport	£121,260.00
Newry And Mourne Community Transport	£152,042.30
Peninsula Community Transport	£108,886.00
Rural Lift	£136,175.00
Roe Valley Rural Community Transport	£63,105.00
South Antrim Community Transport	£73,334.00
Total	£1,899,470.34

The total amount of support available to the partnerships in 2008-2009 will be £2,500,000. The amount to be awarded to each partnership has not been determined as the business planning process is not yet complete.

Rail Passengers

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development detail the number of rail passengers carried on the (i) Belfast to Larne line; (ii) Belfast to Derry/Londonderry line; (iii) Belfast to Bangor line;

and (iv) Belfast to Portadown line, in each of the last 5 years; and what is his assessment of the effect of the new trains on the services provided for the Derry/Londonderry, Bangor and Portadown lines. (AQW 3185/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The following table provides Northern Ireland Railways passenger numbers on the Belfast to Larne; Belfast to Derry; Belfast to Bangor; and Belfast to Portadown lines in each of the five years.

	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Larne	1,794,757	1,811,187	1,827,617	1,477,979	1,720,190
Derry	454,468	652,262	850,056	874,954	1,020,685
Bangor	1,571,457	1,544,386	1,517,315	1,860,752	1,956,801
Porta-down	1,769,503	1,855,165	1,940,826	2,171,165	2,505,059

In 2004/05 the method of counting passenger journeys changed. The 2002/03 and 2003/04 journeys are original estimates revised to be comparable with the new method.

The new trains were introduced in 2004/05 and since then passenger numbers on the Derry, Bangor and Portadown lines increased by 20%, 29% and 29% respectively to 2006/07. Local train punctuality targets have been met in the last four monitoring exercises. Current levels of passenger satisfaction with the rail service in general are at the highest levels since the mid-1990's. These improvements in passenger numbers, quality of service and customer satisfaction are a direct result of the deployment of the new trains alongside timetable development, better passenger information, increased advertising and station improvements.

The funding provided in the Budget will enable the purchase of 20 new trains, 13 of which will be used to replace the older trains currently operating on the network, including on the Larne line.

Drainage Area Plan

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to give a timescale within which Northern Ireland Water will commence a drainage area plan for Ballynahinch, which includes improvements to the sewerage system. (AQW 3211/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the Drainage Area Plan for the Ballynahinch area has identified a number of deficiencies within the sewerage system and made recommendations for sewer improvements.

Northern Ireland Water therefore plans to undertake extensive sewerage improvements in the area but, due to competing priorities, will be unable to do so within

the next three years. However, it will continue to undertake minor improvements to the sewerage system in the area in certain circumstances.

Proposed Bus Station at Ballynahinch

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail progress made towards the establishment of a bus station at Ballynahinch, Co Down. (AQW 3212/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The number of bus passengers no longer supports the construction of a full bus station in Ballynahinch. Passenger numbers in the town centre reduced substantially following the enhancement of schools bus provision. As a result Translink is now planning to provide a safe boarding and alighting area with a covered waiting area in the town.

Sewerage System

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to give a timescale within which a new sewerage system will be completed in Rasharkin, Co. Antrim. (AQW 3233/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that a major sewerage scheme for Rasharkin was scheduled to commence in December 2007, but it has been delayed pending the resolution of land issues. A revised start date for the work is now May 2008 and it is expected to take seventeen months to complete.

Roads Budget

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total roads budget for Northern Ireland, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3242/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The table below details my Department's Roads Service expenditure on developing and maintaining the road network in Northern Ireland, in each of the last 3 years.

	2004/05 £m	2005/06 £m	2006/07 £m
Total	272.5	269.3	302.4

Road Surfaces

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to give a timescale for the reinstatement of the road surfaces on (i) Edenmore Road; and (ii) Rathmore Road, Limavady. (AQW 3243/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Northern Ireland Water (NIW) commenced repair work to damaged sewers at Edenmore Road, Limavady on 14 January 2008 and has advised that the reinstatement of the road was undertaken on 1 February 2008.

NIW also advise that work being undertaken at Rathmore Road, Limavady has largely been completed and that it intends to carry out final reinstatement work within the next few weeks.

I should explain that my Department's Roads Service has powers to facilitate the co-ordination and control of utility street works. Roads Service monitors such works and, where unsatisfactory reinstatements are found, instructs utilities to carry out the necessary repairs.

Disabled Parking Bays

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the penalties that can be imposed on drivers who park inappropriately in disabled parking bays. (AQW 3244/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: A Penalty Charge Notice (PCN) can be issued by a Traffic Attendant to a vehicle, occupying a parking bay for disabled persons, if that vehicle does not display a badge issued under my Department's Blue Badge Scheme.

Where a Traffic Attendant believes there to be misuse of a blue badge, a PCN can be issued. Misuse may also lead to confiscation of the blue badge.

The PCN amount is £60, with a 50% discount applies if the charge is paid within 14 days.

Meetings with MEPs

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of meetings he has had with each of the 3 MEPs from Northern Ireland; and (ii) the purpose of these meetings, since the restoration of devolution in May 2007. (AQW 3282/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have not met with any of the 3 MEPs from the north of Ireland since the restoration of devolution in May 2007.

Kircubbin and Greyabbey

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on the scheme in relation to the area between Kircubbin and Greyabbey, where a landslide took place over the New Year period. (AQW 3295/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the landslide which resulted in soil falling onto the A20 between Greyabbey and Kircubbin is currently being assessed, with a view to determining the best option to prevent future occurrences.

Gritting of Roads

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm whether or not communication has taken place between his department and the Met Office to action the gritting of roads. (AQW 3296/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I can confirm that my Department's Roads Service is in regular communication with the Met Office, to assist in determining when road salting is appropriate. The Met Office provides a range of services for Roads Services, which include:

- the Open Road forecast service. This is a 24 hour consultation service, which Roads Service makes full use of, to identify possible hazardous road conditions; and
- the National Severe Weather Warnings system.

In addition, Met Office forecasters provide Roads Service with site-specific forecasts. To assist the planning of salting operations, Roads Service uses state of the art technology, installed in conjunction with the Met Office. This includes ice sensors linked to 20 weather stations across the North and thermal mapping of all roads on the salting schedule.

Tullynagardy Road

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the steps he is taking to address the access facility for lorries, to Cookes engineering at Tullynagardy Road, Newtownards. (AQW 3297/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service advises that Tullynagardy Road, (U105) is rural in nature. It carries low volumes of traffic, mainly to farms and individual dwellings, and there are no traffic progression problems. The road has a relatively good accident history.

Roads Service has no plans at present to upgrade the roads network in this area.

Flooding Prevention

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he is taking to have gullies cleared on a regular basis in the Ards Borough Council area in order to prevent flooding during times of heavy rainfall. (AQW 3298/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that it aims to inspect and clean, where necessary, all gullies in urban areas twice each year and gullies in rural areas once each year. This is in line with road maintenance guidelines which apply equally in all Council areas including the Ards Borough Council. This policy ensures that a reasonable level of maintenance is carried out to drainage systems, taking account of the Department's finite funding and staff resource levels.

In addition to the scheduled operation, further cleaning is carried out to deal with blocked gullies, particularly at locations where fallen leaves represent an ongoing problem at certain times of the year, or where there has been a history of gullies becoming blocked for other reasons.

Parking Spaces

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to undertake an urgent review of the number of season ticket holder parking spaces available at the two car parks in Limavady. (AQW 3307/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am pleased to inform you that my Department's Roads Service will carry out a review of the number of season tickets issued for the Connell Street and Central car parks in Limavady and will inform you of the outcome once the review is completed.

I can also advise that, although there is currently an allocation of 8 season tickets for Central car park and 6 for Connell Street, latest returns for November and December 2007 indicate that only 7 season tickets were issued for Central and 2 for Connell Street.

Mains Water Supply

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister for Regional Development what is his assessment of the current policy of not supplying mains water to a single rural dwelling, in the context of ensuring fair treatment for rural communities. (AQW 3313/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am aware of the difficulties experienced by those living in remote rural areas whose homes are not connected to mains water and have had occasion recently to respond to similar questions raised on this matter.

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 and it represents a significantly higher level of assistance than is available for rural dwellings in Great Britain. The level of this assistance is kept under review but the proposed consultation on the independent review of water and sewerage services may present an opportunity to consider this issue afresh.

Road Projects

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the road projects in the South Antrim constituency that have been (i) delayed; (ii) postponed; and (iii) cancelled, due to budget cuts. (AQW 3321/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I can advise that there has been no reduction in the budget for road schemes planned for the South Antrim Constituency during the current financial year.

My Department's Roads Service will endeavour to complete the current programme of works. However, you will appreciate that delays in the delivery of road schemes can occur if difficulties arise in connection with obtaining the necessary land. If landowners are not prepared to allow Roads Service access to the land required for the construction of schemes, vesting has to be undertaken and, provided a public enquiry is not required, this can take at least six months to complete.

Traffic Attendants

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2814/08, to detail the specific locations of the 25 mobile patrols of traffic attendants, deployed in the Moyle District Council area from 1 July 2007 to 7 January 2008. (AQW 3332/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I can confirm that the 25 Traffic Attendants, deployed as mobile patrols, have provided a total of 180 patrols in the Moyle District Council area during the period from 1 July 2007 to 7 January 2008. Their specific locations can be summarised as follows:

Ballycastle	patrolled 69 times
Bushmills	patrolled 44 times
Cushendall	patrolled 3 times
Giants Causeway	patrolled 61 times
Waterfoot	patrolled 3 times

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Disabled Facilities Grant

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm whether or not the Disabled Facilities grant for the property at 13 Lisbarnett Villas, Lisbane, will be affected by the reduction in the grants budget. (AQW 3087/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): Disabled Facilities Grants are mandatory and continue to be processed in the normal way.

Benefit Fraud

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the analysis carried out by the department on the levels of benefit fraud in different parts of Northern Ireland. (AQW 3151/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Social Security Agency undertakes a rolling programme of annual benefit review exercises to estimate the levels of incorrectness including benefit fraud. A statistically valid sample of cases across Northern Ireland is randomly selected for each benefit to be reviewed. Each case is checked and a detailed interview with the customer is carried out to detect if there is any incorrectness including fraud and the results are analysed to produce statistical estimates of the levels of incorrectness including customer fraud.

Benefit Fraud

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister for Social Development what consideration has she given to the introduction of a requirement that photographic identification, similar to that required to vote in elections, be produced by those seeking to claim benefits, in order to help reduce benefit fraud. (AQW 3188/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department has obligations under section 87 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 which provides for parity of provision in social security matters for the whole of the United Kingdom. The Department for Work and Pensions in Great Britain is presently conducting a review of its verification procedures as part of a wider Government Identity Management Strategy. The review includes consideration of future security and access parameters for an extensive range of services and is exploring optimum methods for establishing an individual's identity including photographic identification, in the framework of wider business considerations.

Any proposed changes to social security legislation regarding the use of photographic identification arising from this review would be introduced by my Department under the parity arrangements.

Social Housing

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm whether or not the proposed 5250 social housing units, scheduled to be built over the next 3 years, (i) will be of the highest sustainable design; and (ii) will consist of materials that promote zero carbon housing. (AQW 3238/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department requires that all new build schemes within the social housing development programme must make provision within the design brief for an Eco Homes rating of "very good" or better certified by a Building Research Establishment Licensed Assessor. From 1 April 2008 it will be mandatory for all new social housing dwellings to achieve a minimum three star rating in the Code for Sustainable Homes. The Code for Sustainable Homes has been developed to enable a step change in sustainable home building practice with a view to achieving a six star rating – a zero carbon home - by 2016. Under the Code for Sustainable Homes, materials and components are assessed using a methodology developed by the Building Research Establishment and are awarded a rating from A - G where 'A' denotes the lowest environmental impact and 'G' the highest environmental impact.

Fuel Costs

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the comparative fuel costs for (i) oil fired; (ii) and renewable heating systems in social housing units. (AQW 3239/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Details of the independent comparative fuel costs (sourced from the Sutherland Comparative Domestic Heating Costs Tables) which Northern Ireland Housing Executive uses for different fuels, including oil, have been placed in the Assembly Library. There are few whole house renewable heating systems in social housing units and there are, therefore, no comparative figures currently available for such systems.

New Social Housing Units

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm whether or not the proposed 5250 social housing units, to be constructed in the next 3 years, will have wood chip heating systems installed, in order to reduce carbon emissions. (AQW 3240/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The requirements set down by my Department for the social housing development programme are that new homes should achieve maximum energy efficiency, and minimal environmental impact, heat loss, and running costs. The Code for Sustainable Homes will require the consideration of the use of low and zero carbon technologies including wood chip boilers (biomass boilers) and solar thermal panels to help provide heat and hot water. Wood pellet boilers are currently being piloted on sites outside the gas supply area where the installation of oil heating is not technically possible.

Water Saving Measures

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the water saving measures she will introduce in her new build programme. (AQW 3273/08)

The Minister for Social Development: From 1 April 2008 it will be mandatory for all new social housing dwellings to achieve a minimum three star rating in the Code for Sustainable Homes. Under the three star rating of the code new homes will have to be designed to use no more than 105 litres of water per person per day.

Eco-Housing

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development to detail whether or not she will consider building eco-housing estates. (AQW 3274/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department for Social Development requires all new social houses constructed after 1 April 2008 to comply with the 3 star level of the Code for Sustainable Homes.

Double Glazing

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1530/08, what is her assessment of the importance of double glazing in combating fuel poverty. (AQW 3275/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Double glazing is just one of a number of measures which can improve the energy efficiency of a home. Insulation is a more cost effective approach to improving energy efficiency and remains a key part of the assistance available under my Department's Warm Homes Scheme.

Meetings with MEPs

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of meetings she has had with each of the 3 MEPs from Northern Ireland; and (ii) the purpose of these meetings, since the restoration of devolution in May 2007. (AQW 3280/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Since May 2007 I have met once with Jim Allister and once with Bairbre de Brun. At those meetings we discussed my Department's involvement in showcasing both urban regeneration and the successes of the Peace Programmes in Northern Ireland during the EU Open Days event in Brussels in October. We also discussed DSD's interest in the EU Northern Ireland Taskforce. I have not met with Jim Nicholson since taking office.

Social Housing

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the reason for the sale of grass land at Ballysally, Coleraine; to give a commitment to use the funds raised by the sale for social housing, in the Coleraine area only; and to detail what provision she intends to make for a replacement grass play area. (AQW 3308/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Ballysally is undergoing a major estate strategy which incorporates restructuring, selective demolition, environmental improvement and tenure mixing.

Within the plan to mix tenure there are two significant areas where houses were demolished and the land is surplus to social need - at Burn Road and

Danes Hill Road. These sites are suitable for the provision of private housing which would increase the level of owner occupation and consolidate the estate. These two sites have been advertised for sale for private housing development.

The developer will be required to provide adequate open space facilities as part of the planning process for the private housing development.

The proceeds of the sales will be treated as capital receipts by the Housing Executive and used for capital programmes. It is not possible to ring fence receipts for land in a particular area to be spent in that area.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) her department's bids in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review; and (ii) the amount of funding that has been allocated against them in the Budget 2008-11. (AQW 3363/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Tables detailing the breakdown of the Department for Social Development's Resource and Capital bids were placed in the Assembly Library on 14 November 2007 in reply to AQW 1451/08. The tables below show a summary of the bids made and the allocations given to the Department inclusive of its agencies.

SUMMARY OF RESOURCE BIDS

	08/09 £m	09/10 £m	10/11 £m	Totals £m
Housing	16.5	23.7	29.6	69.8
Urban Regeneration	6.7	7.2	5.4	19.3
Social Security Agency	50.6	39.9	46.7	137.2
Child Support Agency	0.2	1.0	8.3	9.5
Core Department	0.8	1.3	1.7	3.8
Total Bids Made	74.8	73.1	91.7	239.6
Overall Allocation from the Department of Finance & Personnel	31.7	42.0	59.9	133.6
Allocation breakdown by Business Area:				
Housing	7.9	14.8	24.2	46.9
Urban Regeneration	4.5	3.2	4.5	12.2
Social Security Agency	18.3	21.6	21.8	61.7
Child Support Agency	0.2	1.1	7.7	9.0
Core Department	0.8	1.3	1.7	3.8

SUMMARY OF NET CAPITAL BIDS

	08/09 £m	09/10 £m	10/11 £m	Totals £m
Housing	300.1	319.6	372.6	992.3
Urban Regeneration	216.6	179.6	-23.5	372.7
Social Security Agency	29.0	14.8	7.2	51.0
Total Bids Made	545.7	514.0	356.3	1416.0
Overall Allocation from the Strategic Investment Board	223.7	220.3	283.4	727.4
Allocation breakdown by Business area:				
Housing	90.6	153.8	178.0	422.4
Urban Regeneration	67.7	63.6	102.5	233.8
Social Security Agency	65.4 ¹	2.9	2.9	71.2

Note 1: The 2008-09 figure includes £41.6m reprofiled from earlier years due to slippage in Capital Programmes.

Housing Executive Properties

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people currently on the waiting list for Housing Executive properties in the (i) Cookstown District Council area; and (ii) Magherafelt District Council area. (AQW 3375/08)

The Minister for Social Development: At 31 December 2007 there were (i) 387 applicants on the waiting list for Cookstown and (ii) 488 applicants on the waiting list for Magherafelt.

Social Housing Stock

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to increase the social housing stock in the (i) Magherafelt District Council area; and (ii) Cookstown District Council area. (AQW 3376/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The current Social Housing Development Programme makes provision for 83 homes for Magherafelt (16 homes in 2009/10, 52 in 2010/11 and 15 in 2011/12) and 34 homes for Cookstown (3 homes in 2007/08, 6 in 2101/11 and 25 in 2011/12).

Travelling Community Sites

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the reasons why the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has not met its requirement, under the Unauthorised Encampment Act 2006, to act upon the six emergency travelling community sites; and to confirm (i) the interim provisions she is making

for those families living on wasteland; and (ii) that the equality and human rights of the travelling community are being protected. (AQW 3384/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Unauthorised Encampments (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 provides a measure of protection for Irish Travellers, by requiring the police to consult with the Housing Executive about a suitable alternative site. The implementation of the Order was delayed until July 2006 to ensure that the 5 Transit sites needed in Northern Ireland were available. To date only 2 of the required sites have been provided. The identification of suitable lands for the other sites remains difficult and the Housing Executive continues to seek to identify appropriate lands in consultation with local councils and the Planning Service.

The Housing Executive has completed a housing need assessment and advised the Traveller families at the unauthorised encampment at Kennedy Way Industrial Estate of accommodation options. The Housing Executive has also written to the landowner requesting permission to provide services under the terms of the Co-operation Policy which provides families with basic services, for example, toilets, refuse disposal and water where available.

Community and Voluntary sector

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the proposals she made during consideration of the (i) Programme for Government; (ii) Investment Strategy; and (iii) Budget by the Executive, on the issue of the community and voluntary sector. (AQW 3388/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Programme for Government has now been published and my Department's proposals have been included with respect to the Community and Voluntary Sector as follows:

Objective	Actions	Target
Promote a strong vibrant and sustainable voluntary and community sector to enable better delivery of services	Deliver a sustainable network of advice centre's meeting the needs of people. Establish a robust system of regulation for charities in Northern Ireland by Improve partnership and recognition across government of the role of the voluntary and community sector in government objectives support.	Implement the Advice Services Strategy by 2009. Establish a Charities Commission for Northern Ireland by the end of 2008, subject to legislation. Monitor and report on <i>Positive Steps</i> implementation by December 2008.

The Budget process involved bids for resources beyond the baseline figure of £17.795m that was initially allocated to the Voluntary and Community Unit. This figure may be subject to efficiency savings under the CSR process.

Resource bids were made in respect of the Conflict Transformation Initiative and the Capital Modernisation Fund. In terms of the capital budget, bids were made for the Modernisation fund, the Charities Commission and Areas at Risk.

Budget proposals were submitted for the Urban Regeneration and Community Development Group of £536m, the published Budget 2008-11 figure is £416m. The specific allocation of this Budget within the Department, including that for the Community and Voluntary Sector, is still to be finalised.

Housing Executive Tenants

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive tenants who have been evicted from their properties in (i) Larne; (ii) Carrickfergus; and (iii) Newtownabbey, broken down by each month, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3395/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This information is not readily available in the format requested. However the following table provides information by Housing Executive District Office, on an annual basis:

District	Evictions 2002/03	Evictions 2003/04	Evictions 2004/05	Evictions 2005/06	Evictions 2006/07
Newtownabbey 1	0	0	4	0	0
Newtownabbey 2	1	2	1	0	0
Carrickfergus	0	2	0	1	6
Larne	0	2	0	0	2

Information Technology Tutor

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Social Development whether or not she will match funding from Coleraine Borough Council to facilitate the continuation of the Information Technology tutor post at Ballysally Community Centre. (AQW 3422/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This post is fully funded through the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund until 31 March 2008 and an application for continuation funding has not been received to date. All applications for Neighbourhood Renewal funding are subject to a rigorous appraisal, to ensure that

proposals address the causes of deprivation, complement rather than duplicate an existing service, offer value for money and that there are no other more appropriate funding sources available. Where an application is received for continuation funding, an evaluation of the existing project is also necessary to ascertain to what extent it has met its aims and objectives and is continuing to address a priority need within the Neighbourhood Renewal Area. Any decision on either full or match funding would therefore be dependant on the outcome of such an appraisal and evaluation.

Increase in Economy 7 Tariff

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the impact of the 14% tariff increase in Economy 7 on low income families. (AQW 3453/08)

The Minister for Social Development: This increase has affected around 5% of households who use Economy 7 as their main form of heating. Fuel prices are already high in Northern Ireland and any increase in the costs that must be met by low income families will increase the difficulties they experience in managing their household budgets. I met Northern Ireland Electricity recently and urged them to do more to minimise the impact of this increase on the fuel poor.

Warm Homes Scheme

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development what actions will she take to address the delay in the provision of home surveys under the Warm Homes scheme. (AQW 3484/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Warm Homes Scheme has been very successful and it is now oversubscribed. I have asked officials to review the delivery of the scheme and develop a way forward which ensures that those people in greatest need get help first.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Accommodation of Assembly Staff

Mr B Wilson asked the Assembly Commission if it will give consideration, in relation to the construction of a new building to accommodate Assembly staff, to holding an international competition for the design of a carbon neutral building that meets the highest environmental and aesthetic standards. (AQW 3032/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): One of the recommendations of the Review Report on the Northern Ireland Assembly Secretariat is that the Assembly should become an exemplar organisation in respect of sustainable development and that sustainable development should be a key consideration in any new accommodation project.

The Assembly Commission is fully committed to ensuring that any proposed new building will meet the highest environmental and aesthetic standards.

Planning for the new accommodation is at a very early stage - an initial feasibility study is being carried out by Central Procurement Directorate to consider alternative sites in close proximity to Parliament Buildings.

The Commission will give consideration to holding a competition for the design of the building.

Electricity Source

Mr Beggs asked the Assembly Commission to confirm whether or not the Assembly purchases electricity from renewable sources. (AQW 3162/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): The Assembly Commission is committed to adopting a proactive approach to energy management and where possible uses renewable sources. Currently 25% of electricity supplied through one single supplier (NIE) to the Stormont Estate, which includes Parliament Buildings, is from a renewable source. This electricity supply is part of a shared service (Government contract) which is administered by Properties Division on a proportionate basis.

Furthermore, the Assembly Commission is currently undertaking an Environmental Audit to establish areas within Parliament Buildings where energy use could be minimized and options identified for alternative energy sources.

Weekly Information Bulletin

Mr Beggs asked the Assembly Commission whether or not they have any plans to end the printing of the Weekly Information Bulletin, which is available online, with the exception of requests for hard copies. (AQW 3182/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): A root and branch review of all the Assembly's printing requirements, including the Weekly Information Bulletin, will be carried out in early 2008. This will be used to inform the number and types of publications to be printed and published.

Weekly Information Bulletin

Mr Beggs asked the Assembly Commission to detail, out of the 81 pages of the Weekly Information Bulletin of Saturday 19 January, the number of pages that remained unaltered from the edition dated Saturday 12 January. (AQW 3183/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): Thirty one pages were unchanged in the Weekly Information Bulletin of 19 January 2008. The content of the Bulletin will be considered as part of the root and branch review of the Assembly's printing requirements to be carried out in early 2008.

Weekly Information Bulletin

Mr Beggs asked the Assembly Commission to detail the cost to the Assembly to print the Weekly Information Bulletin each week; and to detail the number of copies printed each week. (AQW 3184/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): The cost of printing the Weekly Information Bulletin varies depending on the content. The bulletin for 19 January 2008 cost £219.90 for 163 copies. Following a recent review of the requirements of staff for publications the number of copies of the Bulletin to be printed each week has been reduced to 157 with effect from 26 January 2008.

Internet Connection Speed

Mr McKay asked the Assembly Commission to detail whether or not action will be taken to improve the internet connection speed for computers used in the Assembly. (AQW 3232/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): 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;
- The size of any particular website's connection to the Internet.

The issue of congestion was last raised formally with the NICS, with whom the NI Assembly currently share a secure connection, at a meeting on the 14th December 2007 and they confirmed on the 4th February 2008 that the connection capacity would be tripled within the next 2 months.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 15 February 2008

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

‘The Irish Community in Britain’

Mr McElduff asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm that the report of Committee D of the British-Irish Interparliamentary Body, ‘The Irish Community in Britain’, will be tabled as an agenda item at the next meeting of the British-Irish Council; and to outline the action it will take to bring forward an action plan to implement the recommendations contained in the report.

(AQW 2421/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley and Mr M McGuinness): We understand that the report makes recommendations on matters which are the responsibility of the British and Irish Governments and these will be considered by both. It is therefore a matter for the Governments, in the first instance, to respond to the recommendations in the report.

Disability Discrimination

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide a timescale for the introduction of the Disability Discrimination (Transfer Vehicles) Regulations. (AQW 2719/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Article 7 of the Disability Discrimination (NI) Order 2006 was commenced on 31 December 2007. This Article replaces the current exemption for operators of transport services from the provisions of Part III of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 with a more precise exemption applying only to transport services relating to the provision or use of a vehicle. The commencement of Article 7 also provides us with the

powers to make Regulations to lift the exemption and consultation on the Disability Discrimination (Transport Vehicles) Regulations which will take place shortly. The consultation will seek views on proposals to lift the exemption for:

- buses and coaches
- taxis
- trains
- rental cars
- breakdown recovery vehicles

We will be writing to the OFMDFM committee shortly in relation to this.

Child Poverty

Mr Cobain asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the levels of child poverty in (i) 2005; (ii) 2006 and (iii) 2007, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 2734/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The table below shows the number of children living in households experiencing relative income poverty; that is the number of children living in households with an income that is 60% or less of the median income. It is necessary to combine three years of data in order to provide estimates of child poverty that are more robust. A single year's data would not be robust enough to provide estimates at the level of geography requested.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN RELATIVE INCOME POVERTY BEFORE HOUSING COSTS 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%

Parliamentary Constituency	Relative Poverty (BHC)	
	Number	Percentage
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 Northern Ireland (HBAI NI) 2003/2004, 2004/2005 and 2005/2006

Notes: As with any sample survey there is a degree of error attached to the estimates.

Commissioner for Victims and Survivors

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the (i) number; (ii) sex; and (iii) religious affiliation of (a) the applicants for the post of Commissioner for Victims and Survivors, following the advertisement of the position in October 2007; (b) the candidates interviewed for the post after it was advertised in October 2007; and (c) the candidates short-listed after those interviews. (AQW 2942/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Following the advertisement in October 2007, forty-two people submitted applications for the post of Commissioner for Victims and Survivors. Fourteen people were interviewed and three considered suitable for appointment. These were added to the list of five people considered suitable for appointment remaining in the pool from the first stage of the process. We do not feel it is appropriate to comment on the breakdown of sex and religious affiliation.

Commissioner for Victims and Survivors

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the (i) number; (ii) sex; and (iii) religious affiliation of the candidates that were short-listed for the post of Commissioner of Victims and Survivors, encompassing both recruitment campaigns. (AQW 2943/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Both stages of the public appointments process to appoint a Commissioner for Victims and Survivors resulted in a total of nine individuals being considered suitable for appointment. We do not feel it is appropriate to comment on the breakdown of sex and religious affiliation.

A Shared Future First Triennial Action Plan

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the current status of the document 'A Shared Future First Triennial Action Plan 2006-2009'. (AQW 3171/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are fully committed to building a shared and better future. As previously stated we will bring forward proposals for a programme of cohesion and integration for a shared and better future which will take into consideration the progress already achieved. These proposals will be brought forward to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Executive and the Assembly, prior to public consultation.

In the meantime, Departments are working within their own set of responsibilities on taking forward the good relations agenda. A wide range of programmes are ongoing, funded by OFMDFM.

Freedom of Information Requests

Mr Hamilton asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the number of Freedom of Information requests submitted to the Northern Ireland Executive by Mr Jim Allister MEP; and (ii) the cost of processing these requests, since 8 May 2007. (AQW 3246/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Mr Jim Allister MEP has submitted a total of 55 Freedom of Information requests to the Northern Ireland Departments since 8 May 2007. Information about the cost of processing these requests is not currently held since there is no satisfactory formula that facilitates the calculation of accurate figures.

Freedom of Information Requests

Mr Hamilton asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the proportion of Freedom of Information requests, submitted to the Northern Ireland Executive by elected representatives since 8 May 2007, that is accounted for by Mr Jim Allister MEP. (AQW 3247/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Freedom of Information requests submitted to the Northern Ireland Departments by Mr Jim Allister MEP account for just under half of all such requests submitted by elected representatives since 8 May 2007. Elected representatives have made 121 requests since 8 May 2007.

Planning Appeals Commission

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the recent appointments to the Planning Appeals Commission. (AQW 3450/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The Planning Appeals Commission exercises its functions independently of OFMDFM but the Department is responsible for providing the resources needed for the Commission to discharge its responsibilities. Appointments to the Commission are made by the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Five new appointments were made to the Commission at the beginning of January 2008 – 3 new entrant Commissioners, 1 Call-Off Panel Commissioner and 1 Senior Commissioner.

The additional funding allocations for PAC in the Budget 2008-2011 will enable the Chief Commissioner to fund a significant number of additional Commissioners to deploy against the backlog of planning

appeals cases. Arrangements are currently under way to deliver a competition with a view to recruiting a number of additional new commissioners and to enhance the Commission's capacity to manage and train an increased complement. This will of course be subject to the availability of suitable people from within a limited and specialised market.

Sustainable Development Strategy

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister pursuant to AQW 2962/08, to detail the measurement difficulties for each of those targets in table five of the Sustainable Development Strategy that have measurement difficulties.

(AQW 3746/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

Further to the answer provided to AQW 2962/08, this answer encloses details of the measurement difficulties associated with a small number of Sustainable Development Targets (see table 1).

TABLE 1: DETAILS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (SD) TARGETS WITH MEASUREMENT DIFFICULTIES

SD Strategy Target Number	Target	Measurement Difficulty
1	Northern Ireland economy will achieve 85% resource efficiency by 2025.	The resource efficiency indicator is prone to different definitions and interpretations of what should be in it and, as a consequence, there are potentially wide variations in the result.
10	Increase Northern Ireland's forested area by at least 500 hectares per annum in line with Northern Ireland Forestry Strategy – A Strategy for Sustainability and Growth.	At present, DARD has no means of measuring loss of woodland. Data is only available on new woodland. This target is therefore not measurable.
22	Reduce the productivity gap (1) between Northern Ireland and other UK regions; and (2) between the Northern Ireland average and the most deprived communities.	Data is not available to measure the productivity of deprived and non-deprived communities.
23	Reduce the skills gap between Northern Ireland and other UK regions and between the Northern Ireland average and the most deprived communities.	Data is not available to compare the skill levels of deprived and non-deprived communities on a regular basis.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Alpha-Nortestosterone

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of male animals that were slaughtered because of high readings of alpha-nortestosterone, in between the time it was first believed this condition to be a result of induced drugs and when it was realised that this condition was a natural reaction in male casualty animals, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 3288/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): I am unable to provide details, by parliamentary constituency, of male casualty cattle condemned due to the presence of alpha-nortestosterone, as the Department does not hold the information in that format. However, the information is available by county and this is detailed below:

County	Number of cases
Antrim	16
Armagh	31
Down	37
Derry	9

County	Number of cases
Fermanagh	7
Tyrone	56
Total	156

Between March 2006 and March 2007, 156 casualty male cattle from 139 herds were condemned due to the presence of alpha-nortestosterone. Following the initial positive in March 2006, 100% testing of such cattle was initiated from the beginning of April 2006. This was considered necessary to protect public health and to fulfil EU statutory obligations.

However, in light of Professor Wall's report which stated that the accepted scientific consensus on naturally occurring alpha-nortestosterone in male cattle needed to be reviewed and, following discussion with the relevant regulatory authorities, testing was reduced to a risk related approach based on the opinion of the Official Veterinarian at the meat plant. The revised arrangements came into operation on 28 March 2007 and no further positives have been detected since.

There is now emerging recognition within the EU that Alpha-Nortestosterone is likely to occur naturally in injured or stressed male bovines and we expect the Community Reference Laboratory (CRL) for hormones to produce a guidance paper to reflect this position in the near future.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) her Department's bids in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review; and (ii) the amount of funding that has been allocated against them in the Budget 2008-11. (AQW 3299/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The total bids in respect of Current expenditure (i.e. Resource) submitted to DFP by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review, together with Budget allocations, are set out in the table below. These include bids to, and allocations from, the Innovation Fund.

	08/09 £m	09/10 £m	10/11 £m
Total Resource bids	33.26	38.24	43.58
Budget allocations	15.95	27.22	40.02

These Resource bids and allocations are in addition to a roll forward of the Departments 2007/08 baselines. DARD's total Resource allocation in the three forward years is £234.4m, £238.4m, £245.4m respectively.

The total bids for capital expenditure (after deducting capital receipts) and the Budget allocations (net of receipts) are set out in the table below. These include bids to, and allocations from, the Innovation Fund.

	08/09 £m	09/10 £m	10/11 £m
Capital bids	135.21	73.12	69.33
Capital allocations	83.90	28.90	-170.90

The Budget Capital allocation in 2010-11 is based upon a receipt of £200m from the sale of land at Crossnacreevy.

Water Rights

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide an update on the proposed transfer of ownership of the water rights at the Clay Loughs, Shrigley, from the Tannery to her Department. (AQW 3346/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Rivers Agency has received written confirmation that the current controller of water levels in Clea Lakes is prepared to relinquish the water rights and control to Rivers Agency. Discussions are ongoing to finalise the legal transfer.

Animal Transport

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the number of United Kingdom Animal Transport type 1 Authorisations, valid for journeys over 65km and up to 8 hours, issued; and (ii) the number of United Kingdom Animal Transport type 2 Authorisations, valid for journeys over 65km and over 8 hours, issued. (AQW 3352/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

(i) As of the 31 January 2008, the number of UK Animal Transport type 1 Authorisations, valid for journeys over 65km and up to 8 hours, issued by DARD is 688.

(ii) As of the 31 January 2008, the number of UK Animal Transport type 2 Authorisations, valid for journeys over 65km and over 8 hours, issued by DARD is 93.

Pig Industry

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is her assessment of the current state of the pig industry; and to detail what

actions she is taking to address the situation.

(AQW 3356/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The pig sector faces losses as a direct consequence of the global rise in cereal and protein prices. Pigmeat production and prices have yet to respond to those input cost increases. However the EU has reduced the set-aside rate to zero for 2008 in response to cereal market conditions and the weakening of sterling against the euro will increase the cost of pigmeat imports from the rest of Europe in sterling terms. These events should help check feed input costs and firm prices here.

I have written to Hilary Benn urging that the UK support Commissioner Fischer Boel's proposal for export refunds and I welcome the fact that the EU commission has re-introduced export refunds for pigmeat.

To help address the industries difficulties I have met with Grampian Country Pork and subsequently with Ministers Ruane and McGimpsey with a view to developing and expanding local sourcing initiatives in the Education and Health services. I have also written to and met with major retailers to raise the issue of rising costs for producers.

My Department continues to provide support to the pig industry through the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) and Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI). It is also providing resource at farm level to aid compliance with environmental restrictions and has agreed to co-fund a review of the pig sector. The Processing and Marketing Scheme is now open for applications. The Supply Chain Development Programme will be replaced by another scheme under the Rural Development Programme and plans are also well advanced for a new Scheme to support the Marketing of Quality Agricultural Produce.

Biofuels

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make a statement on the 'Are biofuels sustainable?' report drawn up by the all party Environmental Audit Committee at Westminster.

(AQW 3357/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I welcome the recent publication 'Are biofuels sustainable?' drawn up by the all party Environmental Audit Committee in Britain. This report will assist in expanding the existing knowledge base and informing the future development of robust renewable energy policy here.

It is not appropriate for me to make comment on this Report at this time. However, my Department is working closely with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), who take the lead on energy related matters, on a study to assess the potential for the sustainable development of bioenergy, including biofuels, in the North.

My Department remains committed, through the DARD Renewable Energy Action Plan, to promoting the opportunities afforded by the sustainable development of renewable energy in the agri-food sector, forestry sector and wider rural economy.

The DARD Renewable Energy Action Plan has two broad objectives:

- Support the exploitation of opportunities for the alternative land uses and sustainable management of agri-food waste linked to renewable energy; and
- Underpin knowledge and increase awareness of renewable energy technologies.

Holstein Bull Calves

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is her assessment of the potential for producing beef from Holstein bull calves.

(AQW 3358/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: It is estimated that 75,000 to 85,000 Holstein bull calves are produced annually in N.I. The majority of the beef produced from these bull calves is used for mince. Mince accounts for a considerable proportion (almost half) of the beef sold by multiple retailers and is also an important component of the food service sector.

At present the production of beef from Holstein calves using existing production systems is not an economic proposition based on current input costs (particularly for feed and energy) and present returns for the finished product.

Consequently, some calves are humanely destroyed soon after birth by dairy farmers. There are no estimates of the numbers of these calves as they are not registered on APHIS. Since the end of the livestock export ban in 2006 the option exists to export calves to specialist veal production units in Europe.

If economically viable and sustainable production systems could be established they would have the potential to provide a positive financial return to producers and to the beef processing sector thereby utilising an existing natural resource.

Equality Promotion

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail how she has promoted equality in her Department in the current (i) Budget; (ii) Programme for Government; and (iii) Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland. (AQW 3401/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department carried out an equality consultation on the DARD elements of the draft Programme for Government (PfG), Budget (Budget 2007) and Investment Strategy 2008 – 2011 (ISNI 08) from 11 December 2007 until 16 January 2008.

As part of the consultation process, views were sought from approximately 180 equality groups and individuals on the Department's consultation list, and in addition, information about the consultation was also placed on the Department's website. A number of public consultation events were held in the week commencing 17 December 2007. These events were held in Cookstown, Enniskillen and Antrim. The Department also organised a one-day equality workshop which was held on 30 January 2008 in Belfast. This event brought together around 30 senior staff from the Department along with key Section 75 representatives to discuss equality outcomes in relation to DARD specific functions within the Budget, PfG, and the Investment Strategy.

Forest Service Organisational Structure

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her plans for the overall organisational structure of the Forest Service. (AQW 3426/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The organisational structure of the Forest Service is a matter for the Chief Executive and Board of the Forest Service. The Chief Executive has informed me of the Board's decision to begin to restructure the Agency from April 2008. Services will be delivered on a functional basis, rather than through the current three-District structure. The Board believes that this will facilitate better delivery of strategic objectives, set out in the Forestry Strategy, and result in greater efficiency. I am content with the proposals and have asked for a pragmatic approach regarding arrangements for staff affected by the restructuring.

The structure proposed will involve a small number of staff relocating to a new Headquarters to support the creation of discrete functional responsibilities for business areas such as harvesting, forest stewardship and central operations.

The move to a functional structure will not, however, affect the strong local presence of Forest Service

throughout Northern Ireland. Operational bases, whilst not public offices, will continue to operate at various locations, including Enniskillen, Castletwellan and Garvagh. All industrials will continue to be based at, and work at, local level and will not be affected.

A separate review of the administrative and finance support function within the Agency is also being taken forward. The purpose of the review is to ensure that this function is as efficient as possible. This may result in a reduced staff requirement, with a small number of administrative staff (possibly 4 or 5) having to be redeployed, either to HQ or other Government offices.

The Chief Executive has assured me that both the Trade Union and staff are being kept informed of developments.

Farmers' Markets

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had in relation to the establishment of new farmers' markets; and to detail the number of enquiries she has received about this issue. (AQW 3439/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I can confirm that my Department has not been involved in any discussions regarding the establishment of new farmers' markets. While there have been enquiries from individual business people for whom such markets represent current or potential outlets for their products, I understand that there have been no formal approaches from groups planning new markets for the sale of agricultural produce.

Farmers' Markets

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number and location of farmer markets operating in Northern Ireland. (AQW 3448/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have noted with satisfaction the increasing profile of farmers' markets throughout the North. It is clear that locally sourced produce has an important role to play in shortening supply chains, raising farm incomes, reducing transport costs, protecting the environment, strengthening local communities and improving public health. In that regard, I am pleased to say that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has provided financial support to several farmers' markets, most notably, in Derry, Ballymoney and Strabane.

However, the Department has no oversight or regulatory role when it comes to such markets and so holds no statistics on their number or location. I am therefore unable to provide the detailed breakdown sought.

The regulation of farmers' markets is primarily the responsibility of local government, which has important environmental health functions, particularly with regard to the sale of food products. Licensing arrangements affect not markets but individual vendors, who are required to register with their local authority. I understand that, in keeping with the system of local accountability in place, there is no central database of such individuals. Once registered, however, a vendor may trade anywhere in the North and is not bound to a specific site or market.

Badger Diseases

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what actions her Department is taking to stop the spread of diseases by badgers.
(AQW 3494/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am responding in relation to bovine Tuberculosis (TB) specifically, which is a disease of cattle that is also present in badgers in the North.

The TB control programme in the North is based on the detection of diseased or high risk cattle, the compulsory removal of these animals from their herd of origin to slaughter, and the restriction of movements of cattle from infected herds until they are tested clear. My Department has also issued advice on how farmers can help to protect their herd from TB and this includes the practical steps they can take to reduce the contact between cattle and badgers. The advice leaflet is given to all farmers who have a TB breakdown in their herd and it is also available on the DARD web site and through the local Divisional Veterinary Offices. It is important that farmers take all reasonable precautions to protect their herds from possible infection by other cattle or badgers, by adopting good biosecurity such as secure boundary fencing and taking practical steps to reduce badger and cattle contact. We have made considerable progress with TB in recent years. Since peak levels for the disease in 2002, the herd incidence has been reduced by nearly 50%.

Whilst it is established that there is a link between TB in badgers and TB in cattle, it is not certain what role the badger might have in the spread of TB to cattle, or if there are other factors involved in maintaining TB infection in the North. Work is on-going to look at this whole area. The Badger Stakeholder Group, which is chaired by my Department and includes both farmer and environmental interests, has an important role to play in this work. My officials also continue to work with officials from the DOE's Environment and Heritage Service in respect of the role of badgers in TB.

The badger is a protected species and ultimately any decision to intervene in badger populations in the

North will require agreement both from me and the Environment Minister.

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the total cost of bovine tuberculosis to her Department, in each of the last 5 years.
(AQW 3495/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The total costs of the Bovine tuberculosis control programmes for each of the past 5 financial years are shown below

Year	Total Expenditure
2002/03	£22,009,627
2003/04	£24,427,115
2004/05	£23,792,178
2005/06	£21,620,607
2006/07	£22,758,922

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the actions her Department is taking to reduce the incidence of bovine tuberculosis.
(AQW 3496/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: NI has had a compulsory disease eradication programme in place since 1959.

This is a "test and remove" approach. The main surveillance components of the programme are tuberculin testing annually of all cattle and public health examination of all slaughtered cattle. My Department continues to implement and develop this programme.

Where bovine tuberculosis is suspected in a herd, valuation, compensation and removal of reactors, live animal movement restrictions and increased frequency of testing is implemented. DARD staff assess the incident epidemiologically and take appropriate steps to trace the source and spread of the disease.

Recent developments within the programme include the introduction of supplementary blood testing where appropriate, enhanced movement restriction regimes, and more staff dedicated to the implementation of the programme.

In the North, levels of TB rose steadily through the 1990s to a peak herd incidence of 10.2% in 2003, post foot and mouth disease.

However, since 2004 there has been a steady decrease in herd incidence to 5.35%, a reduction of nearly half. This still leaves NI with a disease incidence the same as in the late 1990s. However, in contrast, the trend now is downwards.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Irish Language

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what new action he has taken to ensure the promotion and development of the Irish language since assuming ministerial responsibility.
(AQW 3069/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poets):

European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

My Department continues to provide a secretariat to the Interdepartmental Charter Implementation Group (ICIG) that is responsible for reporting on Northern Ireland's implementation of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

The ICIG meets quarterly to share ideas and best practice across the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

DCAL Translation Service

My Department has made every effort to meet rising demands for translations into and from the Irish language following our return to devolution. In furtherance of the levels of service offered by the translators the Department is currently considering engagement with the translation software TRADOS. In addition provision is also being made to ensure that all the translators used are accredited by Foras na Gaeilge and that their work is Quality Assured to the highest standards. Progress has also been made in developing a set of Guidelines for translators to be published on the Department's website.

British Irish Council Subgroup on Minority and Lesser Used Languages

During my Ministerial term officials from my Department have engaged with the other jurisdictions of the British Irish Council to share information and best practice in relation to language issues.

NSMC Meeting

At the NSMC meeting on 26 October 2007, I along with Minister Ó Cuív welcomed a report on the work of Foras, in particular in the e-government area with the development of an online database of terminology – www.focal.ie, the launch (with Microsoft) of an Irish

language version of Windows XP and the development of Córas Creidiúnaithe/an Accreditation Scheme for Irish Language translators.

Appearance before the CAL Committee

I have made two presentations to the CAL Committee on the strategy for the development and enhancement of the Indigenous Language as set out in the St Andrews Agreement Act 2006, the most recent being on the 31 January 2008. I await a response from the Committee on how they propose to contribute to the strategy.

Meetings with Irish-Language Groups

Since assuming ministerial responsibility I and my officials have met with the following groups, Foras Na Gaeilge, POBAL and ACHT to discuss Irish-language issues and the strategy for indigenous languages locally.

Eel Fishing Industry

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm whether or not he plans to meet with the Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co-operative to discuss the needs of the eel fishing industry.
(AQW 3402/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Yes, I plan to visit the Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co-operative to discuss the needs of the eel fishing industry.

Salmon Catches

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he is taking to address the fall in the numbers of salmon caught in waters around Northern Ireland.
(AQW 3416/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: A management strategy dealing with the decline in populations of salmon for the period 2008 - 2012 is nearing completion and shall be submitted to the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation (NASCO) shortly.

The Department implemented a voluntary buyout of commercial salmon licences between 2001 and 2004. Before the scheme, 31 fishermen had licences to fish 56 nets. 49 of those nets were bought out, reducing the fishing effort by 90% and salmon exploitation from 11,000 to 2,000 per annum in the sea around Northern Ireland. It is hoped that this reduction in exploitation will contribute to a long term strategy to increase numbers of salmon in European waters.

In the Loughs Agency jurisdiction mixed stock interceptory drift net fisheries for Atlantic salmon

seaward of Lough Foyle were prohibited for the 2007 season as these fisheries were suspected of catching salmon destined for rivers in the north-east Atlantic not reaching their conservation limits. The Loughs Agency also reduced the number of commercial nets operating in both Lough Foyle and the River Foyle. A limited commercial fishery is still pursued within Lough Foyle and the tidal River Foyle, these fisheries catch salmon from rivers within the Foyle area only, which at present have all been determined to be meeting their conservation limits.

Homophobia in Sport

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he is taking to tackle homophobia in (i) football; and (ii) other sports. (AQW 3551/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Responsibility for tackling homophobia in football rests with the governing body, the Irish Football Association (IFA). I understand the IFA runs a number of programmes designed to address problems of under representation among minority groups. In addition, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in conjunction with Sport Northern Ireland, is developing a new 10-year Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation. The purpose of the Strategy is to ensure an improved quality of life for all the people of Northern Ireland with no section of the community being excluded or left behind.

Homophobia in Sport

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the research his Department has carried out into the level of homophobia in (i) football; and (ii) other sports. (AQW 3553/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Responsibility for carrying out research into the level of homophobia in football rests with the governing body, the Irish Football Association. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) has commissioned research on barriers to participation in culture, arts and leisure activities in Northern Ireland, including sport. This research recommended that the Department work with appropriate organisations to improve awareness and identify best practice. These recommendations are being considered by DCAL, in partnership with Sport Northern Ireland, as part of the development of a new 10-year Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation.

Lenadoon Community Forum

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in light of the recent Budget announcement, to confirm whether or not the Lenadoon Community Forum will now have the opportunity to avail of funding from Sport NI, after their previous successful application was not funded due to monies being diverted to the 2012 Olympic Games.

(AQW 3591/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am aware that Lenadoon Community Forum has had their application for Lottery funding declined under Sport Northern Ireland's Building Sport programme. Following the agreement on the budget for sport, Sport Northern Ireland in conjunction with my Department will be examining ways in which groups affected by the diversion of Lottery funds can be accommodated.

La Nua Newspaper

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the funding allocated by the Arts Council to the Irish language newspaper La Nua; and the background to the funding. (AQW 3617/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Preas an Phobail, publisher of Lá Nuá has received funding from the Arts Council for a twice weekly arts supplement in Lá Nuá, including a contribution towards the salary of a part time Arts Editor to produce the supplement. The following grants were paid:

Exchequer Arts Development Fund	
2003/04	£27,200
2004/05	£27,200
2005/06	£15,000
Lottery Access	
2006	£117,200 over 3 years

Fisheries Conservancy Board

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail whether or not he will consider introducing a timetable for the transfer of power from the Fisheries Conservancy Board to his Department before the deadline of June 2008. (AQW 3653/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Provisions to abolish the Fisheries Conservancy Board (FCB) and transfer its functions to the Department are included in the Draft Public Authorities Reform Bill which will be taken forward by OFMDFM and is

included in the Legislative Programme for the 2007/2008 Assembly Session. Latest indications are that the Bill could be introduced in April 2008, subject to Assembly Executive approval. It is not possible to transfer power before this legislation is made, which could be up to 6 months or more after introduction.

Regional or Minority Languages

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in relation to the 36 provisions of Part 3 of the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, to which the United Kingdom Government signed up, to detail the provisions that have been implemented to date, and those which have yet to be implemented. (AQW 3699/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Committee of Experts (COMEX) have reported they are satisfied that these 36 provisions of the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Language have been implemented in respect of Irish Language, thus fulfilling the criteria for meeting Part III status.

Irish-Language Legislation

Mr Brolly asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide an update of the progress that has been made on the preparation of a paper for discussion by the Executive, in relation to the introduction of Irish-language legislation. (AQW 3728/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I refer the member to my statement to the CAL Committee of the 31 January 2008 on a Strategy for the enhancement and protection of Indigenous Languages in Northern Ireland as set out in the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006.

Irish Language

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in light of the £4m increase to his Department's budget, to detail what proportion of this will be used in enhancing and protecting the development of the Irish language. (AQW 3729/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The 2008 budgetary allocations include an increase of 2% on the budget of Foras na Gaeilge. As you are aware Foras na Gaeilge have the statutory responsibility for the promotion of the Irish language.

Irish-Language Strategy

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his strategy for promoting and enhancing the Irish language; and what action is he taking to ensure that this strategy is effectively resourced within his Department's budget allocations. (AQW 3730/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I refer the member to my statement to the CAL Committee of the 31 January 2008 on a Strategy for the enhancement and protection of Indigenous Languages in Northern Ireland as set out in the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006. I await a response from the CAL Committee on how they propose to contribute to this Strategy. Any Strategy will be implemented within the agreed budgetary allocations.

Irish-Language Promotion

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide an update on the progress made in relation to bringing forward a strategy to enhance and protect the development of the Irish language. (AQW 3731/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I refer the member to my statement to the CAL Committee of the 31 January 2008 on a Strategy for the enhancement and protection of Indigenous Languages in Northern Ireland as set out in the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006. I await a response from the CAL Committee on how they propose to contribute to this Strategy.

Irish-Language Development

Mr F McCann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give a time frame for proposals to bring forward a strategy to enhance and protect the development of the Irish language. (AQW 3732/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I advised the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee on the 31 January 2008 that I expect to bring forward proposals on a strategy for Indigenous Languages by the summer of 2008. I await a response from the CAL Committee on how they propose to contribute to this strategy.

EDUCATION

Phoenix Primary School

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of funding allocated to build a new school for Phoenix Primary School, Cookstown.
(AQW 2823/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): To date the Department has approved £560k for temporary accommodation for Phoenix Integrated Primary School. No agreement has been reached on either the type or cost of a new build at this site.

Taskforce Report 2002

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Education to state the measurement tools that have been developed and implemented for West Belfast and the Greater Shankill area as recommended in the Taskforce Report 2002; and to provide, in relation to these measurement tools, (i) an assessment of their performance and the outcomes achieved; (ii) the issues they have raised; and (iii) what action she has taken in result of the issues raised.
(AQW 2876/08)

The Minister of Education: The Taskforce Report acknowledged the role of education in helping to break the cycle of deprivation. In response to its findings and wider research and evidence on how to tackle underachievement, my Department has committed to a programme of actions to raise standards across all schools here, but with a particular focus on Belfast. These include the implementation of the revised curriculum and, specifically, the dedicated foundation stage element which was informed by the pilot work on the enriched curriculum undertaken in some west Belfast schools as well as the provision of funding to support extended schools and schools where standards needed to be raised.

Our work, which has been supported through the commitment and dedication of teachers, governors and community representatives, is beginning to deliver improvements against key educational indicators as the table below shows but we are far from complacent and are continuing to take action to raise standards and tackle educational underachievement. This action includes continuing support for extended schools and a Full Service Extended Schools pilot in the north of the city as well as for the development of a Full Service Community Network based around Corpus Christi College in Ballymurphy. Additionally, I have published for consultation a new policy on school improvement and plan shortly to publish, again for consultation, a revised strategy for literacy and numeracy. I know that

the Belfast Education and Library Board is also working, through its 'Béal Feirste a Bhaint Amach' 'Achieving Belfast' initiative, with a small number of schools in the city which face particular challenges in order to ensure that no child is left behind. A similar approach is being developed by the Western Education and Library Boards for schools in Derry.

Educational indicator	Performance in 1998/99		Performance in 2005/06	
	West Belfast Schools	Shankill Schools	West Belfast Schools	Shankill Schools
Pupils achieving at least 5 or more GCSEs at grades A* - C or equivalent	47%	20.4%	54.7%	35.9%
Pupils leaving school with no GCSEs	9%	13.6%	7.7%	8.2%
Pupils leaving with 2 or more A levels at Grade A-E (incl. equivalencies)	25.2%	6.1%	35.9%	21.8%
Pupils achieving level 4 or above in English and Maths at Key Stage 2 assessments	51.4% - English 60.4% - Maths	45.7% - English 53.7% - Maths	64.6% - English 69.4% - Maths	62.4% - English 61.6% - Maths

Meetings Request

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to the answer to AQW 2139/08, to detail the requests for a meeting with her that were received from individual members of the public and from organisations, that were (i) granted; and (ii) refused; and in relation to those requests that were refused, to confirm whether or not they were refused (a) due to prior diary commitments; (b) because negotiations regarding issues referred to in the request were still ongoing; (c) as a result of the issues already being well advanced or already resolved; (d) because the meeting was to discuss a decision that had already been agreed by direct rule Minister; or (e) because the request had been referred to other organisations.
(AQW 2877/08)

The Minister of Education: I cannot release details of requests received from members of the public that might help identify that person. In relation to the information regarding requests received from other organisations, please see table below:

Name of organisation	Accepted/ declined	Reason
SELB	Accepted	
INTO	Accepted	
GSPG	Accepted	
Focus Learning	Declined	Diary commitments
VSO	Accepted	
N/South Exchange Consortium	Accepted	
GTCNI	Accepted	
Mersey Street Primary School	Declined	Decision already agreed by Direct Rule Minister
SPEAC	Declined	Diary commitments
Community Relations Council	Accepted	
GBA	Accepted	
CBI	Accepted	
Gay and Lesbian Equality Network	Accepted	
NASUWT	Accepted	
Conlig Primary School	Accepted	
South Down Ecumenical Study Group	Accepted	
PIPS	Accepted	
IEF	Accepted	
NAHT	Accepted	
Alternative Education Providers Forum	Accepted	
InaG	Accepted	
Patsy McGlone MLA	Declined	Review Ongoing
ASPECT	Declined	Diary commitments
Ballysally Primary School	Accepted	
NASUWT	Accepted	
Torbank Primary School	Accepted	
FONT	Accepted	
Peat and Irish Autism Action	Declined	Diary commitments
Public Appointments NI	Accepted	
Equality Commission	Declined	Diary commitments
NIPSA	Accepted	

Name of organisation	Accepted/ declined	Reason
Jeffrey Donaldson MP MLA	Accepted	
Lagan College	Accepted	
INTO	Accepted	
IEF	Declined	Diary commitments
Belfast Royal Academy	Accepted	
Co-ordinator of Coliaste Brhíde	Accepted	
Sydenham Infants School	Declined	Referred to BELB
Ulster Farmers' Union	Accepted	
YouthNet	Accepted	
Opportunity Youth	Accepted	
Brethern Christian Fellowship	Declined	Diary commitments
OFCOM	Accepted	
Iris Robinson MP MLA	Accepted	
Irish Autism Action	Declined	Diary commitments
YCNI	Accepted	
NI Children's Enterprise	Accepted	
Cumann Na Bunscoil	Declined	Referred to GAA
Educational Trade Union Group	Accepted	
NST	Declined	Referred to ELBs
Gaelscoil Ghleann Darach	Accepted	
Upper Bann FE Students	Accepted	
Early Years Strategic Alliance	Accepted	
Net Media Business Solutions	Declined	Referred to DHSS PS
Restorative Justice in Schools	Accepted	
Gaelscoil Eanna	Accepted	
Cinemagic	Accepted	
Knockavoe Secondary School	Declined	Referred to WELB
Christian Education Movement	Declined	Issue already resolved
NICEM	Accepted	
IOD	Accepted	
Michael McGimpsey MLA	Declined	Issue already resolved

Name of organisation	Accepted/ declined	Reason
Rainey Endowed School	Accepted	
British Council	Accepted	
Children's Law Centre	Accepted	
Donaghadee HS Parents' Action Group	Declined	Referred to ELB
NI PE and School Sport Taskforce	Declined	Referred to officials
RNID	Declined	Referred to officials
Love for Life	Declined	Referred to officials
Kelloggs	Declined	Diary commitments
Breakthru	Declined	Diary commitments
Good Shepherd Nursery School	Declined	Referred to CCMS and SEELB
Jeffrey Donaldson MP MLA	Declined	Referred to SEELB
Youth Sport Trust	Declined	Diary commitments
East Belfast Primary and Nursery Group	Accepted	
REACT Ltd	Accepted	
Stiurthoir Cholaiste Speirin	Accepted	
NIPSA	Accepted	
North Belfast Principals' Group	Accepted	
Bishop Donal McKeown	Accepted	
Patsy McGlone MLA	Accepted	
UNISON	Accepted	
Community Foundation for NI	Declined	Diary commitments
Danny Kennedy MLA	Accepted	
Dawn Purvis MLA	Accepted	
Ulster Teachers' Union	Accepted	
Antrim Community Forum	Declined	Diary commitments
Buddy Bear	Accepted	
Naomi Long MLA	Declined	Referred to officials
Philomena Smyth	Accepted	
St Malachy's HS	Accepted	
Greater Shantallow Arts	Declined	Referred to CCEA

Name of organisation	Accepted/ declined	Reason
ICEP	Declined	Diary commitments
Waterside House	Accepted	
NDBC	Accepted	
Drumlins PS	Accepted	
Youth Action	Accepted	
Hydepark Educ Trust	Declined	Issue already resolved
Nigel Dodds MP MLA	Declined	Referred to officials
Sport Tracker	Declined	Referred to GAA
Lifestyle Designers	Declined	Issue already well advanced
USSI	Accepted	
Arts Council	Accepted	
USHPF	Accepted	
Lower Ormeau Residential Group	Declined	Referred to officials
NIAMH	Accepted	
South Belfast Surestart	Declined	Referred to officials
CINI	Accepted	
All Party Group on CINI	Accepted	
SENTINUS	Declined	Diary commitments
Camlough Community Association	Declined	Referred to officials
POBAL	Accepted	
Jim Shannon MLA	Declined	Referred to SEELB
NIPSA	Accepted	
Netcare NI	Declined	Referred to officials
HIV Support Centre	Declined	Referred to CASS
NI Hospice	Accepted	
Chambers Coach Hire	Declined	Diary Commitments
Greater Village Regeneration Trust	Accepted	
University of Ulster Processors	Declined	Referred to DETI
NCH	Accepted	
Sean McGourty	Declined	Referred to GAA
Teen Pregnancy Group	Declined	Referred to CCEA

Name of organisation	Accepted/ declined	Reason
NICIE	Declined	Diary Commitments
Danny Kennedy MLA	Declined	Referred to SELB
Skill NI	Accepted	
Family Coaching Consultancy	Declined	Referred to officials
The Corporate Goat	Declined	Referred to CCEA
Lord Maginnis of Drumglass	Accepted	
NITC	Accepted	
NIMFA	Accepted	
Mental Health Forum	Declined	Diary Commitments
Internet Watch Foundation	Declined	Diary Commitments
Comber Drugs Awareness Group	Declined	Diary Commitments
Newry & Mourne District Council	Accepted	
Centre for Irish Programs	Declined	Diary Commitments
Fred Cobain MLA	Accepted	
Joint Committee of Naiscoil Charn Tochair & Naiscoil Mhachaire Ratha	Declined	Diary Commitments
Queen's University	Accepted	
Iris Robinson MP MLA	Accepted	
Blackwater College	Accepted	
ALTRAM	Accepted	
International Fund for Ireland	Accepted	
USO	Declined	Diary Commitments
International House	Declined	Issue already resolved
Retrieve Foundation	Accepted	
West Belfast Partnership	Declined	Negotiations still ongoing
Michelle Gildernew MP MLA	Accepted	
Princes Trust	Declined	Diary Commitments
Stem Review	Accepted	
Roy Beggs Jnr MLA	Accepted	
Hibernia College	Accepted	

Name of organisation	Accepted/ declined	Reason
Sammy Wilson MP MLA	Accepted	
Capital Realisation Taskforce	Accepted	
Tom Elliott MLA	Accepted	
Irish Medium Education Trust	Accepted	
Foras Na Gaeilge	Declined	Issue already resolved
RNIB	Accepted	
Dunfane School	Accepted	
Stress Free Schools Ireland	Declined	Referred to officials
Lady Sylvia Hermon MP	Declined	Referred to ELBs
Skill NI	Declined	Diary commitments
Raymond McCartney MLA	Accepted	
Autism NI	Declined	Diary commitments
NIMFA	Accepted	
Assoc of Educational Psychologists	Declined	Issue already well advanced
Community Support Services	Declined	Referred to DHSSPS
Youth Justice Agency	Accepted	
St Bronagh's PS	Accepted	
Association of Teachers and Lecturers	Accepted	
Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagain	Accepted	
St Gerard's Educational Resource Centre	Accepted	
Women's Aid	Accepted	
Holy Trinity Youth Centre	Declined	Diary Commitments
Association for Quality Education	Accepted	
Zest	Declined	Referred to officials
St Aidan's High School	Declined	Issue already well advanced
All Children's Integrated PS	Accepted	
The Horizon Project	Declined	Diary Commitments

Name of organisation	Accepted/ declined	Reason
BELB	Declined	Referred to officials
St Michael's Grammar School	Declined	Diary Commitments
Children's Independent Therapy	Declined	Issue already resolved
Prince's Trust	Declined	Diary commitments
Confederation of Passenger Transport NI	Declined	Diary commitments
O'Brien Press	Declined	Referred to ELB
Network of School Planners, Ireland	Declined	Referred to Regional Training Unit
Trevor Lunn MLA	Declined	Diary commitments
Community Organisations of South Tyrone and Area	Declined	Diary commitments
Integrating Education	Declined	Diary commitments
NICIE	Declined	Negotiations ongoing
St Eugene's HS	Accepted	
POBAL	Accepted	
Patrician Youth Centre	Accepted	
Holocaust Memorial Day Trust	Declined	Diary commitments
Iris Robinson MP MLA	Accepted	
Women's Aid	Declined	Diary commitments
NI Local Government Association	Accepted	
St Theresa's PS	Accepted	
National Children's Bureau	Declined	Diary commitments
P J Bradley MLA	Accepted	
MENCAP	Declined	Referred to officials
SELB	Declined	Diary commitments
Creavery PS	Declined	Diary commitments

School Dress Code

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount spent by her Department in defending the legal case brought against Ballyclare High School by representatives of a pupil contesting the school dress code. (AQW 3229/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department has not incurred any costs in respect of the legal case brought against Ballyclare High School by representatives of a pupil contesting the school dress code.

Air Quality Tests

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 343/08, to provide an update on the results of the air quality tests; and to confirm whether or not the odour has returned. (AQW 3312/08)

The Minister of Education: The report of the findings of the air quality monitoring tests commissioned by my Department was received on 30 January. These results will now be examined and I will write to you as soon as possible with the outcome.

Teachers' Voluntary Redundancy

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister of Education to detail the reasons for her Department's decision to end the practice of paying the 'added years award', in the case of teachers taking up the offer of voluntary redundancy. (AQW 3331/08)

The Minister of Education: An increase in recent years in the number of premature retirements, together with the generous levels of enhancement awarded by employers, have placed an unsustainable burden on the pension scheme in that the scheme's liabilities are increasing at a much faster rate than current contributions can sustain. The current arrangements for premature retirement are unsustainable even in the short term. To continue without taking action to control the costs of premature retirement would necessitate a significant increase in the pension contribution rate and this would in turn have a significant and unwelcome impact on teachers' take-home pay.

It has been a statutory requirement in Great Britain for more than a decade that individual employers meet the additional costs associated with teachers' premature retirements on grounds of redundancy or in the interest of the efficient discharge of the employer's function. Similarly, employers here must be accountable for decisions to retire teachers early in these circumstances,

and for the associated costs. The number of added years' service which may be credited to a teacher remains unchanged.

The early payment of pension is in itself a significant compensation for early retirement (with associated significant costs) and this remains available at no cost to employers in the 2008-09 financial year. The Department will be consulting with relevant parties on the arrangements for the Premature Retirement Compensation Scheme for future years. This will include detailed consideration of possible alternatives such as enhanced severance pay and the facility for employers to purchase additional pension on an employee's behalf.

Rowandale Integrated Primary School

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost to her Department in funding Rowandale Integrated Primary School, Moira. (AQW 3364/08)

The Minister of Education: Rowandale Integrated Primary School opened in September 2007 as a new grant-maintained integrated (GMI) school. In this context, it is entitled to receive recurrent funding from Day-1 of operation. A recurrent budget allocation amounting to £90k has been made available to Rowandale Integrated Primary School in the 2007-08 financial year. As for all new GMI schools, it must satisfy intake criteria laid down by the Department of Education before capital grant-aid can be provided.

Special Educational Needs Review

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to provide a timescale within which she intends to publish the Special Educational Needs review. (AQW 3370/08)

The Minister of Education: I consider the needs of children with special educational needs (SEN) as an important part of my ministerial responsibilities. Therefore I have taken time to consider the review proposals very carefully. Following my approval, the proposals will be taken through the required Assembly processes prior to being issued for formal public consultation, which on present timescales will be mid-2008.

Requests for Meetings

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of requests for meetings she has had from (i) MLAs; and (ii) other groups, since she took up office. (AQW 3372/08)

The Minister of Education: I have received 242 requests for meetings since I took up office, 39 of these were requests from MLAs and 203 were from other groups.

C2K Helpdesk

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Education to detail the average cost, per school, of calling the C2K helpdesk in the past year. (AQW 3374/08)

The Minister of Education: The services of the C2k helpdesk are provided free of charge to all schools. The only cost that a school would incur would be the cost of the phone call. There were two rates applicable in calling an 0870 number in 2007, 6 pence per minute rising to 7 pence per minute.

Gender of Teachers

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Education to detail the most recent numbers of teachers, broken down by gender, at (i) primary phase; and (ii) post-primary phase, holding management allowances (a) 5; (b) 4; (c) 3; (d) 2; and (e) 1. (AQW 3390/08)

The Minister of Education: The information requested is detailed in the attached table.

Gender	Teaching Allowance	Primary	Post Primary	Total
Female	1	1733	907	2640
	2	712	967	1679
	3	88	544	632
	4	5	238	243
	5	0	111	111
Total		2538	2767	5305
Male	1	225	380	605
	2	149	508	657
	3	30	401	431
	4	4	194	198
	5	2	83	85
Total		410	1566	1976
Total		2948	4333	7281

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education whether or not costings have been prepared for her proposed

changes to post primary education.

(AQW 3393/08)

The Minister of Education: Where a need for restructuring is identified as a result of area-based planning, estimates of cost will be produced. I anticipate that existing structures can deliver much of what is proposed. My plans are unlikely to require restructuring significantly beyond that already required by the need for sustainable schools. In the next ten years our current accommodation deficiencies mean that we have to rebuild a significant amount of the post-primary estate whatever happens.

Youth Service Provision

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Education to detail the measures her department is taking to develop youth service provision in the Greater Ballysillan area of North Belfast.

(AQW 3466/08)

The Minister of Education: The Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) is responsible for youth provision in the Greater Ballysillan area. I have been provided with the following information by the Chief Executive of the Belfast Education and Library Board.

The Greater Ballysillan area is an integral part of the Board's North Belfast Youth Division and there are a number of youth service activities ongoing in the Division which impact on the greater Ballysillan area.

Whilst recognising that there are gaps in structural provision, Belfast Education and Library Board youth service is committed to the new youth centre facility currently being incorporated as part of the new school development within Belfast Boys' Model School.

Currently the school employs a youth tutor to work with disengaged young men both within the school and local communities at a cost of £34,281.

In 2007/08, the Board invested over £280,000 in running youth service activities in its North Belfast Division. The board runs the North Belfast Area Project which prioritises work within communities across North Belfast with little or no youth provision. Ballysillan is currently supported by 3 staff from the area project. These staff work with young people within smaller geographical areas who are not accessing existing youth provision in the area. In this financial year £100,000 has been allocated from the Board's core Youth Service Budget to maintain this project.

Under the Children and Young Peoples Funding Package and the Renewing Communities Initiative, £150,000 has been allocated to provide detached outreach youth workers throughout the area, to reach out to disaffected young people and engage them in

meaningful activities so as to divert them from becoming involved in anti-social behaviour. Approximately £30,000 has been allocated to run summer intervention and youth intervention programmes both of which aim to reduce youth migration towards flashpoint areas in Belfast.

The Board also registered 22 organisations in the area which work with children and young people. This includes ten community and church based youth clubs, the girl guides, the scouts and the Boys' and Girls' Brigade.

In addition the area has a number of youth workers employed by community organisations; Ballysillan Youth for Christ, Benview Youth Project, Ballysillan Community Forum, all of which secure additional funding from other sources.

The area further benefits from the work of 2 Community Empowerment Programmes (CEPs) that cover the greater Ballysillan Area. These 2 programmes are funded by the North Belfast Community Action Unit. They have a combined youth programme funding of £55,870 for this financial year.

Written Assembly Questions

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of written Assembly Questions she has received since May 2007; and (ii) the average length of time it takes her department to respond.

(AQW 3476/08)

The Minister of Education: Between 08 May 2007 and 04 February 2008 my Department received 857 Assembly Written Questions. On average it has taken 11 working days to respond.

Language Courses

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail schools in Northern Ireland at primary and post-primary level that currently provide courses in (i) Mandarin; (ii) Hindi; and (iii) Russian. (AQW 3580/08)

The Minister of Education: DE does not hold information on course provision. At post primary level course entries for GCSE and A level examinations are collected. The latest available data on post-primary entries relates to the 2005/06 academic year.

Post primary schools with entries in GCSE and/or A Level courses in:

Mandarin

- Our lady of Mercy High School
- Campbell College
- Methodist College

- Strathearn School
- Downshire School
- Belfast High School
- Friends School
- Royal School Dungannon
- Royal School Armagh
- Malone Intergrated College
- Victoria College

Hindi

- No schools had entries in Hindi in the 2005/06 academic year.

Russian

- Methodist college
 - Nendrum college
1. Information on entries in Mandarin, Hindi and Russian courses in individual primary schools is not available.

Independent Integrated Schools

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail what precedent exists to permit her department to give financial support to independent integrated secondary schools. (AQW 3600/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department has not provided financial support to independent integrated secondary schools.

The current location of Rowallane Integrated College is in temporary mobile accommodation on a leased site at Belvoir Park Hospital Estate. The Department has not provided any monies in preparing and maintaining the site.

The Department has not invested any monies in Rowallane Integrated College in the past three years. The school is funded by the Integrated Education Fund.

Rowallane Independent Integrated College

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the current location of Rowallane Independent Integrated College; and (ii) the amount of money invested by her department in preparing and maintaining the site. (AQW 3601/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department has not provided financial support to independent integrated secondary schools.

The current location of Rowallane Integrated College is in temporary mobile accommodation on a leased site at Belvoir Park Hospital Estate. The

Department has not provided any monies in preparing and maintaining the site.

The Department has not invested any monies in Rowallane Integrated College in the past three years. The school is funded by the Integrated Education Fund.

Rowallane Independent Integrated School

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the total amount of money her department has invested in Rowallane Independent Integrated Secondary School, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3602/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department has not provided financial support to independent integrated secondary schools.

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Protestant Teachers

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the percentage; and (ii) the number of Protestant teachers employed in primary schools in (a) the Controlled sector; and (b) the Maintained sector. (AQW 3631/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department does not hold statistical information on the religious breakdown of teachers.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the dates on which she briefed the Executive on her proposals for post-primary transfer. (AQW 3690/08)

The Minister of Education: I wrote to my Executive colleagues on 4 December 2007. The process of engagement was discussed at meetings of the Executive on 18 December 2007, 17 and 31 January 2008.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether or not she has sought the views of the Assembly Committee for Education in relation to the

future arrangements for transfer to post-primary education. (AQO 1924/08)

The Minister of Education: Bhí cruinnithe agam le Coiste Oideachais an Tionóil gairid i ndiaidh mé teacht i gcionn oifige agus bhí cruinnithe agam freisin le hurlabhraithe oideachais na bpáirtithe, agus bhuail mé leis an Choiste arís ar an aonú lá is triocha de mhí Eanáir agus chuir mé freagraí scríofa ar fáil ar cheisteanna a chuir baill den Choiste.

Following initial meetings with the Assembly Education Committee shortly after I took up office, and meetings in the interim period with Party education spokespersons including meeting with the chair, I met with the Committee again on 31 January 2008 and provided written answers to a number of questions they had raised. That meeting provided me with an opportunity to respond to further questions on other points of detail which the Committee wished to raise with me.

I also briefed the Committee on progress that has been made towards seeking a consensus amongst education-ists on arrangements for transfer in 2010 and beyond. At the meeting on 31 January, and indeed prior to Christmas, I invited Committee members to reach a consensus and provide me with their agreed views on a way forward. I am still awaiting their response.

I will continue to engage constructively with the Committee, and I value the input that they can make to the process of building an educational consensus that puts children first.

Dr Farry has asked me, in question number 7, to provide an update on my proposals. I am happy to do so.

After my statement on 4 December I met quickly with groups representing the full range of education interests. I asked all of them to provide me with a position paper based on their response to the vision I set out.

In the new year my officials have met with each group again and have explored the areas of consensus and the areas of continuing contention. I am asking my officials to continue with these discussions since I feel it is vital to engage directly with those in education and to seek an educational consensus.

When these discussions are complete I will bring forward detailed proposals to the Executive, the Assembly and, of course, the Committee. I am sometimes shocked to hear criticisms of this process but I make no apology for it.

This issue has been under discussion for several years. A way forward capable of widespread support has eluded us. I want to achieve it. Indeed I am determined to achieve such an outcome.

Books and Learning Aids

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education to detail the impact the Budget will have on the future purchase of books and learning aids for primary schools in the Strangford constituency, over the next three years. (AQO 1833/08)

The Minister of Education: Dáileann mo Roinn gach maoiniú ar féidir a chur ar fáil do scoileanna trí na húdaráis mhaoinithe tríd an mhodh sin.

My Department distributes all funds that could be made available to schools through the funding authorities, via that route.

This includes the delegated budget made available to every grant-aided school covered by the Common Funding Scheme.

The common funding formula, which is used to determine individual school budgets, is made up of a range of factors developed to reflect the main costs associated with the running of a school. The common funding formula allocations delegated to each school, are designed to cover all essential expenditure on items to be met from within the school's budget, including expenditure on books and learning aids.

The formula takes account of the number of pupils; their ages and profile; the relative size of schools; together with a range of other factors. Falling pupil enrolments inevitably impact on the budgets available to individual schools and highlight the importance of having sustainable schools planned on an area basis.

Once the size of an individual school budget is determined, it is for the Board of Governors of each school to decide how to use its funding to meet its needs and priorities.

Post-Primary Transfer

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on her proposals for post-primary transfer. (AQO 1932/08)

The Minister of Education: Bhí cruinnithe agam le Coiste Oideachais an Tionóil gairid i ndiaidh mé teacht i gcionn oifige agus bhí cruinnithe agam freisin le hurlabhraithe oideachais na bpáirtithe, agus bhuail mé leis an Choiste arís ar an aonú lá is triocha de mhí Eanáir agus chuir mé freagraí scríofa ar fáil ar cheisteanna a chuir baill den Choiste.

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This issue has been under discussion for several years. A way forward capable of widespread support has eluded us. I want to achieve it. Indeed I am determined to achieve such an outcome.

Council for Education in World Citizenship

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to fund the Council for Education in World Citizenship. (AQO 1931/08)

The Minister of Education: Fuair an Chomhairle um Oideachas sa tSaoránacht Dhomhanda maoiniú tríd an Scéim Bunmhaoinithe do Chaidreamh Pobail dhá mhíle a haon go dhá mhíle a ceithre. Chuir siad isteach ar mhaoiniú ar bhonn leanúnach i mbabhtai ina dhiaidh sin, ach ó bhí an maoiniú teoranta, ní tháinig leis an Roinn gach eagraíocht a mhaoiniú a chuir iarratas isteach.

The Council for Education in World Citizenship (CEWC) received funding through the Community Relations Core Funding Scheme (CRCFS) 2001-04. They applied for continued funding, in subsequent rounds, but, as the funding was limited, the Department could not fund every organisation that applied. In the recent round of core funding, commencing in 2007, the application from CEWC was unsuccessful.

All unsuccessful applicants were advised of their right to appeal and were provided with a copy of the appeal procedures. CEWC decided not to appeal the Department decision.

Is tríd an Scéim Bunmhaoinithe do Chaidreamh Pobail amháin a thig maoiniú do obair na Comhairle um Oideachas sa tSaoránacht Dhomhanda, agus faoi láthair tá an scéim lán tiomanta.

The only funding available for the work carried out by CEWC is through the Community Relations Core Funding Scheme and the current scheme is fully committed. CEWC should however be eligible to apply for funding under the next round of the Community Relations Core Funding Scheme.

Education Welfare Officers

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Education what steps she is taking to provide parity of pay and recognition between Education Welfare Officers who have social work qualifications, and Social Workers who are employed in the Health Service. (AQO 1917/08)

The Minister of Education: Tuigim ó na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne, arb iad na fostaitheoirí iad sa tSeirbhís Leasa Oideachais, go gcinntítear grádú Oifigeach Leasa Oideachais trí phróiseas comhaontaithe ar mheastóireacht poist.

I understand, from the Education and Library Boards, who are the employers of staff in the Education Welfare Service, that the grading of Education Welfare Officers is determined by an agreed process of job evaluation. This process takes account of a range of factors relating to the job including supervisory responsibility, creativity, contacts, decision making, knowledge and skills (including qualifications), and work context and is regarded as much fairer than a determination solely based on qualification.

Staff employed in the Health and Social Services are engaged under different terms and conditions of service from staff in the Education and Library Boards and their salaries and gradings are agreed through an entirely different negotiating machinery.

North-South Educational Projects

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Education to detail the new North-South educational projects she has introduced since taking up office. (AQO 1890/08)

The Minister of Education: Faoi choimirce na Comhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas tá comhoibriú ann ar an oideachas trasna réimse ceisteanna: oideachas do pháistí le riachtanais speisialta; an fo-ghnóthachtáil san oideachas; cáilíochtaí agus aoisliúntas múinteoirí; scéimeanna malairte do scoileanna, do dhaoine óga agus do mhúinteoirí.

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 in January with Micheál Martin, Irish Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

I will be hosting the next North South Ministerial Council meeting in Education Sectoral format in the

Spring and will, of course, report back to the Assembly on progress made on these and other issues.

Implementation Costs

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education to identify her department's allocation in the Budget in relation to the costs of implementing her 'vision' for education. (AQO 1857/08)

The Minister of Education: Cheadaigh an Tionól an Buiséad ar 29 Eanáir 2008. Tá mé ag déanamh breithniú ar mhiondáileadh an Bhuiséid do sheirbhísí oideachais.

The Assembly approved the Budget on January 29, 2008. I am currently considering the detailed distribution of the budget allocation for education services. However, the proposals under my vision are unlikely to require restructuring significantly beyond that already required by the need for Sustainable Schools.

Academic Selection Procedure

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of grammar schools that only accept pupils with grades 'A' or 'B' in the current academic selection procedure. (AQO 1914/08)

The Minister of Education: Sa bhliain oideachais 2007/08 níor ghlac ach 9 de na 69 scoil ghramadaí i dTuaisceart na hÉireann daltaí le Grád A nó Grád B.

In the 2007/08 academic year, 9 of the 69 grammar schools in the North of Ireland only accepted pupils with Grade A or Grade B.

Free Public Transport

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Education what consideration she has given to providing free public transport for special needs children and young adults. (AQO 1929/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá na socruithe taistil ón bhaile go dtí an scoil do dhaltáí le riachtanais speisialta oideachais taobh amuigh de na socruithe caighdeánacha, agus tá siad sonraithe do gach páiste.

The current home to school transport arrangements for pupils with special educational needs lie outside of the standard arrangements applied, and are tailored to each individual child. If health care professionals deem transport provision necessary as part of the child's statementing process, then transport will be provided using whatever mode of transport is recommended, to whichever school is deemed most suitable to meet that child's needs.

As part of its Concessionary Fares Scheme in the north, the Department for Regional Development provides half fares to young people up to the 30th June of the school year in which they turn 16; that is, while they are in compulsory education. In addition, the Scheme provides free fares to persons who are registered blind. Half fares are available to a number of groups of people with disabilities, including persons: in receipt of either mobility component of Disability Living Allowance; known to have a learning disability; registered as being partially sighted; and persons who have been refused a driving licence on medical grounds. I am advised that the Department for Regional Development made a number of bids to extend the Scheme as part of the recent Comprehensive Spending Review. These bids, which were unsuccessful, included the provision of half fares to young people up to their eighteenth birthday and extending free fares to existing half fare disabled categories.

Disabled Children at St. Joseph's College

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Education what action she is taking to ensure that disabled children in St. Joseph's Secondary College, Coalisland, have suitable access to school facilities; and what plans she has to ensure that the rights of disabled children in mainstream schools will be protected.

(AQO 1907/08)

The Minister of Education: Faoin Special Educational Needs and Disability Order 2005 tá dualgas ar Bhoird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne agus ar Bhoird Gobharnóirí gach céim réasúnta a ghlacadh lena chinntiú nach bhfuil dalta le míchumas faoi mhíbhuntáiste i gcomórtas le dalta nach bhfuil míchumas air.

Under the Special Educational Needs and Disability Order 2005 there is already a duty on Education and Library Boards and Boards of Governors to take all reasonable steps to ensure that a pupil with a disability is not placed at a substantial disadvantage in comparison to a pupil who does not have a disability.

In regard to St Joseph's Secondary College, I am aware of the current situation. A scheme to provide chair lifts, disabled toilet facilities and a lift is at an advanced stage of planning. This will ensure the children have access to all parts of the curriculum. The first stage to provide chair lifts is expected to be finished in April and the lift will be installed during the summer.

School Buildings Handbook

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on the progress of the review of the School Buildings Handbook. (AQO 1927/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá obair faoi lán seoil le Lámbhleabhar na mBunscoileanna a athbhreithniú. Le deireannas, bhuail Craobh Tógála na Roinne le grúpa de phríomhoidí bunscoile a raibh scoileanna nua-thógtha acu lena gcleachtadh agus a mbarúlacha a phlé maidir leis an Lámbhleabhar.

Work is currently underway to review the Primary School Handbook. The Department's Building Branch have recently met with a group of primary school Principals who have had recent new build schools, to discuss their experiences and their views on the Handbook. It is also intended to meet with other education stakeholders who are closely involved in the planning / design of new schools to obtain their views. It is planned to have the review of the Primary School Handbook completed by the Autumn of 2008.

The Post-Primary Handbook was substantially reviewed in 2003 and there has not been the same requirement to undertake a review of it again. The Department will, however, be considering what further improvements are required through engagement with the education sector.

Youth Services in Belfast

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education to detail all existing cross-departmental funding for youth services in Belfast up to the end of this financial year. (AQO 1911/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department received cross-departmental funding for the youth service in Belfast in 2007/08 from the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Office of the First Minister/Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). This funding was allocated to the both Belfast (BELB) and South Eastern Education and Library boards (SEELB).

The Department received £175,000 from the OFMDFM from their Community Action Groups Fund. This funding was allocated for youth intervention schemes.

The Department also received £536,000 from DSD from the Integrated Development (Renewing Communities) Fund and the Belfast Regeneration Office Project. This funding was allocated for youth outreach work and summer intervention programmes.

Visiting Northern Ireland to Study

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of requests she has received from abroad in relation to visiting Northern Ireland to study the 'world-class education system'. (AQO 1923/08)

The Minister of Education: Ní bhfuair mé aon iarratas sonrath leis an chóras oideachais de chaighdeán domhanda.

I have received no specific requests to study the world class education system. However, I have received:

- one request from Mr Paul Smyth from Public Achievement, Belfast on behalf of Miren Azkarate of the Basque Government to discuss conflict resolution and the use of traditional language in contested regions;
- an invitation from Miren Azkarate to visit the Basque country to exchange views on the work we are both engaged in and create new bonds of cooperation between the north of Ireland and the Basque country;
- one request from Mr Joe Mulhern, Senior Teacher in Harberton School on behalf of a group of visiting teachers from Turkey, Germany and Spain to launch a European Schools Project on the environment;

I have also

- hosted a reception for Modern Language Assistants in Parliament Buildings;
- had a comprehensive meeting with Fiona Hyslop, Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning in Scotland; and.

On 12 February I will be attending the launch of Stranmillis Colleges' project 'Capacity Building Programme for Teachers in Post-Conflict Areas' which include representatives from Ireland, Uganda, Rwanda and Sierra Leone.

The assembly will be aware of the widespread interest in the peace process between Ireland, Britain and the new institutions. I regularly meet people at various events from countries throughout the world who have an interest in the process.

School Places

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail any consultations she has had with the European Commission regarding her proposal to give preference to children from the Republic of Ireland for places in schools in Northern Ireland. (AQO 1817/08)

The Minister of Education: Creidim gur chóir do pháistí bheith ábalta freastal ar an scoil fhóirsteanach is gaire dóibh, is cuma cén taobh den teorainn a bhfuil sí uirthi.

I believe children should be able to attend their nearest suitable school regardless of which side of the border it is on. Our education system should not be built around partition. I have attended North South Ministerial Council meetings where we have discussed the removal of obstacles to mobility and this is one such area.

It is my intention to review the legislation (with a view to changing it) that currently requires schools to give priority in their admissions criteria to children resident in the North before any child not so resident. This is because the legislation may be in conflict with EU law and I am in the process of obtaining legal advice on this matter; I have not been in contact with the European Commission. Additionally it is my Department's policy to maximise the extent to which parents are enabled to send their children to their school of first choice.

Funding Youth Provision

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister of Education to outline the extent to which her department is funding youth provision in South Belfast; and to detail the portion of this funding that is targeted on drug and alcohol awareness. (AQO 1902/08)

The Minister of Education: Dúirt an Príomhfheidhmeannach de Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne Bhéal Feirsde gur sainíodh £406,483 ó bhunbhuiséad don tseirbhís óige i 2007/08 do Dheisceart Bhéal Feirsde.

I have been advised by the Chief Executive of the Belfast Education and Library Board that £406,483 was designated from the youth service core budget in 2007/2008 for South Belfast. In addition £17,628 was allocated for the Youth Intervention Programme, £10,750 for summer intervention, £35,000 for community based peer educators and £50,000 for detached and outreach youth work posts in the area.

This equates to £519,861 of the available youth allocation going to South Belfast.

In terms of drugs and alcohol awareness work with young people, Belfast Education and Library Board have advised that they do not prioritise funding directly to this area. However, many youth units deliver a raft of personal development programmes which include drugs and alcohol awareness.

Teachers' Conditions of Service

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Education to detail the terms of reference of the Curran Committee of Enquiry in relation to her department's review of teachers' conditions of service. (AQO 1891/08)

The Minister of Education: In September last year I signalled my intention to initiate a review of the schools workforce. I expect to make a further announcement about the terms of reference for the review in the near future. However, I should make it clear that the forthcoming review will not be restricted to teachers but will deal with all staff working in our schools. Nor will it be confined to issues around pay and conditions of service which were the main focus of the Curran Independent Inquiry. The terms of reference for the Inquiry are set out in Appendix 1 of the Final Report Part 1, published in June 2003.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Adult Learners

Mr Cobain asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of adult learners achieving a qualification in literacy, numeracy and ICT skills in (i) 2005; (ii) 2006; and (iii) 2007, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 2737/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The number of adult learners achieving a qualification in literacy, numeracy and ICT skills in (i) 2005; (ii) 2006; and (iii) 2007, broken down by parliamentary constituency is not available. However, the overall number of adult learners achieving a qualification in literacy, numeracy and ICT skills in Northern Ireland in (i) 2005; (ii) 2006; and (iii) 2007, is available and is detailed in the table below.

Essential Skills Course	Calendar Year ¹		
	(i) 2005	(ii) 2006	(iii) 2007
Literacy	3,576	5,387	5,227
Numeracy	2,341	4,016	4,955
ICT ²	N/A	N/A	131

Source: Awarding Bodies.

Notes: Figures are correct as at 30th November 2007.

1. Calendar year is defined as 1st January to 31st December.
2. The Department funded a pilot project for a new essential skill of ICT, which commenced in September 2006.

New Deal for Musicians Programme

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what is his assessment of the provision of teaching accommodation, facilities and equipment, in the North West, for those students enrolled in the New Deal for Musicians Programme. (AQW 2783/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The New Deal for Musicians programme is based on participants undertaking study of Open Learning workbooks, as opposed to being classroom based. Therefore, there is no requirement for the South Eastern Regional College who are currently contracted to deliver the programme throughout N. Ireland to provide any teaching accommodation. The workbooks are accessed through the internet with participants advised to use the facilities of their local library to assist them in completing these. Participants can also receive personal hard copies of the workbooks from the College which they can retain.

South Eastern Regional College also offer participants the opportunity to be awarded a discretionary fund of up to £400 to purchase equipment which will assist them finding work primarily in the music industry.

I am content with the delivery of the programme by South Eastern Regional College as the recent contract monitoring visit by my Department's Quality Performance Branch identified that the programme was being managed in an effective manner.

New Chief Executive

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to confirm when the appointment will take place of the new Chief Executive of the South Eastern Regional College. (AQW 2883/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The appointment of the Principal of South Eastern Regional College is a matter for the Governing Body of the College, as the employing authority, to determine. My Department has been advised that the interviews for candidates for the position are scheduled for the beginning of February 2008. The date of appointment of the new Principal by the Governing Body depends upon a suitable candidate being identified by the selection panel and any individual circumstances relating to this person.

Capital Build Programmes

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of apprenticeships that will be created, as a result of the Capital Build Programmes to be initiated by the Executive.

(AQW 3286/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Public Procurement Regulations 2006, Regulation 39, allows for the integration of social considerations within the procurement process. This could include the creation of apprenticeships and Central Procurement Directorate is in discussion with the

construction industry to determine how this might be achieved.

The number of apprenticeships that will be created will become clearer on conclusion of this process.

Apprentices' Earnings

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the guidance, in relation to wages, that he has given to companies that employ apprentices. (AQW 3432/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Training for Success Operational Guidelines for Level 2 and Level 3 Apprenticeships state that "Apprentices should be paid the appropriate rate for the job in line with National Minimum Wage (NMW) regulations." The Guidelines also provide the NMW Helpline telephone number and the website link, www.hmrc.gov.uk/nmw/help.htm#main

Computer Science Courses

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of full time and part time undergraduate students studying (i) computer science courses; and (ii) subjects in which computer science accounts for at least 50% of their course, at (a) Queen's University, Belfast; and (b) the University of Ulster's campus. (AQW 3441/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

(i) The number of full-time and part-time undergraduate students studying a computer science course at Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and the University of Ulster (UU) in 2006/07 are given in the table below:

	QUB	UU	Total
Full Time	805	1,580	2,385
Part Time	90	125	215
Total	895	1,705	2,600

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Notes: Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5.

(ii) The number of full-time and part-time undergraduate students studying a course in which computer science accounts for at least 50% of their course at QUB and UU in 2006/07 are given in the table below:

	QUB	UU	Total
Full Time	875	1,635	2,510
Part Time	100	195	295

	QUB	UU	Total
Total	975	1,830	2,805

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Notes: Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5.

University Fees

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment he has made of the impact of the difference in university fees, between universities in Northern Ireland and those in the Republic of Ireland, on the ability of universities in Northern Ireland to recruit students. (AQW 3452/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: It is too early to gauge the impact of variable tuition fees as we are only in the second academic year of the new arrangements. However, UCAS final accepted applicant figures for entry to full-time undergraduate courses in the UK in academic year 2007/2008 show that the number of applicants accepted to NI institutions has actually increased by 8.4%.

A review of variable fees and student finance arrangements is planned to commence in Academic Year 2008/2009. The review will look at the impact of variable fees on participation levels in Higher Education and inform future student finance policy for Northern Ireland.

Modern Apprenticeships

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the reasons why the consultants who prepared the 'Review of Modern Apprenticeships in the North West - Understanding demographics/ trends to date and forecasting future scenarios', did not hold discussions with the North West Regional College. (AQW 3511/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The terms of reference for the Study of Modern Apprenticeships in the North West commissioned a statistical analysis of the uptake of modern apprenticeships in the North West, benchmarked against other district council areas and against NI as a whole.

The terms of reference required the consultants to review and analyse data already captured by DEL. The terms of reference did not include provision for new or additional research, or for the consultants to hold discussions with any training providers. However, the consultants did meet with the Electrical Training Trust in order to develop a case study included in the report.

Tribunals Enforcement

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail any plans he has to introduce legislation to give (i) the Office of Industrial Tribunals; and (ii) the Fair Employment Tribunal, greater powers to enforce their decisions. (AQW 3555/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department plans a comprehensive review of mechanisms for resolving individual employment rights disputes beginning later this year. As a first step, officials will shortly begin discussions with key stakeholders, including representatives of business and the trade unions, to establish whether and how systems for resolving disputes can be changed for the better. Full public consultation will follow this initial exploratory phase.

The wide-ranging review will include in its scope, amongst other issues, the functions and powers of industrial tribunals and the Fair Employment Tribunal. I will consider carefully any representations received during the course of the review regarding the enforcement of tribunal decisions.

European Globalisation Adjustment Fund

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2897/08, to provide an update on the meeting that his departmental official had with the European Commission on the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund. (AQW 3561/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Following the meeting with officials of the European Commission on the EU Globalisation Adjustment Fund, Departmental officials have been working to clarify the criteria for application to the Fund and to gather information relevant to an application. Upon completion of this process I will make an assessment on the detail of an application.

Language Courses

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the steps that have been taken to provide the relevant language courses suitable for local businesses wishing to access markets in India, China and Russia. (AQW 3579/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The University of Ulster's School of Languages and Literature includes a language services company, FLEX (Foreign Languages for Export), which offers customised courses for companies engaged in global markets.

Additionally, Further Education colleges can arrange language courses for local businesses, as required.

Indigenous Trades

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the grants available to train people in indigenous trades, such as thatching and dry stone walling. (AQW 3637/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Training for Success is the Department for Employment and Learning's apprenticeship scheme for young people aged 16-24. Under this provision, technical and professional frameworks are developed by Sector Skills Councils, to address the skills needs of that particular sector. If an apprenticeship framework is developed by a Sector Skills Council which includes a particular trade, then the Department will fund the provision of training for an apprentice in that trade.

In relation to the trades you have mentioned, a Construction Industry framework has been developed by the Construction Industry Training Board (CITBNI). This framework does include training in thatching and stonemasonry, but there is no specific framework for dry stone walling.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has advised that it does not facilitate any grants to train people in indigenous trades. It has advised, however, that under the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme, support may in principle be available for specialist or bespoke training. This would, however, have to be agreed by a Local Action Group under the Programme, and be included in a local rural development strategy, which is drawn by the Local Action Group, based on the needs and priorities of its area.

DARD has also advised that the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) offers free training courses on field boundary management to farmers and farm family members. Furthermore, within DARD's Countryside Management Scheme, payments are available to farmers who carry out Field Boundary Management, which may include dry stone walling.

North West Development

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning pursuant to his answer to AQW 3020/08, to detail (i) the subjects which are identified as necessary for the growth of the North West region; (ii) which of these subjects have been identified for expansion in terms of student numbers and research; and (iii) which new subjects, necessary for economic

growth, will be added to the existing range of subjects at the Magee Campus of the University of Ulster.

(AQW 3672/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

(i) My Department has identified six priority skills areas which are necessary to the effective growth of the economy across Northern Ireland, including the North West. These are: Software Engineering, Electronics, Manufacturing Engineering, Tourism & Hospitality, ICT and Construction & the Built Environment.

(ii) My Department is working closely with the Sector Skills Councils to improve skills levels in these areas and is targeting resources towards their development. Under the Programme for Government, the Department is committed to increasing the annual intake of DEL funded PhD students by 100 per annum, culminating in 300 additional PhD studentships by 2010/11. These additional studentships will be focused on areas of economic relevance to be determined as part of the Department's forthcoming "Review of Postgraduate Policy and Funding".

(iii) The University of Ulster is committed to working in partnership with various development agencies, including ILEX, to offer courses at its Magee campus which provide the necessary graduate skills to support the development of the North West region. The University has committed itself to providing those courses deemed necessary for economic development, for example, by developing its current provision in computing and engineering (with a priority to expand into construction and building), creative technologies and business services. Since research, technology transfer and teaching are, to a large extent, complementary activities, research and technology transfer in these economically relevant areas would also be developed further (the latter in partnership with the Northern Ireland Science Park).

Economic Inactivity

Mr Cree asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action he is taking to address economic inactivity amongst categories other than students, single parent families, and those suffering with long-term illness.

(AQW 3724/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: A comprehensive range of services is available through my Department's network of 35 Jobs and Benefits offices and JobCentres and through contracted Providers to help the economically inactive find work. The services include mandatory work-focused interviews; action planning for certain clients and measures designed to improve the job prospects of those in areas of high unemployment and deprivation

who have severe employability barriers. These services are subject to regular review to ensure that the public Employment Service in Northern Ireland is fit for purpose in the delivery of Welfare to Work policies.

Non-NQF Qualifications

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in relation to FE 08/07 'Prescribed list of approved Non-NQF Qualifications', to detail (i) what is meant by 'robust quality assurance for non-NQF qualifications'; and (ii) what are recognised as 'clear progression routes'.

(AQW 3725/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

(i) The 'robust quality assurance' referred to in FE 08/07 means that all of the non-NQF qualifications submitted by the Colleges must receive full endorsement by the relevant Sector Skills Council (SSC) or Standards Setting Body (SSB). This ensures that a rigorous quality assurance process is being maintained across the qualifications offer.

(ii) Clear progression routes are those identified by Colleges which enable learners to advance their careers either by continuing with non-NQF qualifications or nationally accredited qualifications, and which will be recognised by educational establishments and employers.

Non-NQF Qualifications

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the list of qualifications that his department has accepted for the prescribed list of non-NQF qualifications; (ii) the organisations delivering these qualifications; and (iii) the reasons for the delay in providing the list of qualifications.

(AQW 3726/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

(i) The only non-NQF qualifications that have been listed, to date, are the following University Access Courses.

Access Diploma in Combined Studies	Univ'y of Ulster
Access Diploma in...	Univ'y of Ulster
Computing with Business & Multimedia	
Access Diploma in...	Univ'y of Ulster
IT Studies & Professional Development	
Access Diploma in Life & Social Sciences	Univ'y of Ulster

Access Diploma in Science	Univ'y of Ulster
Access Diploma in Social Sciences	Univ'y of Ulster
Access Diploma for Adult Learning	Univ'y of Ulster
Access Certificate in Arts & Humanities	Queens University
Access Certificate in Biological Sciences	Queens University
Access Certificate in Engineering	Queens University
Access Certificate in...	Queens University
Humanities & Social Science	
Access Certificate in Languages in...	Queens University
(French, German & Spanish)	
Access Certificate in Mathematics & Computing	Queens University
Access Certificate in Nursing & Health Studies	Queens University
Access Certificate in Social Sciences	Queens University
Certificate in Access Studies	OCN NW Region

The Department has agreed with the Colleges that these qualifications will be funded.

(ii) The policy of the Department is that these non-NQF qualifications will be delivered by the FE Colleges only.

(iii) The publication of the list was delayed to facilitate submissions from the FE sector for additional qualifications to be added.

Recycled Waste

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the percentage of waste produced by the department that is recycled. (AQW 3797/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department for Employment and Learning does not maintain its recycling information in the format requested. The Department, is however, committed to recycling as much waste as possible as part of its green and sustainable development policies.

A number of specific arrangements have been put in place to recycle paper, cardboard, plastic bottles, aluminium cans and glass. For example 33914 kilos of waste paper and 1142 kilos of cardboard have been sent for recycling from the Department's HQ, Adelaide House, since the introduction of a new "on site"

shredding policy in October 2006. The Department also recycles printer cartridges and mobile phones.

The Department actively promotes a policy of reducing the amount of waste going to landfill and keeps staff involved and informed with current initiatives by regular updates on the Department's Intranet and through articles in the Staff Magazine "Update".

The Department will continue to take every opportunity to develop initiatives in relation to waste management.

Student Anti-Social Behaviour

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the number of students attending Queen's University, Belfast, and the University of Ulster, who have been subject to disciplinary procedures as a result of anti-social behaviour off-campus; and (ii) the number of these students with term time addresses in South Belfast. (AQO 1901/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Available statistics show that, in the current academic year (2007/8) to date, 232 students at Queen's University and 143 students at the University of Ulster have been subject to disciplinary procedures in respect of anti-social behaviour.

342 of those students had term-time addresses in the South Belfast area.

Students from Outside Northern Ireland

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number, and country of origin, of students from outside Northern Ireland enrolled in courses at (i) Queen's University Belfast; and (ii) the University of Ulster. (AQO 1825/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: There is a total enrolment of 6,300 students at Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions from over 100 countries across the world.

There are 2,865 students at Queen's University Belfast and 3,435 students at University of Ulster.

The three countries, excluding Northern Ireland, which had the largest number of students enrolled at Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster in 2006/07 are as follows:

- Republic of Ireland - 1,025 enrolments at QUB and 2,215 at UU;
- England - 485 enrolments at QUB and 365 at UU; and

- China - 305 enrolments at QUB and 210 at UU.

A full list of enrolments by country of domicile in each university has been placed in the Assembly library.

Careers Service

Mr Burnside asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he is taking to make the Careers Service more effective. (AQO 1838/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Careers Service currently provides valuable careers information, advice and guidance to young people and adults. My Department together with the Department of Education has developed proposals for an all-age Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance Strategy for Northern Ireland which will further improve the effectiveness of the Careers Service.

Proposals include the development of Careers Resource Centres, improved access to up to date labour market information, development of partnership agreements with schools, implementation of recognised quality standards, and enhanced continuous professional development of staff. This will be supported by effective management information.

Responses to the consultation are currently being analysed and the final strategy and implementation plan are scheduled for summer 2008.

Task Force Report 2002

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the proposals for the future of Further and Higher Education within the area defined by the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Task Force Report 2002. (AQO 1906/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department, through the statutory Further Education Sector, continues to widen access and increase participation in further and higher education in the West Belfast and Greater Shankill areas.

Belfast Metropolitan College offers a wide range of courses at its main Campus and in its Outreach Centres throughout West Belfast and Greater Shankill. The College is also setting up a Workforce and Economic Development Centre on the Springvale site, which will offer a range of services to support economic and social regeneration in the area.

The Department is committed to Widening Participation in higher education in West Belfast and Greater Shankill, through:

- the introduction of the Belfast “Step-Up” programme; and

- an additional 200 full-time higher education places, allocated to Belfast Metropolitan College.

IT Sector

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give his assessment of the extent of the labour shortage in the information technology sector. (AQO 1847/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: It is estimated that the information technology sector needs 1610 new entrants each year to replace those leaving the IT workforce (this need is currently met) and 360 additional recruits per annum to support the predicted growth of that industry. Action to address this issue is currently being taken forward by my Department and InvestNI along with representatives from industry.

Springvale Education Village Project

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action he is taking to address the low levels of further and higher education attainment in the Springvale area, particularly in relation to difficulties with the Springvale Education Village Project and high levels of deprivation in this area. (AQO 1913/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Belfast Metropolitan College continues to take measures to encourage participation in further and higher education by local communities in West and North Belfast, including the immediate Springvale area.

There is a range of Entry Level, Level 1 and Essential Skills courses available through local ‘outreach’ centres and this service will be strengthened by the College’s planned Workforce and Economic Development Centre (WEDC), which will open in the Spring of 2010. The Centre will provide pre-employment and in-company training as well as support services to Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises.

The Department is committed to Widening Participation in higher education in West Belfast and Greater Shankill, through:

- the introduction of the Belfast “Step-Up” programme; and
- an additional 200 full-time higher education places, allocated to Belfast Metropolitan College.

The Department is also entering into discussions with Belfast Metropolitan College, and other Colleges, about the scope for Colleges to contract with local third party organisations to provide mentoring and

support services for those 'hard to reach' members of the community who might be prepared to enrol on employment related further education courses.

Newtownards Campus

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what is his assessment of reports that jobs and courses are to be lost at the Newtownards campus of the South Eastern Regional College.
(AQO 1813/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Following the merger of further education colleges in August 2007, the South Eastern Regional College, which includes the Newtownards campus, in keeping with other further education colleges in Northern Ireland, is organising its provision and structures to meet business needs. The College Management has yet to determine the final number and location of posts which may be made redundant as a result of the restructuring process.

Training for Success

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what is his assessment of the process undertaken, and standards applied, in relation to his department's procurement exercise, which led to the award of contracts for Training for Success; and what action he is taking to address the lessons learned in relation to future procurement exercises. (AQO 1895/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am content with the advice and guidance received from the Department of Finance and Personnel's Central Procurement Directorate during the tendering and awarding of contracts for Training for Success. The procurement process is quality assured and meets the ISO 9002 standard and also adheres to the 12 principles of Northern Ireland Public Procurement Policy as laid down by the Executive in May 2002. My officials are in the early stages of reviewing Training for Success and any lessons learned will be carried forward for future procurement exercises.

Concessionary Fees

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the instructions given to colleges by his department in relation to concessionary fees for pensioners.
(AQO 1815/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I have asked the Department to work with colleges to ensure that they adopt a consistent approach to the application of Age Legislation as far as it relates to the setting of

course fees. The Department has received assurances from colleges that consistent approaches will be in place for the start of the 2008/09 academic year. The Department is also working with colleges on eligibility criteria for fees setting that could increase the number of people, including some pensioners, who could benefit from fees concessions, in a way that is compliant with Age Legislation.

Skills Shortage

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to identify the areas where final budget allocations have resulted in gaps in his department's ability to deliver the skills necessary to compete in the global market.
(AQO 1934/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: In a tight financial environment, my Department secured a positive budget settlement with increases of 1.8%, 5.3% and 6.2% across the CSR period. In allocating my budget, I have given priority to those areas that support directly the Department's ability to deliver the skills required for Northern Ireland to compete in the global market. This was strengthened further through the additional budget allocation for innovation. Therefore, the main gaps are in areas which relate to assisting those individuals with barriers to participating in education and employment, including those who are economically inactive.

Economically Inactive

Mr Cree asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline how he proposes to support the economically inactive and disadvantaged.
(AQO 1851/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department's Employment Service, through its network of 35 Jobs and Benefits offices and JobCentres, is already pro-actively supporting those who are deemed economically inactive and disadvantaged. This support is available via a wide range of interventions and services, some in the form of specialist help, but all of which are designed to assist jobseekers prepare themselves for entry or re-entry into the labour market. The facilities currently available include access to Work-focussed Interviews; targeted help for those on Incapacity Benefit or Income Support who have health problems; the full range of New Deal programmes; specialist employability-focussed support for those with a history of substance misuse, homelessness or ex-offenders/ex-prisoners; community based provision in areas of high disadvantage for those who do not use the statutory employment services; provision which is

testing a new and more targeted approach to address clients needs and a number of programmes to assist people with disabilities.

Through this portfolio of programmes and services, my Department aims to deliver a high quality, customer focussed service, where necessary, helping clients to improve their employability and thereby increasing Northern Ireland's employment rate.

PhD Places

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to confirm whether or not the figure in the Budget for increasing the number of PhD places, takes account of the 150 places that will be lost in March due to the withdrawal of European Union Social Funds. (AQO 1799/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department's budget settlement facilitates the increase of the annual intake of funded PhD students by 100 per annum but does not take account of the withdrawal of European Social Funds or any other changes in funding. PhD studentships are funded from a wide range of sources including the universities themselves, the European Commission, charities, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Department for Employment and Learning, the UK Research Councils, businesses and overseas governments.

Careers Education

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions he has had with the Minister for Education in relation to the enhancement of careers education. (AQO 1850/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I have had discussions with the Minister of Education on 2 occasions, on 5 June and 13 August 2007, in relation to the development of an all-age Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance Strategy for Northern Ireland. This work has been taken forward by officials from both departments and the aim is to develop effective career decision makers leading to increased participation in education, training and employment.

The joint strategy issued for consultation in October 2007 and the responses are currently being analysed.

Match Funding

Ms McCann asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the resources available in his department to provide match funding to support women who are economically inactive to re-enter the workforce. (AQW 3959/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The Northern Ireland European Social Fund (NIESF) Programme 2007 -13 offers funding for projects that will benefit economically inactive men and women who are trying to enter, or re-enter, the workforce. The Programme will provide projects with 65% programme funding, made up of 40% from EU Funds and 25% contribution from my Department. The remaining 35% 'match funding' must be secured independently from other public sources by the project promoters, as was the case for the previous rounds of ESF funded Programmes.

My Department will not be providing 'match funding', in addition to the 25% contribution already offered, to projects to support women who are economically inactive to re-enter the workforce. However it has a range of provision available to assist economically inactive individuals, including women, to find employment such as New Deal, Pathways to Work and Further Education.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Renewable Energy Sources

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount of financial assistance that is available for renewable energy sources. (AQW 3351/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): Consideration of these issues is ongoing. I will have a substantive answer to you by Wednesday, 27 February 2008 at the latest.

Investment in Down District

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to his answer to AQW 1130/07, to detail the reasons why Down District was deemed to be an unsuitable location for investment from the other 3 potential investors; and to detail the number of visits to the Down District Council area organised by Invest NI in 2007. (AQW 3400/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Following the 4 inward visits under consideration 2 chose to locate in Northern Ireland, one of which was in the Down District area.

As is often the case, the companies did not provide detailed reasons for preferring one location over another.

When a company is looking at locations for potential investments various factors are considered, such as skills availability, infrastructure and property availability, and each company will assign its own weightings to the importance of such factors.

Invest NI does not determine the locations for potential investors: this decision is taken by the investor. Invest NI does however work closely with companies to ensure that the locations to be considered during their assessments of Northern Ireland meet their requirements and also provide the best opportunity to sell the Northern Ireland proposition.

There were no visits organised by Invest NI for the Down District Council area in 2007.

Foreign Direct Investment

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is his assessment of the difficulties that will arise in attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), from directing the location of investment in line with the PSA1 objective 2 commitment, to ensure that 70% of new FDI secured occurs within 10 miles of areas of economic disadvantage. (AQW 3409/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI encourages potential investors to consider all areas of Northern Ireland that have the capacity to support new investment projects but it is the investor who makes the final decision on location. Since its inception in 2002, Invest NI has secured almost 75% of new investment for areas of Northern Ireland that fall into this category.

Invest NI remains committed to delivering against its target for securing new FDI in areas of economic disadvantage, while recognising the challenges presented by the slow down in global markets and the effects of the credit crunch.

Renewable Energy Sources

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount of finance allocated to renewable energy sources for each of the last three years. (AQW 3417/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Consideration of these issues is ongoing. I will have a

substantive answer to you by Wednesday, 27 February 2008 at the latest.

Deficits in Economic Development

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to confirm that the specific deficits in economic development infrastructure, in relation to the North West area, have been identified in the Invest NI Corporate Plan; to detail what those deficits are; and to outline measures contained in the plan to remedy the deficits. (AQW 3445/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI's Draft Corporate Plan 2008-2011 will shortly be released for public consultation, following scrutiny by the Enterprise, Trade, and Investment Committee. Prior to preparing the draft plan, Invest NI undertook an extensive consultation process with its clients and key stakeholders, in particular, the main business bodies and academia.

The plan acknowledges the main structural weaknesses within the Northern Ireland economy as a whole, which are compliant to those described in the Executive's Programme for Government and associated PSA Framework, and outlines Invest NI's response to the challenge that lies ahead, within the strict limitations of its remit and the resources available to it.

The draft plan does not refer to specific sub-regional issues or initiatives. By necessity, it is strategic in nature. However, the annual operating plans that will emanate from it will bring clarity on specific initiatives and activities, at both the regional and local level. With specific reference to the North West, it is likely these will aim to build on the successes that Invest NI has already achieved since it was set up in 2002.

The Invest NI Performance Information Report 2002/03 – 2006/07, which was recently published, and which is available in the publications section of the Invest NI website (www.investni.com), demonstrates the success of Invest NI in influencing investment commitments in the North West Region (defined as the Limavady, Londonderry, Coleraine and Magherafelt District Council areas). To summarize, Invest NI offered financial assistance totalling over £95 million, contributing towards 1,965 projects that plan to invest almost £432 million.

University of Ulster Science Parks

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in relation to each of the science parks of the University of Ulster, to detail (i) a list of the companies located there; (ii) the industry in

which each company is operating; and (iii) the number of people employed locally by each company.

(AQW 3451/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The information requested is contained in the following table:

MAGEE SCIENCE PARK

Location	Tenant	Sector	Employees
Technology & Software Innovation Centre, Magee	8over8	ICT	20
	Biznet Solutions	ICT	14
	Clearway Medical	Healthcare	2
	Trufflepig	Multimedia	1
	Euroxchanger	Financial Services	1
	Beeches Management Centre	ICT	1
	Ecom Software	ICT	1
	EFW Ltd	ICT	1
	Optimum Results	Business Support	1
Software Development Centre, Magee	Invision Software	ICT	30
	Censys	Telemarketing	35
MS Building, Magee	Northbrook Technologies	ICT	220
Total Employee Numbers at Magee Science Park			327

COLERAINE SCIENCE PARK

Location	Tenant	Sector	Employees
Science Innovation Centre, Coleraine	UUTECH	Business Support	3
	Causeway Data Communications	ICT	8
	Gendel	Healthcare	1
	DF Solutions	ICT	3
	Air5	ICT	5
	Gaelectric	Renewable Energy	4
	Covernet	ICT	13
	Netramedia	Multimedia	3
	Invest NI	Business Support	2
	Telatec	ICT	4
	MCL	Property	3

Location	Tenant	Sector	Employees
Total Employee Numbers at Coleraine Science Park			49

JORDANSTOWN SCIENCE PARK

Location	Tenant	Sector	Employees
Technology & Engineering Innovation Centre, Jordanstown	Advantage NI	Business Support	3
	Concierge Directory	ICT	1
	Consultus	ICT	1
	Dementia Services (NI)	Healthcare	2
	Farmwizard	Agriculture / ICT	3
	Inphoactive	ICT	5
	SAP	ICT	25
	Tecnico Logix	Engineering	4
	UUTECH	Business Support	6
	FMS-NI	ICT	2
	Sophia Search	ICT	4
	Omiino	ICT	8
Total Employee Numbers at Jordanstown Science Park			64
Total Employee Numbers of UUSR tenant companies			440

Hotel Accommodation in Belfast

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of (i) bedrooms; and (ii) bed spaces, available in hotels in (a) North Belfast; (b) West Belfast; (c) East Belfast; and (d) South Belfast.

(AQW 3458/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

The current number of hotels within the four Belfast Borough Parliamentary Constituencies, along with their respective room and bed-space totals, are detailed in the table below:

Parliamentary Constituency	Number of Hotels	Number of Rooms	Number of Bed-spaces
Belfast North	3	115	232
Belfast West	1	42	84
Belfast East	2	166	376
Belfast South	19	1,909	3,955
Total	25	2,232	4,647

Within this distribution, two of the three Belfast North Hotels and all bar two of the Belfast South hotels are located in close proximity to Belfast City Centre. This includes the area south of the City Hall, the University area, Gasworks and Sandy Row/Great Victoria Street Areas.

EU Competitiveness Programme

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline when calls will be made for the EU Competitiveness Programme, with particular reference to (i) Priority 2.4 signature tourism projects; and (ii) Priority 2.3 tourism product and market development; and to confirm which agency is responsible for administering these measures.

(AQW 3464/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: DETI are the Managing Authority for the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) Competitiveness Programme and The Programme will be implemented directly by DETI and its Agencies, principally Invest NI and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB). NITB is the designated Intermediate Body for the delivery of the Tourism element of the Programme namely Priorities 2.3 and 2.4.

There will be no call for Priority 2.4 Signature Tourism as this will be implemented by NITB.

The proposals for the administration of Priority 2.3 Tourism Product and Market Development are currently being developed. This Priority will be delivered by a mix of procurement, open call and by NITB directly. Where appropriate, NITB will commence open calls in 2008/09.

Hotel Accommodation in Coleraine and Limavady

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of (i) bedrooms; and (ii) bed spaces, available in hotels in the (a) Coleraine District Council area; and (b) Limavady Borough Council area. (AQW 3492/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The current number of hotels within Coleraine Borough Council and Limavady Borough Council, along with their respective room and bed-space totals, are detailed in the table below:

Council	Number of Hotels	Number of Rooms	Number of Bed-spaces
Coleraine Borough Council	12	375	1,018
Limavady Borough Council	2	158	402

Casement Park

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to confirm whether or not Casement Park in West Belfast is designated as a tourist attraction; and if so, to confirm if it is eligible for white on brown tourist signing. (AQW 3493/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Tourism signing in Northern Ireland is considered under a policy jointly agreed between the Department of Regional Development (DRD) Roads Service and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB).

Under Section 1.2.p of the Roads Service Policy and Procedure Guide The Signing of Tourist Attractions and Facilities (2004), a sport facility is designated as a "Tourist Utility" – a place or a service that would be of interest to tourists but does not of itself constitute an attraction. On this basis, Casement Park is not eligible for white on brown tourist signing.

Other sports facilities in Northern Ireland have been considered for signing by Roads Service using black on white local directional signage. Decisions on signage of this nature rest with DRD Roads Service.

Arntz Belting Company

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in light of the public investment in the Arntz Belting Company, Derry/Londonderry, what his assessment is of the (i) short-term; (ii) medium-term; and (iii) long term, sustainability of the company. (AQW 3520/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Arntz Belting Company continues to trade as normal and there are no concerns about previous public investment in the Company. It is not appropriate for me to comment on the short, medium and long term future of the Company as any comments would be purely speculative in nature.

Planning and Environmental Heritage Regimes

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is his assessment of the impact of planning and environmental heritage regimes on his plans to provide a dynamic and thriving economy in the short-term. (AQW 3531/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Sustainable economic growth requires a planning regime which permits development whilst safeguarding the environment. This balance is not always easy to achieve; but I and my officials are committed

to working with the Ministers for the Environment and for Regional Development and their departments to ensure that the planning and environmental heritage regimes operate in a way that facilitates economic development.

Students: Language Skills

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment he has made of the adequacy of the number of school leavers with language skills in (i) Russian; (ii) Mandarin; and (iii) Hindi, in relation to the potential needs of Northern Ireland business in the global economy.

(AQW 3578/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I have not had cause to undertake an assessment as no weight of evidence has been made available to Invest NI that an inadequacy of language skills in Russian, Mandarin and Hindi is, or is likely to become, a limiting factor in the development and growth of its client companies.

However, I am satisfied that the practical support and assistance that is made available through Invest NI's offices in Mumbai and Shanghai, coupled with the trade and investment functions provided by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office through its Embassy network in India, China and Russia, is capable of meeting the needs of Northern Ireland businesses in these markets.

Hotel Accommodation in West Tyrone

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of bed spaces available in hotels in the West Tyrone constituency.

(AQW 3608/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: There are currently four hotels within the West Tyrone Parliamentary Constituency, with a combined 86 rooms and 193 bed-spaces. These hotels are detailed below:

HOTELS WITHIN WEST TYRONE PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY

Hotel Name	Number of Rooms	Number of Bed-spaces
Fir Trees Hotel	16	37
Hunting Lodge Hotel	15	33
Mellon Country Hotel	15	43
Silverbirch Hotel	40	80
Total:	86	193

Trade Visits

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of businesses, based in the West Tyrone constituency, that have taken part in trade visits abroad organised by Invest NI, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3609/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Five companies from the West Tyrone constituency have taken part in trade visits organised by Invest NI in the past 3 years as follows:

2004/05	1
2005/06	2
2006/07	2

Trade visits are open to all companies interested in doing business in export markets. Invest NI promotes these visits through mailshots, websites and seminars. A seminar on Doing Business in International markets was held in Omagh on 18 February 2008.

Workplace Injuries

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of people who have been injured in the workplace for each of the last five years. (AQW 3742/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The number of work-related injuries reported to HSENI and the District Councils for the last five years, is as follows:

2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
4467	4167	3696	3853	3524

Further detail is published in HSENI's Annual Report and Statement of Accounts for 2006/07, which can be accessed on HSENI's website via the link: http://www.hseni.gov.uk/annual_report_06_07.pdf

Local Enterprise Companies

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the role and contribution of local enterprise companies in (i) addressing the skills needs of employers; and (ii) helping to stimulate the local economy. (AQO 1882/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In relation to point (i), the Department of Employment and Learning has advised that Local Enterprise Agencies have no formal role in addressing the skills needs of employers. However, where needs are

identified, the LEAs may refer these to local Further Education Colleges, or other training providers.

In relation to point (ii), LEAs work for the benefit of their communities by supporting small businesses and community enterprises. The services they provide include enterprise awareness initiatives, start-up support, access to loans and property and business advice/guidance. Much of their programme activity is funded by government, the Start a Business Programme being the largest single contract which they have delivered continuously since 2001. This alone has supported the setting up of approximately 17,000 new businesses over that period, resulting in the creation of 22,000 jobs.

Social Economy Growth

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline how he proposes to encourage growth in the social economy.
(AQO 1842/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My department has and will continue to lead on the development of a successful social economy in Northern Ireland. Our approach centres on three strategic objectives – to increase awareness of the sector, develop its business strength and provide a supportive environment in which it can prosper.

Invest NI play an important role in DETI's contribution to the development of the sector through its range of business support services, particularly the Social Entrepreneurship Programme and will continue to do so.

Its Social Entrepreneurship Programme has been used to assist 65 new social economy enterprises since its launch in September 2006.

DETI will also continue to fund and support the development of the SEN with a grant totalling £600k over the 4 year period up to 2011.

Investment Conference

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of chief executive officers of major corporations in the United States of America that have confirmed their attendance at the Investment Conference on 8 May 2008.
(AQO 1868/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The invitation process is underway and the First Minister and deputy First Minister have issued a "Save the Date" letter to over 250 targeted US CEOs. The formal invitation will issue shortly with an RSVP

request and we would expect replies to come from that. Indeed, even before these invitations have issued, twenty targeted companies have expressed their interest or support for the conference at this point.

Requests for participation in the conference have also gone to existing investors and, as their participation is confirmed, we will be publicising their involvement on a conference website.

It should be noted that we will not be disclosing names of attendees in advance of the conference as companies have asked us to keep this information commercial in confidence.

Regional Tourism Partnerships

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the funding commitments he has made to Regional Tourism Partnerships; and to provide a timescale within which these commitments will end.
(AQO 1800/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In the context of the Programme for Government, the Budget, and of an independent evaluation of the Strategic Framework for Action for Tourism 2004 to 2007, which has recently been carried out, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board 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 Tourist Board's Corporate Plan will come to me for consideration.

Once priorities, programmes, targets and objectives for the allocation of the Tourist Board's budget are defined, consideration will be given to the most appropriate delivery mechanisms at Northern Ireland and local level to deliver the required outcomes. Funding commitments and associated timescales will be allocated to Regional Tourism Partnerships as appropriate within this context

Civic Amenity Site

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the Invest NI client companies that have registered an interest in purchasing the site that Down District Council wishes to acquire to provide a civic amenity site, but are unable to purchase due to Invest NI policy.
(AQO 1881/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The site referred to is at the Killough Road Industrial Estate. Invest NI holds approximately 46 acres at this location, 18.8 of which remain available. There are three recorded interests against this remaining available land.

Invest NI land is held exclusively for its client companies with an approved business case and an immediate demonstrable business need. As its clients' property needs vary, Invest NI does not record interests against a specific site but rather against remaining available land on an estate.

Demand for Invest NI land is at a record level and land that has previously remained vacant for many years is now subject to client interest.

Links with India

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the benefits which will result from closer trade and investment links with India. (AQO 1831/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I have no doubt that closer trade and investment links with India will result in increased opportunities for the Northern Ireland economy. Invest NI's new office in Mumbai, which I officially opened during my visit to India last week, is well placed to take advantage of these.

Invest NI has a successful record in securing good quality investment from India. To date, six Indian companies have invested £65 million in projects that have already led to the creation of 2,235 new jobs. During my visit to the country last week, I had very positive discussions with a number of companies, showing that there is significant scope for further investment by Indian businesses in Northern Ireland.

Invest NI's trade missions to the market have also been popular and lucrative. Fourteen companies have already committed to joining the next mission to Mumbai and Chennai in April.

Trade with India has strong export potential particularly in Engineering, for example, material handling, airport equipment, automotive, ICT and Software Services and a number of companies are already doing business there.

Titanic Signature Project

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide an update on his plans to take forward the Titanic Signature project, following the failure to secure Lottery funding. (AQO 1814/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Efforts are continuing to bridge the £25 million funding gap caused by the failure to secure Lottery funding. It would be counter-productive for me to reveal the detail of those efforts. I can, however,

assure the House that I am working hard to bridge this substantial funding gap.

Tourist Accommodation

Mr F McCann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action he is taking to provide incentives to hoteliers in order to encourage the development of tourist accommodation in areas of Belfast with growing visitor numbers, such as West Belfast and the Shankill. (AQO 1884/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI offers development assistance to hotels throughout Belfast. It supports the training and development of staff; management improvement; development of marketing; process and energy efficiency, and the development of management information systems.

A moratorium on capital assistance for hotel development within a 10 mile radius of Belfast city centre was introduced by NITB in 1997 and remains in place.

Where, however, the project is based in an area designated as an area of economic disadvantage, Invest NI may consider the merits of any proposed hotel and its ability to satisfy stated support policy.

Invest NI is aware of a number of proposals for development of hotels in West Belfast and has met with the promoters of a number of these projects.

Foreign Direct Investment Jobs

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the number of new foreign direct investment jobs that were brought to the Foyle constituency, in the last three years; and (ii) how many are targeted over the next three years. (AQO 1862/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In the 3 financial years 2004/05 to 2006/07, Invest NI supported development projects from externally-owned clients that promoted 1,155 new jobs and safeguarded 1,375 others in the Foyle Parliamentary constituency. Over this period, Invest NI made 7 offers of assistance amounting to £27.9 million towards planned investment costs of £135.6 million.

In the Programme for Government, for the next 3 years, Invest NI has a target to promote 6,500 new inward investment jobs within Northern Ireland. There are no specific jobs targets set for different regional locations.

Invest NI has limited scope for directing first-time mobile investment to specific geographic areas within

Northern Ireland. Clients are increasingly choosing locations that offer access to a large and skilled labour pool, within a reasonable travel to work area, ease of access through good transportation linkages, and access to a wide range of economic and leisure amenities.

Granville Industrial Estate

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of possible investors who have visited the Granville Industrial Estate over the last two years. (AQO 1871/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Much of the existing Granville Industrial Estate was sold to the private sector in 1994. Invest NI owns 50 acres of developed land in the estate to cater for demand from its clients and a further 40 acres that is yet to be developed; is being held as a strategic reserve.

Over the last two years, Invest NI has organised visits to its Granville lands for ten clients.

In recent years, Invest NI has seen a large increase in demand for industrial land. At 31 March 2007, it had 861 acres of land available right across Northern Ireland. Site leases are expected to reduce this figure to 770 by the end of this financial year. At this rate of uptake, Invest NI's landholding will be fully let within 5 to 7 years.

The Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland has a target that Invest NI will acquire and develop a further 200 acres of land by 2012.

Income Gap with UK

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline his plans to create higher paid jobs, increase productivity, and close the income gap with the United Kingdom average.

(AQO 1843/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In the context of developing the Programme for Government, I have made increasing private sector productivity my Department's top priority. We will therefore focus on high quality inward investment, seeking to secure investment commitments promising over 6,500 jobs by 2011, of which 5,500 will offer salaries above the Northern Ireland private sector median. In addition, we will target investment to increase innovation and exports and improve energy and telecoms infrastructure. However, the productivity drivers also include skills and wider infrastructure, therefore DEL and DRD have also important roles in achieving a high productivity, high wage economy.

Direct Air Routes

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the impact of the financial assistance provided to encourage direct air routes into Northern Ireland. (AQO 1809/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: A recent review concluded that the Air Route Development Scheme, ARDS, introduced by my Department in 2003 and which provided financial assistance for nine new air routes produced a positive economic benefit for Northern Ireland. This Scheme has recently closed.

Specific direct benefits, up to September 2007, identified by the review include:

- (i) funded routes carried just under 128,000 visitors, of whom around 29,000 would not have come to Northern Ireland if there had been no direct flight;
- (ii) those 29,000 new visitors spent an estimated £12.5 million;
- (iii) the airlines have created around 207 jobs as a result of the funded routes; and,
- (iv) annual tourism expenditure by the additional visitors support an estimated, additional 196 jobs in the wider economy.

In addition the Scheme has acted as a catalyst for new air routes, and Northern Ireland now has 35 international air routes, in comparison to only 1 when it was launched in 2003.

Performance Assessment

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is his assessment of the present performance of (a) Invest NI; (b) Intertrade Ireland; and (c) Tourism Ireland, in relation to their current contribution to economic development. (AQO 1867/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI, InterTradeIreland and Tourism Ireland continue to perform effectively and contribute significantly to economic development in Northern Ireland. A summary of recent performance for each body is set out below:

Invest NI: Performance to date and the estimated outturn against Invest NI's 2005-08 Corporate Plan targets (most of which are activity based outputs), indicates that the majority will be met. In 2006-07, Invest NI attracted 28 first-time and reinvestment projects from overseas owned companies, the best annual performance in this area of its operations since the agency was created. Headline targets in relation to new business start-ups, trade activity and foreign direct investment successes are likely to be achieved. It is expected that over 10,000 new start-ups will have been

created, over 600 firms will have begun to export for the first time, over 200 firms will have engaged in their first R&D activity and some 48 new inward investments will have been secured. It is also estimated that, across all its programmes, Invest NI activity for the period will result in planned investment in the NI economy of over £1,500m.

InterTradeIreland: From 2003 to 2006, InterTrade-Ireland has created more than 20 new North/South Business Networks and engaged with more than 12,000 companies to which it has provided information, advice and services. More than 850 companies have participated directly on its programmes, generating more than £81 million worth of trade and business value. More than 50,000 copies of the body's research reports have been downloaded.

Tourism Ireland: The ambitious targets set by Tourism Ireland for 2005/2006 (the latest years for which statistics are available) were met. 2005 showed a 6.8% (9% NI) growth in revenue and 5.1% (7% NI) growth in visitor numbers. In 2006, there was 6.9% (9%NI) growth in revenue and 5.2% (6.9% NI) growth in visitor numbers.

Corporate Plans going forward are subject to rigorous scrutiny to ensure that Northern Ireland's interests are promoted effectively.

Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline (i) the steps he is taking to ensure that a world class Visitor's Centre is constructed at the Giant's Causeway; and (ii) the stakeholders who will be involved in discussions. (AQO 2041/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The National Trust has advised my Department that it wishes to take forward the public sector proposal for new facilities at the Giant's Causeway. I have asked officials to assist the National Trust by providing all relevant material and information relating to the project.

The National Trust is in the lead in terms of discussions with key stakeholders, who include Moyle District Council, statutory consultees, such as Environment & Heritage Service, and potential funders.

ENVIRONMENT

Mains Water

Mrs McGill asked the Minister of the Environment whether or not a resident in a rural dispersed rural

community in West Tyrone who wishes to provide his own water system from a local well, because he cannot afford to access mains water, will receive a financial contribution towards the cost, in the same way as those who are connected to mains water do. (AQW 1879/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): Householders who requisition a water main under Article 76 of the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 are required to pay the reasonable costs in accordance with Article 77. However, these costs may be reduced by the application of a reasonable cost allowance to reflect the economic value of the new main to the public supply network. For properties built before 2000 a higher allowance is provided to assist properties unconnected to the public supply with the costs of mains requisition. This allowance is significantly higher than comparable provision in England and Wales.

The independent review of water and sewerage services recommended that the policy on reasonable costs allowances be reviewed.

Although my Department is responsible for public water supplies it has no statutory or financial basis for funding private water systems.

MEPs Meetings

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the number of meetings she has had with each of the 3 Northern Ireland MEP's since May 2007; and (ii) the purpose of these meetings. (AQW 3201/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I have not met with any of the Northern Ireland MEPs since May 2007. However, I am due to meet with Jim Nicholson on 28 February to discuss the Mayboy Landfill site at Ringsend.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Dr Farry asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) her department's bids in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review; and (ii) the amount of funding that has been allocated against them in the Budget 2008-11. (AQW 3359/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Budget 2008-11 has provided my Department with additional Resource funding of £4.4m (£2008/09), £6.5m (£2009/10) and £13.0m (£2010/11) and the table attached at Annex A details how this additional funding has been allocated against the various bids put forward.

Following proposals put to the Finance Minister and the Executive, my Department has also been allocated

additional Capital funding of £3.1m (£2008/09), £13.7m (£2009/10) and £180.2m (£2010/11). This funding, which has been disclosed in both the Budget 2008-2011 document and the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI), will be disbursed to the councils to help them procure the waste infrastructure required to enable Northern Ireland to comply with the stringent EU Landfill Directive targets. This capital subvention will ultimately lessen the impact of these waste infrastructure costs being passed on to ratepayers.

BUDGET 2008-11 RESOURCE ALLOCATIONS

Spending Proposal	Bid Order	Total Bids		
		2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Road Safety Service - New initiatives/ partnerships to reduce Number of casualties	1	800	1,600	1,600
Enhanced Road Transport Compliance (Driver & Vehicle Agency) to improve Road safety	1	780	1,395	1,670
Enforcement and better Regulation for environmental protection	2	870	1,255	1,980
Implementation of reform within the Planning Service	3	950	980	1,115
Costs associated with the Programme Delivery Support Unit to support the Councils with their Waste Management Plans	4	600	600	800
Costs of Implementing RPA - Planning Service & Local Government - to address issues such as finance, estates, shared services	5	4,450	5,500	8,150
Emergency Planning for NI Civil Contingencies Programme - Grant to District Councils	6	700	700	700
Costs to put in place a regime to deal with waste and contaminated land	7	1,500	1,500	1,500

Spending Proposal	Bid Order	Total Bids		
		2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Subtotal		10,650	13,530	17,515
Marker Bids				
Illegal dumping - for the removal and disposal of waste from the Rol (1)	9	8,200	5,200	2,600
Overall Total		18,850	18,730	20,115

Spending Proposal	Bid Order	Bids met from Resource Allocations		
		2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Road Safety Service - New initiatives/ partnerships to reduce Number of casualties	1	500	1,200	1,600
Enhanced Road Transport Compliance (Driver & Vehicle Agency) to improve Road safety	1	780	1,395	1,670
Enforcement and better Regulation for environmental protection	2	770	1,255	1,980
Implementation of reform within the Planning Service	3	2,150	150	250
Costs associated with the Programme Delivery Support Unit to support the Councils with their Waste Management Plans	4	200	600	800
Costs of Implementing RPA - Planning Service & Local Government - to address issues such as finance, estates, shared services	5	-	800	5,000
Emergency Planning for NI Civil Contingencies Programme - Grant to District Councils	6	-	700	700

Costs to put in place a regime to deal with waste and contaminated land	7	-	400	1,000
Subtotal		4,400	6,500	13,000
Marker Bids				
Illegal dumping - for the removal and disposal of waste from the Rol (1)	9	-	-	-
Overall Total		4,400	6,500	13,000

Spending Proposal	Bid Order	Variance between allocations and bids		
		2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Road Safety Service - New initiatives/ partnerships to reduce Number of casualties	1	-300	-400	0
Enhanced Road Transport Compliance (Driver & Vehicle Agency) to improve Road safety	1	0	0	0
Enforcement and better Regulation for environmental protection	2	-100	0	0
Implementation of reform within the Planning Service	3	1,200	-830	-865
Costs associated with the Programme Delivery Support Unit to support the Councils with their Waste Management Plans	4	-400	0	0
Costs of Implementing RPA - Planning Service & Local Government - to address issues such as finance, estates, shared services	5	-4,450	-4,700	-3,150
Emergency Planning for NI Civil Contingencies Programme - Grant to District Councils	6	-700	0	0

Costs to put in place a regime to deal with waste and contaminated land	7	-1,500	-1,100	-500
Subtotal		-6,250	-7,030	-4,515
Marker Bids				
Illegal dumping - for the removal and disposal of waste from the Rol (1)	9	-8,200	-5,200	-2,600
Overall Total		-14,450	-12,230	-7,115

Notes:

(1) These are estimated costs and are dependant upon whether or not the Department is liable for a third of the overall removal and disposal costs.

Planning Applications

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the percentage of planning applications; and (ii) the percentage of retrospective planning applications, that were approved over the last five years. (AQW 3425/08)

The Minister of the Environment: In 2006/07, the percentage of planning applications and retrospective planning applications approved were 79.8% and 85.4% respectively. The figures for 2002/03, 2003/04, 2004/05, and 2005/06 are currently being prepared for publication and will be available later in 2008.

Anaerobic Digestion Treatment

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment what plans her department has to promote and facilitate the introduction of Anaerobic Digestion Treatment. (AQW 3465/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Waste Management Strategy for Northern Ireland, published by my department, encourages a mix of technologies to deal with our waste, and in particular those that can contribute to meeting our non-fossil fuel obligations and policies on renewable energy. While anaerobic digestion is one option that can provide energy from waste, responsibility for identifying the exact type and number of waste facilities to be developed rests with the three sub-regional district council waste management partnerships, through their waste management plans.

Leylandii Trees

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to introduce legislation in relation

to nuisance Leylandii trees and high hedges.
(AQW 3497/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I am aware that this is an issue of widespread concern and I am keen to bring forward legislation as soon as possible, starting with a policy consultation on the detailed operation of the legislation. However, the timing will be subject to consideration of other competing priorities facing my Department.

Wildlife Order

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm whether or not her department has any plans to introduce legislation in relation to a new Wildlife Order for Northern Ireland (AQW 3498/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department is proposing to update the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985 and a policy consultation paper on proposed amendments will be formally published before the end of February.

Lough Neagh Water

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 3067/08, to confirm whether or not the company will (i) use water from; and (ii) discharge effluent into, nearby Lough Neagh. (AQW 3502/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The company, Rose Energy, have not yet submitted a formal planning application.

However, based on the information currently available; (i) the company do not propose to use water from Lough Neagh, and (ii) the company do not propose to discharge effluent into nearby Lough Neagh.

Producer Responsibility Unit

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of people currently employed within the Producer Responsibility Unit in her department. (AQW 3540/08)

The Minister of the Environment: There are 16 people currently employed within the Producer Responsibility Unit, which is part of the Environment and Heritage Service's Land & Resource Management Unit. Under the team manager, 8 people deal with Packaging Regulations and 7 people with Waste Electrical & Electronic Equipment, End of Life Vehicles and Batteries.

Producer Responsibility Unit

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the responsibilities of the Producer Responsibility Unit. (AQW 3541/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The role of the Producer Responsibility Unit within EHS is to implement European Directives on Packaging (2004/12/EC), Waste Electrical & Electronic Equipment (2002/96/EC), End of Life Vehicles (2000/53/EC) and Batteries (2006/66/EC). These Directives have been implemented through a variety of Northern Ireland or UK wide regulations. EHS works closely with colleagues in the Environment Agency and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency to maintain consistent regulatory systems across the UK.

The main responsibilities of the team are to:

- Identify and register obligated businesses;
- Audit businesses to check the accuracy of their data returns;
- Approve waste operators to issue evidence of waste collection and recovery targets;
- Regularly audit waste operators and check their data returns;
- Regulate Compliance Schemes;
- Report Northern Ireland data to the relevant UK Government Departments (DEFRA and BERR).

Review of Road Safety

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an indicative timescale for her review of road safety. (AQW 3545/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The review of the current Road Safety Strategy is well advanced and a draft report will be completed over the next couple of months for agreement with the statutory partners: DRD and the PSNI. I recently discussed some of the high level outcomes at a meeting with the Environment Committee.

Plans to prepare a new strategy have also moved ahead. I would envisage that this work, including underpinning research and consultation, to which all three partners are fully committed, would be completed during 2009 for introduction from January 2010, two years ahead of the end of the existing strategy. I also discussed with the Environment Committee a programme of road safety work that will be taken forward by my Department in the interim period up to 2010.

The new Strategy will include innovative education, training, engineering and enforcement measures to meet challenging new casualty reduction targets.

Giant's Causeway Visitors' Centre

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the discussions that have taken place between her department and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to the Giant's Causeway site, and plans to provide a new Visitors' Centre. (AQW 3559/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The records held by my officials do not appear to indicate any discussions having taken place between my Department and the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) regarding proposals to provide a new visitors centre at the Giant's Causeway.

However, on 20th October 2006, Planning Service officials replied to a written request for information from OFMDFM in relation to the application for a new visitors centre at the Giant's Causeway.

Planning Service Staff

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment what action she will take to deal with the capacity deficit in the Planning Service, due to the reported difficulties in recruitment and retention of specialist staff. (AQW 3604/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Whilst Planning Service has had some problems in recruiting specialist staff, the particular difficulty in recent years has been the loss of experienced planners through resignations and retirements. These issues had been raised at Ministerial level and with the Department of Finance & Personnel's Central Personnel Group (CPG) which is responsible for, among other things, pay and terms and conditions of employment. Remuneration packages which can compete with those offered to planners by employers outside the NICS are neither viable nor affordable.

However over the last year the number of professional staff leaving the Planning Service has declined and the Agency will continue to monitor this closely.

To reduce the number of vacancies a recruitment competition for casual professional planners has recently been held and 25 new staff will be in post from mid February 2008.

In addition, the Planning Service continues to monitor and prioritise the effective use its staff. For example, as resources required for the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan reduce, professional planning staff are being redeployed to other priorities such as processing planning applications.

An important further action to enhance capacity is the Planning Service's significant investment in staff training.

In particular it is carrying out a comprehensive review of training and development for its planners, aimed at accelerating the learning, development and competence of its new and inexperienced staff. The importance of ensuring the continuing professional development of these specialist staff, given their particular contribution to the work of the Agency, has been recognised in my decision to meet the cost of their membership fees to professional bodies.

Environmental Protection Agency

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the bids for funding, for an Environmental Protection Agency, that her department made to the Department of Finance and Personnel. (AQW 3723/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Final decisions on environmental governance have not yet been made so my Department has not made any bids for funding for an Environmental Protection Agency to the Department of Finance and Personnel.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Civil Service Vacancies

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the current number of vacant positions, including grade level, in the Northern Ireland Civil Service. (AQW 3293/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): The number of vacancies in all permanent Northern Ireland Civil Service posts in the eleven Northern Ireland Departments and their Agencies as at 1 January 2008 is set out in the table attached. The figures are broken down by General Service (and analogous) grades, and industrial grades.

VACANCIES IN PERMANENT NICS POSTS (FTE) IN THE 11 NI DEPARTMENTS AND THEIR AGENCIES POSITION AS AT 1 JANUARY 2008*

Grade Level	Number of Vacancies
(i) General Service and analogous (non-industrial)	
Grade 3	2
Grade 4	1
Grade 5	9
Grade 6	25
Grade 7	53
Deputy Principal	103.5
Staff Officer	253.5

Grade Level	Number of Vacancies
Executive Officer 1	262.7
Executive Officer 2	210.3
Administrative Officer	536.5
Administrative Assistant	348.2
(ii) Industrial Grades	64
Total	1868.7

* except figures for CSA available only at 21 December 2007

Civil Service Absentee Figures

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the latest absentee figures for the Northern Ireland Civil Service, broken down by department. (AQW 3454/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The information requested is set out in the attached table. You will note that the overall rate of sickness absence for the 11 NI Departments for the period April 2007 to December 2007 was 9.6 days. It is estimated that the rate for the annual review period - April 2007 to March 2008 will be 12.7 days, down from 13.7 days in 2006 / 2007.

The overall figures presented include NI Government Departments and their Executive Agencies.

TABLE 1 WORKING DAYS LOST DUE TO SICKNESS

Department	Working Days Lost* Year to date (Apr 07 - Dec 07)**
DARD	8.4
DCAL	9.5
DE	9.2
DETI	5.8
DFP	8.2
DEL	10.8
DHSSPS	7.3
DOE	8.1
DRD	6.5
DSD	12.5
OFMDFM	6.5
NI Departments Overall	9.6

Note:

* Working days lost is the average number of days lost per whole time equivalent member of staff.

** Days lost on a year to date basis is a cumulative figure.

Pension Credit

Mr Cobain asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what assessment his department has made of the amount of rates that a person who receives pension credit, and who lives in a house worth £100,000, will pay in (i) 2008; (ii) 2009; (iii) 2010; and (iv) 2011.

(AQW 3499/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: An individual who receives pension guarantee credit or pension guarantee credit and pension savings credit and living in a house valued at £100,000 who applies for housing benefit will be entitled to a full rate rebate in (i) 2008; (ii) 2009; (iii) 2010; and (iv) 2011 provided there are no non-dependants living in the household.

Pension Credit

Mr Cobain asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the amount of rates that an individual who received pension credit, and who lived in a house valued at £100,000, would have paid in (i) 2005; (ii) 2006; and (iii) 2007.

(AQW 3500/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: An individual who received pension guarantee credit or pension guarantee credit and pension savings credit and living in a house valued at £100,000 who applies for housing benefit would have been entitled to a full rate rebate in (i) 2005; (ii) 2006; and (iii) 2007 provided there are no non-dependants living in the household.

Water Rates

Mr Cobain asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in light of the findings of the Independent Water Review Panel's second report, what assessment his department has made of the amount of water rates a person who receives pension credit, and who lives in a house valued at £100,000, will pay in (i) 2008; (ii) 2009; (iii) 2010; and (iv) 2011.

(AQW 3501/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Executive is currently considering the recommendations put forward by the Independent Water Review Panel in its Strand 2 Report and has not yet agreed a methodology by which consumers will contribute increased revenue.

The Panel has dealt with the issue of affordability in its second and final report. It recommends that all those entitled to rate relief should continue to be entitled to the Affordability Tariff and that this should continue after 2010. Although Pension Credit is not a passport to the Affordability Tariff it is a passport to Housing

Benefit which is, in turn, a passport to the Affordability Tariff.

The Affordability Tariff investigated by the Panel consisted of a three-tier flat rate based on the capital value of the domestic property occupied. The three bands were:

- Property values up to and including £70,000
- Property values over £70,000 up to and including £100,000
- Property values over £100,000

The combined water and sewerage Affordability Tariff for the High Band (over £100,000) would be set at 3% of the single person's pension credit guarantee. For the Medium Band this is discounted by 25% and for the Low Band by 50%. In 2008/09 there will be no bill for water and sewerage but for subsequent years the combined Affordability Tariff for a property valued at £100,000 (which would fall into the Medium Band) is estimated as follows:

2009/10	£145
2010/11	£149
2011/12	£153

Compensation for Asbestos-Related Illness

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether or not he intends to follow the example of the Scottish Parliament, and introduce legislation to ensure that people can continue to make claims for compensation for asbestos related illness. (AQW 3549/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In *Rothwell and others v Chemical and Insulating Company Ltd and others* (2007) the House of Lords decided that the presence of pleural plaques did not give rise to an action for damages in tort. Pleural plaques are small areas of scarring (fibrosis) on the membrane surrounding the lungs (pleura) which indicate that the patient has been exposed to asbestos. The presence of pleural plaques does not normally impair lung function or cause disability and can only be detected through X-Ray or CT scans. However, a diagnosis of pleural plaques may cause the patient to become anxious that he or she will develop a more serious asbestos-related condition.

The decision raises serious issues for those individuals in Northern Ireland who have been negligently exposed to asbestos and have subsequently developed or been diagnosed with pleural plaques. Prior to the decision it had been accepted that a person diagnosed with pleural plaques was entitled to compensation. The decision of the House of Lords is binding on the courts in Northern

Ireland. It affects people claiming compensation in Northern Ireland as well as people from here making a claim for compensation in Scotland or England & Wales.

The Scottish Government announced on 29 November 2007 that it would bring forward new legislation to make clear that the decision in *Rothwell* would have no effect in Scotland and that people diagnosed with pleural plaques would continue to have a right to claim damages. The UK Government has indicated that it does not believe that it would be appropriate to reverse the decision for England and Wales. I will be following very closely the developments both in Scotland and England and Wales.

Before making a decision whether to follow the Scottish Government and present legislation to the Assembly to reverse the decision of the House of Lords I will wish to reflect further on the matter and consider, along with Executive colleagues, all the options which may be available. My officials are currently examining in more detail the decision in *Rothwell* and its impact on people in Northern who have been diagnosed with pleural plaques.

Sufferers of Pleural Plaques

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what assessment he has made of the impact on Northern Ireland of the House of Lords ruling in relation to sufferers of pleural plaques and their right to claim compensation in England and Wales. (AQW 3552/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In *Rothwell and others v Chemical and Insulating Company Ltd and others* (2007) the House of Lords decided that the presence of pleural plaques did not give rise to an action for damages in tort. Pleural plaques are small areas of scarring (fibrosis) on the membrane surrounding the lungs (pleura) which indicate that the patient has been exposed to asbestos. The presence of pleural plaques does not normally impair lung function or cause disability and can only be detected through X-Ray or CT scans. However, a diagnosis of pleural plaques may cause the patient to become anxious that he or she will develop a more serious asbestos-related condition.

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Before making a decision whether to follow the Scottish Government and present legislation to the Assembly to reverse the decision of the House of Lords I will wish to reflect further on the matter and consider, along with Executive colleagues, all the options which may be available. My officials are currently examining in more detail the decision in Rothwell and its impact on people in Northern who have been diagnosed with pleural plaques.

Unclaimed Assets Scheme

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on the progress made in relation to the Unclaimed Assets Scheme.
(AQW 3566/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Bill reached the Report Stage in the House of Lords on 29 January 2008. The Third Reading is scheduled for 26 February 2008. It is not yet known when the Bill will be introduced in the Commons.

When the Bill reaches the final amending stage in the Commons, the Department of Finance and Personnel will consult with key stakeholders, after which a public consultation on the Northern Ireland spending priorities will be taken forward.

Infant Mortality Rates

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the infant mortality rates for children living in areas of social deprivation. (AQW 3623/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The table below shows the infant mortality rate over the period 2002 to 2006, for areas classified by their level of deprivation.

Area ¹	Infant Death Rate ²
Most Deprived decile	6.4
2 nd Most Deprived decile	7.0
3 rd Most Deprived decile	5.4

Area ¹	Infant Death Rate ²
4 th Most Deprived decile	6.1
5 th Most Deprived decile	5.7
6 th Most Deprived decile	5.1
7 th Most Deprived decile	5.2
8 th Most Deprived decile	3.9
9 th Most Deprived decile	4.2
Least Deprived decile	3.7

- 1 Areas are classified on the basis of the ranking of Super Output Areas by the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (NIMDM) 2005.
- 2 The infant death rate is defined as deaths of children aged less than 1 year per 1,000 resident live births over the period 2002 to 2006.

Capital Spending

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the level of capital spending by each department, as a proportion of the budget allocation, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3640/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The following table sets out capital spending as a percentage of the capital allocation made to each department in the previous year's budget.

The figures are for capital DEL and are based on the final outturn information provided by departments

CAPITAL EXPENDITURE AGAINST BUDGET ALLOCATION

	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
AOCC		90.0%	263.3%	63.3%	50.0%
DARD	67.0%	97.6%	118.8%	53.9%	57.4%
DCAL	117.7%	169.2%	66.3%	67.3%	48.2%
DE	118.2%	121.5%	74.1%	59.5%	62.1%
DEL	95.6%	110.4%	87.8%	59.7%	71.2%
DETI	4.1%	109.0%	102.4%	83.5%	39.3%
DFP	152.3%	186.8%	-28.8%	45.7%	102.3%
DHSSPS	125.9%	130.2%	112.5%	89.7%	100.5%
DOE	103.6%	248.0%	92.2%	76.2%	121.8%
DRD	102.0%	131.4%	98.8%	90.3%	105.0%
DSD	67.9%	6.3%	142.5%	91.8%	35.5%
FSA				94.0%	56.0%
NIA	12.1%	1.6%	1.0%	1.5%	3.1%
NIAER	287.0%	73.9%	87.0%	291.3%	139.1%
NIAO	278.1%	110.2%	142.1%	134.6%	275.8%
OFMDFM	0.8%	-125.3%	103.6%	29.6%	16.5%

	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
Total	83.2%	105.6%	99.8%	79.1%	77.3%

Note 1: 2002-03 is on a RAB Stage 1 basis all other years are on RAB stage 2

Note 2: AOCC in 2002-03 and FSA in 2004-05 had no capital allocation in the budget.

Note 3: The figures published in the December 2002 budget for 2003-04 did not include capital grants the figures above have been amended to include them.

You should note than in comparing expenditure against a budget allocation the impact of changes which occurred during the inyear monitoring process has not been captured.

United States Investment Conference

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give a timescale within which the new Regional Economic Strategy will be prepared and the role it will play in the United States Investment Conference in May. (AQW 3671/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The draft Regional Economic Strategy (RES) reflects the aspirations of the previous Direct Rule Ministers. There is therefore a need to radically rewrite the document to reflect the Assembly and Executive's economic aspirations for Northern Ireland, as set out in the Programme for Government and Final Budget.

Drafting a new RES will take place in parallel with the second Varney Review. The recommendations of this Review will be highly relevant to the future economic development of Northern Ireland and it would therefore not be appropriate to finalise the RES before this review completes. The policy implications of the second Varney Review will be available for discussion and circulation, if necessary, at the US/NI Investment Conference scheduled for May 2008.

Department's Vehicle Usage

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the records kept of non-Ministerial use of the department's car pool. (AQW 3736/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Official Car Pool holds full details of all journeys undertaken by officials entitled to use the service. Details include the date, the pick-up point and time together with the destination and time of arrival.

Workplace 2010 Project

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on Workplace 2010; and to detail reasons for any delay in delivering this project. (AQW 3888/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am pleased to say that on 14 January 2008 the Department of Finance and Personnel invited the two remaining bidders, Land Securities Trillium and Telereal, to submit their best and final offers for the Workplace 2010 contract. The invitations were issued following the resolution of a legal challenge taken against the Department by an unsuccessful bidder in spring 2007. The legal proceedings created some delay in the process although in procurement terms the Workplace 2010 timetable is still very realistic. Based on current projections the Department will be seeking to appoint a preferred bidder in the early autumn with a view to finalising the contract in early 2009.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Clostridium Difficile

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether or not he intends to initiate a Public Inquiry into the recent outbreak of Clostridium difficile, and the resultant deaths of 16 people, including 10 patients at the Antrim Area Hospital. (AQW 3196/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): My priority is to ensure that the current outbreak is brought under control. I believe establishing a public inquiry would distract the Trust from this overriding priority and put patients at risk. I have however asked the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority, once the outbreak is over, to carry out an independent review into the circumstances that led to this incident and make recommendations to the Trust and to the wider Health and Social Care family.

Clostridium Difficile

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what steps he has taken to determine the cause of the outbreak of Clostridium difficile in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 3197/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have asked the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority, once the outbreak is over, to carry out an independent review into the circumstances that led to this incident and make recommendations to the Trust and to the wider Health and Social Care family. Lessons drawn from the RQIA's report will be acted on in order to reduce the risk of occurrence of such an outbreak in any hospital in Northern Ireland.

In the meantime the Trust has put in place a robust action plan which includes reviewing antibiotic use; containment of infected patients, and an intensive cleaning regime.

Causeway Women's Aid

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not Causeway Women's Aid will continue to receive funding via the Children's Fund in order to deliver their 'Domestic Violence and Children: A Prevention and Intervention Project'. (AQW 3259/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Some funding has been identified to support Children's Fund-type activity after March 2008. Decisions about funding for individual projects should be announced shortly.

Bowel Screening Programme

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans are in place to ensure that the bowel screening programme will commence in March 2009; and to confirm that the necessary administration, technology and facilities will be in place. (AQW 3310/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am pleased that the budget settlement will allow me to introduce screening for bowel cancer in 2009. The introduction of the programme is planned for late 2009, not for March of that year.

The introduction of a new screening programme is a complex task, requiring the establishment of the necessary and appropriate administration, technology and services. The Department is currently working with service providers to expand the capacity of endoscopy services; to ensure that endoscopy services meet the UK national standards that have been set, and to establish a training programme for endoscopists, so that the necessary follow-up services can be provided to those who are identified as being at risk through the screening programme.

We are also in the process of appointing a project manager to coordinate the introduction of the screening programme.

Closure of Sperrin Ward

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not he has any plans to close the Sperrin ward at Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital. (AQW 3327/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have no plans to close the Sperrin ward. I understand that the Western Health and Social Care Trust is redesigning the care services provided there.

Refurbished Hospital Theatres

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the projected lifespan of the refurbished theatres at the Erne Hospital; and what plans he has for the theatres when the new acute hospital opens in 2011. (AQW 3328/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The two existing theatres at the Erne Hospital, Enniskillen, which are currently being refurbished will have a projected lifespan of approximately five years. These services are expected to move to the new South West Acute Hospital in 2012. The existing Erne Hospital including theatres, will then be decommissioned. Where practicable, serviceable equipment will be relocated for use in other acute facilities

Clostridium Difficile

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the directives his department has given in relation to clostridium difficile, following the 16 deaths in the Northern Health and Social Services Board area. (AQW 3336/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On 12 April 2007, the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Nursing Officer issued a letter headed 'the prevention of infection caused by Clostridium difficile' to all Trust Chief Executives; Infection Prevention and Control Leads in the Trusts; Trust Medical Directors; Trust Nursing Directors, for dissemination to all nurses; Consultant Microbiologists; Infection Control Nurses; Regional Epidemiologists at CDSC (NI); Consultants in Communicable Disease Control in the HSS Boards and Directors of Public Health in the HSS Boards. This letter is available at www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/phhss_md_9-2007.pdf and was

accompanied by a Good Practice Guide to Control of *Clostridium difficile*. The letter emphasises the need for Trust policies to cover:

- antibiotic prescribing policies to minimise the use of broad spectrum antibiotics;
- clinical protocols for the prompt diagnosis of infection caused by *Clostridium difficile* in patients with diarrhea;
- isolation or cohorting of cases of infection caused by *Clostridium difficile* and control of the movement of infected patients between wards and departments;
- enhanced infection control procedures for the nursing care of patients with infection caused by *Clostridium difficile*, including emphasis on the need for handwashing after patient contact or handling bedpans etc, and
- cleaning protocols which include increased environmental cleaning and the use of disinfectants e.g. chlorine-based in areas where there are *Clostridium difficile* infected patients.

The Permanent Secretary wrote to Health and Social Care organisations on 18 January 2008 detailing learning from the HCAI incident in Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells Trust. The Chief Medical Officer issued a further letter on 24 January 2008, in response to the increase in cases at Antrim Area Hospital, reminding clinicians of the need for heightened awareness of this condition; for policies and procedures to be in place to minimise the risk of infection caused by *Clostridium difficile*, and for management of cases. This letter is available at www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/hss-md-2008.pdf

I have asked the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority, once the outbreak is over, to review the circumstances that led to the incident in Antrim Area Hospital, and make recommendations to the Trust and to the wider Health and Social Care family.

On 25 January 2008, I announced that I would be investing an additional £9 million over the next three years to improve patient safety and, in particular to reduce the spread of infections such as MRSA and *Clostridium difficile*. This additional funding will be used to put in place an extensive package of further

measures aimed at fighting healthcare-associated infections, including: single rooms for new hospitals to improve privacy as well as hygiene; unannounced inspections of all hospitals; a regional dress code for all health care staff; a regional hand hygiene campaign; rapid response cleaning teams at all hospitals; funding for a pharmacist in each Trust to promote safer prescribing of antibiotics; and quarterly publication of Trusts' infection control performance.

I believe that measures that I have announced, along with the practices and protocols already in place, will help to restore public confidence in our hospitals.

Departmental Funding

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) his department's bids in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review; and (ii) the amount of funding that has been allocated against them in the Budget 2008-11. (AQW 3361/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department submitted bids to the Department of Finance and Personnel under the CSR process covering both unavoidable pressures and service development needs. My original bids for resources, as adjusted for ongoing analysis during the CSR process, were £336m/£640m/£1000m for 2008/09 to 2010/11. In addition, a bid for Innovation Funding of £2.6m/£4.2m/£6.3m and a Welfare Reform bid made by Department of Social Development of £3.6m/£3.6m/£4.6m brought my total bids to £342.2m/£647.8m/£1010.9m.

In the Final Executive Budget, my Department has been allocated total funds of £3949.6m/£4076.4m/£4273.6m for 2008/09 to 2010/11. In addition, the budget has provided a package of measures designed to provide DHSSPS with greater scope and flexibility and an additional £20m as the guaranteed first call on in-year monitoring in 2008/9 to 2010/11.

I have set out at Annex A the full list of original bids together with the monies that I have allocated against each based on the final budget outcome.

ANNEX A

INESCAPABLES £000						
	2008-09		2009-10		2010-11	
	Original	Final	Original	Final	Original	Final
Pay at 3%, Pay Reform and Agenda for Change	105,000	105,000	199,000	199,000	294,000	294,000
Non Pay at 2.7%	20,000	20,000	40,000	40,000	60,000	60,000
Pharmaceutical Services	44,000	44,000	92,000	92,000	144,000	144,000
Amended NHS Pension (Superannuation) Scheme	13,000	9,000	28,000	10,000	31,000	11,000

INESCAPABLES £000						
	2008-09		2009-10		2010-11	
	Original	Final	Original	Final	Original	Final
Pandemic Flu Emergency Provision	4,000	3,000	4,000	2,000	20,000	20,000
Medical Workforce Training and Tuition Fees	7,000	7,000	13,000	13,000	17,000	17,000
Renal Services	3,000	2,000	6,000	3,000	9,000	6,000
Child Protection	1,000	1,000	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000
Children with Complex Needs	2,000	2,000	3,000	3,000	4,000	4,000
Blood Safety	1,000	1,000	3,000	3,000	5,000	5,000
Revenue Consequences of capital investment	22,000	21,000	47,000	44,000	71,000	67,000

INESCAPABLES £000						
	2008-09		2009-10		2010-11	
	Original	Final	Original	Final	Original	Final
GP Contract	1,000	0	5000	3,000	10,000	5,000
Additional acute costs	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,000
Mainstreaming Children and Young People's Package	5,000	5,000	4,000	4,000	4,000	4,000
Demographic Pressures in Primary and Community Services	5,000	7,000	11,000	18,000	25,000	35,000
Capitation	0	3,000	0	10,000	0	10,000
Nursing mentoring	0	1,000	0	2,000	0	2,000
HSC Complaints	0	1,000	0	1,000	0	1,000
Total Inescapable Bids	235,000	234,000	459,000	451,000	698,000	689,000

SERVICE DEVELOPMENTS £000						
	2008-09		2009-10		2010-11	
	Original	Final	Original	Final	Original	Final
Mental Health and Learning Disability (Note 1)	20,850	21,850	33,200	25,200	53,600	45,600
Long Term Conditions (Note 2)	11,350	8,750	17,600	14,400	24,300	21,000
Cardiovascular/Stroke	6,000	4,000	12,000	6,000	20,000	16,000
Cancer Services	2,000	2,000	14,000	3,000	20,000	6,000
Cancer Control	6,000	3,000	10,000	10,000	16,000	13,000
Public Health and Health Protection	9,000	5,000	17,000	7,000	22,000	12,000
Specialist Drugs	5,000	1,000	10,000	3,000	15,000	12,000
Quality & Safety	4,000	2,000	8,000	2,000	10,000	5,000
Disability	5,000	1,000	7,000	2,000	12,000	7,000
Children	8,000	5,000	12,000	7,000	19,000	10,000
Acute Services	6,000	1,000	10,000	2,000	18,000	8,000
Elective Care Access	5,000	4,000	10,000	5,000	15,000	6,000
Fire	2,000	2,000	3,000	2,000	5,000	3,000
Research and Development (Note 2)	6,000	1,000	6,000	1,000	6,000	1,000
Free Personal Care	0	0	0	0	25,000	0
Free Prescriptions	3,000	0	6,000	0	9,000	0
Free Eye Examinations	3,000	0	3,000	0	3,000	0

SERVICE DEVELOPMENTS £000						
	2008-09		2009-10		2010-11	
	Original	Final	Original	Final	Original	Final
Developing Core Services	5,000	0	10,000	0	20,000	0
Total Service Developments	107,200	61,600	188,800	89,600	312,900	165,600
Total Inescapables and Service Developments	342,200	295,600	647,800	540,600	1,010,900	854,600

Note 1 – this includes funding for Welfare Reform bid for by DSD.

Note 2 – this includes innovation funding.

Health Care Provision

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the (i) health and care centres; (ii) minor injury units; (iii) community hospitals; and (iv) acute hospitals, currently in existence in Northern Ireland, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 3379/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

(i) Health and Care Centres by Parliamentary Constituency Area (PCA)

Health and social care is provided from a wide range of community facilities across Northern Ireland including health centres, GP practices, resources centres, day care facilities, residential and nursing homes. My current policy provides for a number of these services to be brought together in new health and social care centres across Northern Ireland. Following an estate rationalisation programme and the introduction of these new models in Belfast, all boards in conjunction with Trusts have now developed plans for the provision of these new centres in their areas. The following centres are operational:

PCA	Health & Care Centres
Belfast East	The Arches Centre
Belfast South	The Bradbury Centre
Belfast North	Carlisle Centre

(ii) Minor Injury Units by PCA

In addition to A&E, urgent care and treatment and minor injuries services provided at the hospitals offering a restricted or full range of services at (iv) below, the following hospitals provide minor injuries services:

PCA	Minor Injury Units
Fermanagh & S. Tyrone	South Tyrone
Newry & Armagh	Armagh Community
North Down	Bangor

PCA	Minor Injury Units
Strangford	Ards

(iii) Community hospitals by PCA

There is no definitive description of a community hospital in Northern Ireland. The hospitals/providers below provide a range of local services, for example, care of the elderly, palliative care, rehabilitation, intermediate care, outpatient services and diagnostics:

PCA	Hospital/provider
Belfast East	Woodstock Lodge
Belfast North	Alexandra Gardens
Belfast South	Forster Green
Foyle	Waterside (wards 1-4); Waterside (ward 5)
Lagan Valley	Thompson House
Newry & Armagh	Armagh Community; Mullinure
North Antrim	Dalriada; Robinson Memorial; Braid Valley
North Down	Bangor
South Down	Mourne
East Antrim	Moyle; Carrickfergus
Strangford	Ards
Upper Bann	Lurgan;

In addition, mental health and learning disability services are provided from:

PCA	Hospital/provider
Belfast North	Whiteabbey
Belfast South	Shaftesbury Square; Young People's Centre; Knockbracken Healthcare Park; Windsor House (Belfast City)
East Londonderry	Ross Thompson Unit (Causeway)
Foyle	Gransha; Lakeview (formerly Stradreagh)

PCA	Hospital/provider
Newry & Armagh	St Luke's; Longstone;
South Antrim	Holywell; Muckamore Abbey
South Down	Downshire;
West Tyrone	Tyrone and Fermanagh

(iv) Acute hospitals by PCA

The following hospitals provide a restricted or full range of inpatient acute services:

PCA	Acute Hospitals
Belfast North	Mater Infirmorum; Whiteabbey
Belfast South	Belfast City; Musgrave Park
Belfast West	Royal Group of Hospitals
East Londonderry	Causeway
Fermanagh & S Tyrone	Erne
Foyle	Altnagelvin Area
Lagan Valley	Lagan Valley
Mid-Ulster	Mid-Ulster
Newry & Armagh	Daisy Hill
South Antrim	Antrim
South Down	Downe
Strangford	Ulster
Upper Bann	Craigavon Area
West Tyrone	Tyrone County

Mental-Health Funding

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount of money from his department's budget that will be allocated to mental health. (AQW 3380/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There will be an additional £11m allocated to mental health services in 2008/09, £12m in 2009/10, and £23m in 2010/11. This will be on top of an estimated spend of £187million in 2007/08 on mental health services.

Mental Health

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what actions he is taking in relation to (i) prevention; and (ii) promotional issues on mental health. (AQW 3382/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Promoting Mental Health Strategy and Action Plan was issued in 2003 and contains 20 actions to improve people's mental health and emotional well being. In this financial year my Department has made available £600,000 to Health and Social Care and the Health Promotion Agency to implement the actions. This includes a range of measures such as raising awareness and understanding of mental health issues, programmes to promote coping skills, and improving knowledge and skills of health professionals.

Comprehensive major public information campaigns including television and radio advertisements and information leaflets have been developed by the Health Promotion Agency. These are aimed at promoting awareness and understanding around the issue of mental and emotional health.

Funding for Fire Stations

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if funding will be made available to build a new Fire Station (i) in Ballymena; (ii) in Cushendall; and (iii) in Ballycastle. (AQW 3407/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department recently secured an additional £14 million for the Fire and Rescue Service capital development programme, bringing its total capital budget to £46m. This increased level of funding will assist in the continued delivery of essential modernisation to fire service fleet and specialist equipment, as well as provide initial investment for the redevelopment of fire stations in this vital public service.

Determining priorities of the capital budget, including renewal / upgrading of fire stations, including those in Ballymena, Cushendall and Ballycastle will be a matter for the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service.

Medinet at Tyrone County Hospital

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of operations carried out by Medinet at Tyrone County Hospital over the past 12 months; (ii) the types of operations carried out; and (iii) the total cost of these operations to the department. (AQW 3412/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Medinet carried out 43 operations at Tyrone County Hospital in the period 1 January 2007 to 31 December 2007.

All operations were for the removal of cataracts.

The total cost of these operations was £36,550

Nursing Staff Pay

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the Health and Social Services Boards who have paid the 2% increase to their nursing staff, as agreed in June 2007; (ii) the Health and Social Services Boards which have still not done so; and (iii) the date on which payment will be made by these Health and Social Services Boards. (AQW 3413/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The 2.5% pay increase from 1 April 2007 is only payable to staff on the Agenda for Change rates of pay. For staff not yet on these rates the 2.5% increase will be paid when they are put on the new rates and backdated to 1 April 2007. Most nurses are employed by the Health and Social Care Trusts however there are a small number employed by the Health and Social Services Boards. The Northern Health and Social Services Board does not directly employ nursing staff; of the other three Health and Social Services Boards (i) the Western Board paid the 2.5% increase to all staff including nurses in December, (ii) the Eastern and Southern Boards have not yet moved their nursing staff to Agenda for Change rates of pay but are working towards concluding this exercise, and (iii) the 2.5% pay increase will be paid when staff are moved on to the Agenda for Change rates of pay.

Ambulance Response Times

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (i) the method used for calculation of ambulance response times; (ii) the type of vehicles determined as ambulances for the purposes of these calculations; and (iii) the equipment contained in those vehicles included in the calculation of ambulance response times. (AQW 3420/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) In order to calculate the response time the clock starts when the following details of the call have been ascertained :
- caller's telephone number;
 - exact location of the incident; and
 - nature of the chief complaint.

The clock stops when the emergency response vehicle or a 'first responder' arrives at the scene of the incident.

- (ii) An emergency response may be made by:
- an Accident and Emergency ambulance;

- a rapid response vehicle; or
- an approved first responder dispatched by, and accountable to, the Ambulance Service.

(iii) An Accident & Emergency Ambulance will typically contain:

- A single trolley
- Defibrillator
- O2 resuscitator
- Suction
- Analgesic gas
- Vacuum splints
- Spinal Boards

Although Rapid Response Vehicles do not transport patients they carry equipment similar to a full scale A&E vehicle.

First Responders are equipped with a defibrillator.

Cancer Services for Children

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm that funding for cancer services for children will continue beyond March 2008. (AQW 3449/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have no hesitation in confirming that funding for cancer services for children will continue beyond March 2008. Ensuring that both children and adults affected by cancer receive the best possible care remains a priority for my department and the health service.

Home Start Schemes

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the recent Budget announcements, to make a statement on the future funding of Home Start schemes for 2008-2011. (AQW 3456/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Some funding has been identified to support Children's Fund-type activity after March 2008. Decisions about funding for individual projects should be announced shortly.

Phosphoric Acid

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the medical research that indicates that phosphoric acid is safe to add to the water supply in Northern Ireland. (AQW 3462/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Orthophosphate treatment of drinking water, involving the addition of orthophosphoric acid, is used across the United Kingdom as a means of improving compliance with the regulatory standard for lead and thus reduces consumer exposure to lead. The addition of phosphoric acid to reduce lead solubility and corrosion, by forming a protection film on the inside of pipes, results in low phosphate concentrations being present in drinking water.

Products which are to be used in the provision of drinking water supplies must undergo an approval process. The List and the Approvals Process are administered by the England and Wales Drinking Water Inspectorate on behalf of all United Kingdom authorities. The Inspectorate takes account of expert toxicological advice as part of this approval process. The available human data indicate no concerns relating to acute toxicity from the low levels of phosphoric acid present in drinking water. Research on chronic exposure shows no evidence of carcinogenicity, mutagenicity or toxicity to the reproductive system.

Orthophosphoric acid is listed as an approved product by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, for use by the Water Industry in the whole of the United Kingdom. Orthophosphoric acid also has a "BS EN" rating which gives it approval for use across Europe.

Children in Foster Care

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to children in foster care, to detail (i) the average hours per week that they are taken by social workers to spend time with their parent(s); (ii) the arrangements that are put in place for weekend contact visits with their parent(s); (iii) the arrangements put in place to enable mothers to breast feed a baby that has been taken into care; and (iv) the arrangements that are in place to ensure the availability of a guardian ad litem, if required, over weekend and holiday periods.
(AQW 3463/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: (i) Contact visits are determined on a case by case basis premised on the assessed needs and risks for the child. While the number of hours can vary contact can take place on a daily basis and at weekends.

(ii) Social workers facilitate contact between parents and their children outside of normal working hours and at weekends. Visits can take place at the Foster Carer's home, a contact centre or at a mutually agreed venue.

(iii) While Trusts would wish to promote breastfeeding as the best option for the health of the baby it is clearly difficult to maintain when the baby is in Foster Care. In some cases the mother is encouraged to express her milk so that the baby can be bottle fed.

(iv) The Northern Ireland Guardian Ad Litem Agency (NIGALA) work antisocial hours including holidays and weekends once appointed to a case as required to meet the needs of families and carers. NIGALA do not however operate an out of hours rota for new appointments.

Alzheimer's Sufferers

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the criteria used to determine the percentage of the cost of caring for Alzheimer's sufferers, that must be met by the patient or his/her family.
(AQW 3467/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Specific conditions such as Alzheimer's are not a factor in determining how much a person is required to contribute to the cost of their care.

Where the assessed care needs can be met through a domiciliary care package delivered in the person's own home, there is no charge for that care. Where, however, the needs are of a level that requires a residential or nursing home placement, Health and Social Care Trusts are required to make an assessment of the person's ability to contribute towards the cost of care. The Health and Personal Social Services (Assessment of resources) Regulations (NI) 1993 set out the financial assessment of capital and income to be carried out to determine how much each service user can afford to contribute to the cost of their care.

Enler Project in Dundonald

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the funding that his department will make available for the Enler Project in Dundonald, during the 2008-2009 financial year.
(AQW 3471/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Provision has now been made by my Department for £1.4 million in capital funding in the 2008/09 financial year to support the Enler Project. The allocation of this funding is subject to the approval of the overall business case for the Enler scheme.

Cross-Border Medical Imaging Centre

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans his department has to progress the proposed cross-border medical imaging centre for the North West. (AQW 3475/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has no plans at present to develop a cross-border medical imaging centre for the North West. However, I understand that the University of Ulster is developing a partnership proposal for an Institute of Advanced Medical Imaging in the North West with the primary aim of enhancing research capability.

Discharged from Care

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of young people aged between 14 and 16 years, discharged from care in (i) 2004; (ii) 2005; (iii) 2006; and (iv) 2007, broken down by (a) Health and Social Care Trust; (b) year of discharge; (c) age; and (d) length of time in care. (AQW 3481/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of young people discharged from care is not available. Information is, however, available on the number of discharges from care for the years 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007 in respect of the former Health and Social Services Trusts that were in operation at 31 March 2007. Information is not collected according to the age bands requested, however information is available on the number of discharges in respect of young people aged between 12 and 15, and 16 and over.

TABLE 1 NUMBER OF DISCHARGES FROM CARE BY HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES TRUST AND AGE GROUP DURING YEAR ENDING 31 MARCH 2004 – 2007.

Trust	2004		2005		2006		2007	
	12 - 15	16 & over	12 - 15	16 & over	12 - 15	16 & over	12 - 15	16 & over
North & West Belfast	26	29	23	38	22	25	9	38
South & East Belfast	89	54	95	37	34	50	32	61
Ulster Community	5	11	10	26	9	27	9	23
Down Lisburn	31	34	26	31	23	34	16	34
Causeway	6	6	10	6	13	18	28	12

Trust	2004		2005		2006		2007	
	12 - 15	16 & over	12 - 15	16 & over	12 - 15	16 & over	12 - 15	16 & over
Homefirst	23	48	22	29	25	44	24	30
Armagh & Dungannon	11	13	8	5	10	12	7	18
Craigavon & Banbridge	5	18	12	17	8	20	22	16
Newry & Mourne	6	6	0	5	8	3	3	11
Foyle	9	25	6	36	14	35	3	3
Sperrin Lakeland	22	11	39	11	42	24	4	24
Northern Ireland	233	255	251	241	208	292	157	270

Source: DHSSPS LA8 return

TABLE 2 NUMBER OF DISCHARGES FROM CARE BY LENGTH OF TIME IN CARE AND AGE GROUP DURING YEAR ENDING 31 MARCH 2004 – 2007.

Length of time in Care	2004		2005		2006		2007	
	12 - 15	16 & over	12 - 15	16 & over	12 - 15	16 & over	12 - 15	16 & over
Under 2 weeks	120	27	151	24	87	50	58	49
2 weeks < 3 months	27	7	28	10	25	11	29	4
3 months < 6 months	15	14	17	9	23	12	19	14
6 months < 1 year	30	11	19	12	25	18	19	18
1 year < 2 years	16	16	14	18	18	32	11	24
2 years < 3 years	2	24	4	19	6	20	7	15
3 years or more	23	156	18	149	24	149	14	146
Total	233	255	251	241	208	292	157	270

Source: DHSSPS LA8 return

Intensive Care Unit Beds

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of ICU beds available at the Royal Victoria Hospital for Sick Children, for children under the age of 13; and to

confirm whether or not the beds are staffed.
(AQW 3485/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children (RBHSC) has 8 beds funded in the Paediatric Intensive Care (PICU). These beds are fully staffed.

Whilst the age range for RBHSC is up to the 13th birthday for new patients, patients who are within the service will be seen until their transition to adult services. These patients will be treated in PICU if required. Also where beds are limited within the adult ICU provision of Northern Ireland new patients may be taken above the 13th Birthday if they are developmentally appropriate for the service.

Limavady Health Centre

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give a timescale for the start of the new build health centre at Scroggy Road, Limavady.
(AQW 3508/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is intended that the development of Limavady Health and Care Centre will be implemented through the Primary Care Community Care Infrastructure Programme (PCCI). This project has been identified by the Western HSSB and the Western HSC Trust as one of a number of schemes to be rolled out as part of the Department's investment plans within the Executive's Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland. The Western Trust is currently reviewing scheme priorities across the West of the province area and until this is completed an actual commencement date cannot be confirmed.

Young People in Care

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of young people in care who are (i) under 12 years old; (ii) 12-16 years; (iii) 16-18 years; and (iv) 18-21 years, for each of the last 10 years.
(AQW 3514/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of young people in care according to the age bands requested is not collected centrally. Information is, however, available on the number of young people in care at 31 March 1998 - 2007 by alternative age groupings as shown in Table 1 overleaf.

At 31 March 2007, there were 2,356 young people in care. Of these, 1,127 (48%) were aged under 12, 765 (32%) were aged between 12 and 15, and 464 (20%) were aged 16 and over.

TABLE 1 YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE BY AGE GROUP AT 31 MARCH 1998 – 2007.

Year	Under 12	12 - 15	16 and over	Total
2007	1,127	765	464	2,356
2006	1,224	763	449	2,436
2005	1,278	818	435	2,531
2004	1,322	775	413	2,510
2003	1,296	738	412	2,446
2002	1,284	740	429	2,453
2001	1,274	710	430	2,414
2000	1,289	727	406	2,422
1999	1,220	731	373	2,324
1998	1,240	713	401	2,354

Source: DHSSPS LA1 return

Education of Children in Care

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of children in care who (i) have gone into employment; (ii) are in further education; (iii) are in higher education; and (iv) are unemployed, in each of the last 3 years.
(AQW 3515/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of children in care who are in employment, further education, higher education and are unemployed is not collected centrally.

Information is however available on the number of former care leavers who are in employment, further education, higher education or are unemployed at their 19th birthday and is detailed in Table 1 overleaf for the years ending 31 March 2004 and 2006, where a year refers to the period 1 April to 31 March.

TABLE 1 ECONOMIC ACTIVITY OF FORMER CARE LEAVERS WHO REACHED THEIR 19TH BIRTHDAY DURING THE YEAR ENDING 31 MARCH 2004 AND 2006.

Economic Activity	2006	2004
(i) Employment	53	25
(ii) Further Education	9	21
(iii) Higher Education	17	5
(iv) Unemployed	34	46

Source: DHSSPS OC3 return

Medical Negligence Claims

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the costs incurred by the Health Service, in relation to medical negligence claims, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 3517/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested has been set out in the table below.

FIGURES ARE IN £000'S.

2006/07	2005/06	2004/05	2003/04	2002/03
£13,634	£14,181	£14,206	£20,291	£13,597

Education of Children in Care

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of children in care who left school with 5 or less GCSE passes A* to C, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3532/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of children in care who left school is not collected centrally.

Information is collected on the qualifications of children who have been in care continuously for 12 months. The most recent information available relates to children who were looked after on 30 September 2003, and who at that time had been looked after continuously for one year or more.

There were 144 children who had been looked after continuously for 12 months or more at 30 September 2003 who were eligible to sit GCSE examinations. Of these, 12 obtained 5 or more GCSE passes A* - C, 32 obtained between 1 and 4 GCSE passes A* - C, 17 obtained qualifications other than GCSE passes A* - C, 76 did not sit any examinations, and 7 did not obtain any qualifications.

Information is also collected on the qualifications of children who left care aged 16 and over during the year ending 31 March 2006, the latest date for which such information is available.

During the year ending 31 March 2006 there were 181 children who left care aged 16 and over who were eligible to sit GCSE examinations. Of these, 17 obtained 5 or more GCSE passes A* - C, 33 obtained between 1 and 4 GCSE passes A* - C, 44 obtained qualifications other than GCSE passes A* - C, 82 did not sit any examinations, and 5 did not obtain any qualifications.

Education of Children in Care

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of children in care who left school with no qualifications, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3533/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of children in care who left school is not collected centrally.

Information is collected on the qualifications of children who have been in care continuously for 12 months. The most recent information available relates to children who were looked after on 30 September 2003, and who at that time had been looked after continuously for one year or more.

There were 144 children who had been looked after continuously for 12 months or more at 30 September 2003 who were eligible to sit GCSE examinations. Of these, 12 obtained 5 or more GCSE passes A* - C, 32 obtained between 1 and 4 GCSE passes A* - C, 17 obtained qualifications other than GCSE passes A* - C, 76 did not sit any examinations, and 7 did not obtain any qualifications.

Information is also collected on the qualifications of children who left care aged 16 and over during the year ending 31 March 2006, the latest date for which such information is available.

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Education of Children in Care

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of children in care who left school with 5 or more GCSE passes A* to C, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3534/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of children in care who left school is not collected centrally.

Information is collected on the qualifications of children who have been in care continuously for 12 months. The most recent information available relates to children who were looked after on 30 September 2003, and who at that time had been looked after continuously for one year or more.

There were 144 children who had been looked after continuously for 12 months or more at 30 September 2003 who were eligible to sit GCSE examinations. Of these, 12 obtained 5 or more GCSE passes A* - C, 32

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TABLE 1

Year	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
No. of prescriptions dispensed in Primary Care for Vioxx (Rofecoxib) in NI from 2000 to 2005	50,876	78,069	98,099	107,581	92,873	179

Health and Social Care Reforms

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the names of the agencies that are to be brought under the proposed single, multi-purpose authority, as part of the new Health and Social Care Reforms. (AQW 3568/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Under the proposals that I announced to the Assembly on 4 February none of the agencies which were set to merge with the authority suggested under the Direct Rule structures would be brought into the proposed Regional Health and Social Care Board. The consultation paper on my proposals does, however, seek further views in relation to these agencies.

However, under my proposals, most of the functions of the Central Services Agency would transfer to a common services organisation and the Department, The Regional Medical Physics Agency would become part of the Belfast Trust, and the Mental Health Commission would merge with the Regulation and Improvement Authority.

Cost Breakdown of Facilities

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3315/08, to provide a breakdown of costings for

Arthritis Drug Vioxx

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people who were prescribed the arthritis drug Vioxx, before it was taken off the market. (AQW 3542/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information regarding patient numbers who were prescribed Vioxx is not held, however, it is estimated that approximately 400,000 people have been prescribed Vioxx in the UK.

Prescription data held by the Central Service Agency in Northern Ireland refers to prescribed items that were dispensed and for which payment was sought by community pharmacist contractors. The CSA data therefore refers to prescription numbers on an annual basis and not to individual patients. Annual prescription numbers for Vioxx in NI between 2000 and 2005 are detailed in the table below.

the new (i) Health and Social Care Centre; and (ii) local enhanced hospital and mental health centre, as estimated in the £190m project. (AQW 3569/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Omagh Hospital Complex has been developed as one integrated project to achieve efficiencies both in construction and service delivery, and is currently out to tender on this basis. I am therefore unable to disclose at this time further detail on specific costings for project elements within the overall capital estimate, in order not to jeopardise the competitive tendering process now underway.

Unpaid Dental Fees

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the costs incurred by his department in taking legal action against members of the public for unpaid dental fees; and (ii) the total amount recovered as a result of cases won, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3590/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department remains firmly committed to maintaining robust and effective measures to safeguard public funds. Where patients do not pay relevant statutory health charges, such as dental costs, when they should, it is important that such monies are recovered in full.

The table below shows the number of cases referred to the Small Claims Court in relation to the recovery of unpaid statutory dental charges, the number of successful cases *, the total cost (staff costs and court fees incurred in taking legal action) and the monies recovered. The data covers the 2006/07, 2005/06 and 2004/05 financial years.

Financial Year	Cases referred to Court	Successful Cases *	Total Cost	Total Recoveries
2004/2005	71	71	£4,870.59	£5,582.69
2005/2006	68	68	£5,401.03	£6,897.38
2006/2007	84	84	£6,792.25	£7,266.08

It should be noted that patients are given a number of opportunities to repay the amounts involved, including the option of repaying by agreed monthly instalments, before a case is referred to the Small Claims Court.

In addition to the recoveries shown, the following amounts were recovered by the Counter Fraud Unit, in respect of unpaid dental charges, without the need for recourse to legal action via the Small Claims Court:

2004/05 £	2005/06 £	2006/07 £
47,145	55,168	94,468

* successful cases (i.e. where a County Court Judgement was awarded in favour of the Central Services Agency)

Managerial Level Employees

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of managerial level employees; and (ii) the percentage of employees that are at managerial level, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3597/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the managerial level of all health and social care employees is not routinely recorded on Trust information systems and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. However, information on the managerial level of staff within the Administration & Clerical staff group has been provided in the tables below.

(I) TABLE 1: HEADCOUNT OF ADMINISTRATION & CLERICAL STAFF AT MANAGERIAL LEVEL

	Belfast	Northern	Western	Southern	South Eastern	All Trusts
Dec-05	617	318	223	302	294	1754
Dec-06	633	330	236	292	308	1799
Dec-07	589	289	241	285	293	1697

TABLE 2: WHOLE-TIME EQUIVALENT (WTE) OF ADMINISTRATION & CLERICAL STAFF AT MANAGERIAL LEVEL

	Belfast	Northern	Western	Southern	South Eastern	All Trusts
Dec-05	600.45	305.48	219.3	288.21	285.77	1699.21
Dec-06	615.53	317.45	230.74	280.7	297.56	1741.98
Dec-07	572.17	276.66	235.15	274.97	283.35	1642.3

TABLE 3: PERCENTAGE OF ADMINISTRATION & CLERICAL STAFF THAT ARE MANAGERIAL LEVEL (BASED ON HEADCOUNT)

	Belfast	Northern	Western	Southern	South Eastern	All Trusts
Dec-05	16.0%	14.3%	13.2%	17.4%	17.5%	15.7%
Dec-06	16.5%	14.4%	13.4%	16.4%	18.2%	15.8%
Dec-07	15.9%	13.1%	13.5%	15.6%	18.7%	15.3%

TABLE 4: PERCENTAGE OF ADMINISTRATION & CLERICAL STAFF THAT ARE MANAGERIAL LEVEL (BASED ON WHOLE-TIME EQUIVALENT)

	Belfast	Northern	Western	Southern	South Eastern	All Trusts
Dec-05	17.8%	16.2%	14.5%	19.3%	20.0%	17.5%
Dec-06	18.3%	16.3%	14.7%	18.3%	20.8%	17.7%
Dec-07	17.7%	14.9%	14.6%	17.6%	21.4%	17.1%

TABLE 5: ADMIN & CLERICAL MANAGERIAL STAFF AS A PERCENTAGE OF ALL HEALTH & SOCIAL CARE TRUST STAFF (BASED ON HEADCOUNT)

	Belfast	Northern	Western	Southern	South Eastern	All Trusts
Dec-05	3.1%	3.0%	2.8%	3.7%	3.5%	3.2%
Dec-06	3.2%	3.0%	2.7%	3.4%	3.6%	3.2%
Dec-07	3.0%	2.7%	2.6%	3.1%	3.5%	3.0%

TABLE 6: ADMIN & CLERICAL MANAGERIAL STAFF AS A PERCENTAGE OF ALL HEALTH & SOCIAL CARE TRUST STAFF (BASED ON WHOLE-TIME EQUIVALENT)

	Belfast	Northern	Western	Southern	South Eastern	All Trusts
Dec-05	3.6%	3.4%	3.0%	4.2%	4.1%	3.6%
Dec-06	3.6%	3.5%	3.0%	3.9%	4.2%	3.6%
Dec-07	3.4%	3.1%	2.9%	3.6%	4.0%	3.4%

Source: Human Resource Management System.

Table Notes:

1. WTE = whole time equivalent of staff. The whole time equivalent of staff is calculated by aggregating the total number of hours that staff in a grade are contracted to work, and dividing by the standard hours for that grade. In this way, part-time staff are converted into an equivalent number of 'whole-time' staff.
2. Managerial level includes those classed as manager, senior manager, senior executive and board members.
3. Base figures used for percentages of Health & Social Care Trust staff exclude home helps, bank staff and student nurses.

Delayed Discharges

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the up-to-date figures on delayed discharges for all Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQW 3638/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The latest up-to-date official figures on delayed discharges for all Health and Social Care Trusts are for the month ending 31st December. The figures shown in the table below show the number of care managed patients or patients awaiting a care management assessment remaining in hospital after the date they are deemed medically fit for discharge as at the 31st December 2007 in each Health and Social Care Trust.

Health and Social Care Trusts	Number of Delayed Discharges *
Belfast HSC Trust	37
Northern HSC Trust	47
Southern HSC Trust	4
South Eastern HSC Trust	25
Western HSC Trust	18
Total	131

Source: Departmental Return, DD1.

Notes:

Figures are presented in respect of the position at the last day of each month.

* - Information is currently provisional and subject to change.

Delayed Discharges

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what plans he has to respond to delayed discharges in Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQW 3639/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have set stringent new targets for delayed discharge, which mean that, by March 2008, non-complex cases should be discharged within 6 hours of being declared fit and complex cases should be discharged within 72 hours of being declared fit. These targets are subject to rigorous monitoring arrangements and I can report that achievement rates for January 2008 are 96% and 75% respectively.

In tandem with improving systems within hospitals, we are also working to expand the range of flexible and responsive intermediate care services in the community. This will ensure that those who need it can be discharged safely and promptly into an appropriate service in the community.

Efficiency Savings

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how the efficiencies proposed in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust document 'Comprehensive Spending Review - Efficiency Savings Proposed by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust', will be used to enhance health services. (AQW 3642/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Trusts must achieve 3% per annum efficiency savings and so I have asked all Trusts to give me their proposals on how CSR efficiencies should be delivered. In developing their proposals, I have specifically asked for efficiencies, not cuts, and that the implications for staff and patients are fully explained. I have not yet received fully worked up proposals from Trusts and I will not be making decisions on Trust efficiency proposals until all these implications are clearly established.

Several members of the Assembly have been strongly advocating efficiencies. It is incumbent on us to take the opportunity now to look across the new Trusts and to reshape services where they can be provided more efficiently and effectively. As monies are freed up, we will invest them into the services and priorities agreed in the CSR budget settlement for the benefit of patients and clients across Northern Ireland.

These developments include, for example, investment to combat healthcare acquired infections, more and better mental health and learning disability services, support services for children and young people - greater investment in stroke and cardiovascular services, more cancer services - including screening

and vaccinations - access to new and specialist drugs, funding to prevent suicide, more renal dialysis provision and funding to provide more of the appropriate services for our ageing population.

Suicide Prevention

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how the £6m allocated to implement the suicide prevention strategy has been used. (AQW 3651/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In 2007/08 the Department allocated £3.06m recurrent funding for suicide prevention and the breakdown of this funding was agreed between the Department and the Suicide Strategy Implementation Body (SSIB). The funding was subsequently allocated as follows:

Category	07/08 Funding
Community Support (Both local and regional spend)	£1,800,000
Pilot Schemes	£300,000
Awareness campaigns/training	£550,000
Research	£150,000
Infrastructure	£100,000
All-Island Co-operation	£90,000
Evaluation	£50,000
Misc.	£20,000
Total	£3,060,000

An additional £3.5m will be allocated in 2008/09 by the Department for the implementation of the new regional crisis response 24/7 telephone helpline.

Suicide Prevention

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the other interventions that have been considered in relation to suicide prevention. (AQW 3652/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: During the development of the Suicide Prevention Strategy, the Taskforce commissioned a review of the evidence base relating to suicide and self harm.

The review highlighted that there is limited evidence available in relation to interventions that are effective in reducing the risk of suicide and self-harm.

In light of this lack of evidence base, a number of innovative initiatives have been undertaken as part of the implementation of the strategy. These include:

- Establishment of a 24/7 regional crisis response helpline, and a self-harm mentoring pilot scheme;
- Research into the effects of the Troubles on our mental health and local suicide rates;
- Development of a new GP depression Awareness Training programme; Production of joint North/South public information campaigns;
- Allocation of a substantial community support funding package; and
- Establishment of a crisis intervention service.

To assess the effectiveness of the strategy, an evaluation framework is being developed.

Cardiovascular Service Framework

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give his assessment of the effectiveness of the Cardiovascular Service Framework in addressing the wide range and complex nature of diabetes. (AQW 3674/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The cardiovascular framework addresses a wide range of the key elements of good diabetes care, including standards relating to risk factors for diabetes, accurate and timely diagnosis, education and support, annual review, regular foot care and the wide range of standards relating to the cardiovascular diseases that are more common in patients with diabetes.

The cardiovascular framework attempts to move away from an 'illness model' of service standards / delivery to one which promotes health and wellbeing and prevents disease. In this context, it is recognised that diabetes is but one of a number of interconnected risk factors for cardiovascular health and wellbeing.

The cardiovascular framework will link to existing strategies on diabetes such as the Report of the Northern Ireland Task Force on Diabetes (2003). Diabetes UK has participated in the development of the framework to ensure that it takes appropriate account of the effect of diabetes on cardiovascular health.

The effectiveness of the cardiovascular framework will be evaluated following its implementation.

Fire and Rescue Service Personnel Injuries

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of Fire and Rescue Service Personnel who have suffered injury in the line of duty in each of the last three years. (AQW 3684/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Table below shows the number of

all on-duty injuries sustained by Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service personnel in the last 3 years:

Year	Injuries
2005	212
2006	213
2007	177

Medical Procedures outside NI

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of people that are sent outside Northern Ireland for medical procedures, in each of the last 5 years; and (ii) the total cost incurred by his department.
(AQW 3685/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of people sent outside Northern Ireland for medical procedures, in each of the last five years, is outlined in the table below.

Financial year	Number of people sent outside Northern Ireland for medical procedures
2002/03	1,074
2003/04	1,075
2004/05	1,298
2005/06	1,343
2006/07	1,495

Source: Health and Social Services Boards

The cost incurred by the Department for Health, Social Services and Public Safety in the provision of this service, is not available prior to 2003/04. The cost relates to patients from Northern Ireland treated in hospitals in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. This information is detailed in the following table.

Financial year	Cost incurred by the DHSSPS in the provision of medical treatment for patients from Northern Ireland at hospitals in GB/ROI (£million)
2003/04	8.1
2004/05	12.2
2005/06	12.1
2006/07	12.8

Source: Health and Social Services Boards

The above figures relate to expenditure incurred by the four Health and Social Services Boards. Further expenditure may have been incurred by Trusts who have

received funding from the Boards, but who have opted to send a patient to GB/ROI for treatment. Information on these costs is not captured by the Department.

Trainee Dental Nurses

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the (i) number; and (ii) location, of (a) full-time; and (b) part-time, training places for trainee dental nurses currently available.
(AQW 3695/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The DHSSPS does not commission dental nurse training. The National Certificate in Dental Nursing is offered by the Further Education sector.

Diabetes Service Framework

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration he has given to the establishment of a Diabetes Service Framework.
(AQW 3700/08)

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 spring 2008.

Inver House in Larne

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of representations he has received in relation to Inver House in Larne since May 2007; and (ii) who these representations have been from.
(AQW 3739/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below sets out the number and source of representations I have received in relation to Inver House in Larne between May 2007 and 8 February this year.

Source	Number of representations
MLAs	11
Larne Borough Council	2
Local GPs	1 (enclosing 17 signatures)

Source	Number of representations
Member of the Public	48
Church Ministers	1 (enclosing 16 signatures)
Other	1
Total	64

Child Sexual Abuse

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the referral reports by the Department of Education and Department of Employment and Learning of child sexual abuse by (i) parents; (ii) other relatives (iii) school board employees and (iv) others, for each of the last five years. (AQW 3751/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Details of individual referral reports to Social Services are not collected centrally. Information on individual referrals would not be published due to Data Protection considerations.

Whilst the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety collects information on the numbers of children referred to Social Services, details of referrals made by the Department of Education and the Department of Employment and Learning are not identified separately.

Private Finance Initiatives

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on all current and planned Public Private Partnerships/ Private Finance Initiatives; and to outline (i) those projects which are delayed; (ii) the reasons for the delays; and (iii) completion dates for delivering these projects. (AQW 3887/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are currently two new build projects being procured using the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) methodology. They are the new South West Acute Hospital north of Enniskillen, due for completion in 2011/12, and the new Enhanced Local Hospital Complex at Omagh due for completion in 2012/13. There are currently no delays in the planned delivery of these projects.

Decisions on the procurement method to be used for any future new build projects will be based on a rigorous value for money and affordability assessment for each project when the relevant Outline Business Case is considered for approval by the Department.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Calls Received Over Christmas

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of calls for help that were made by consumers to his department over the Christmas and New Year period, broken down by parliamentary constituency. (AQW 3294/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the number of telephone calls for help received over the Christmas and New Year period (24 December 2007- 4 January 2008), broken down by Parliamentary Constituency, are shown in the table below:

Parliamentary Constituency	Total number of calls (eg - snow/ ice related, flooding, tree damage, road defects, etc)
Foyle	114
East Londonderry	46
North Antrim	36
East Antrim	38
South Antrim	73
Belfast North	45
Belfast East	27
Belfast South	43
Belfast West	5
North Down	25
Strangford	91
Lagan Valley	38
South Down	83
Upper Bann	33
Newry and Armagh	44
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	92
West Tyrone	78
Mid Ulster	43

I should point out that Roads Service holds information on telephone calls by Section Office, and the breakdown by Parliamentary Constituency has been estimated as accurately as possible for the purpose of answering your question.

Park and Ride Facility

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what plans he has to expand the park and ride facility in Templepatrick. (AQW 3320/08)

The Minister for Regional Development:

Officials from my Department's Roads Service have advised that there are no current plans to provide additional parking in Templepatrick.

The small park and ride/park and share car park was provided at Templepatrick in 2003. Due to high levels of usage, it was extended in 2005. In 2007, a further extension was added, up to the limit of the land available.

International Airport Bus Service

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the number of people who used the 300 International Airport bus in (a) 2005; (b) 2006; and (c) 2007; and (ii) the average number of passengers who used the bus for each day of the week in 2007; and what assessment he has made of the percentage of passengers who used this service to commute to Belfast, rather than travel to, and from, the International Airport. (AQW 3324/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The information is not readily available in the format you requested. However, Translink has provided the following information:

Number of Passenger Journeys on International Airport 300 Service	
Year	Journeys
1/1/05 – 31/12/05	268,477
1/1/06 – 31/12/06	316,580
1/1/07 – 31/12/07	384,488

Average Journeys per Day	
Day	Average Number of Journeys
Monday to Friday	1,172
Saturday and Sunday	768

Translink has informed me that approximately 25 percent of passengers board or leave the bus at points other than the International Airport

Drinking Water

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm whether or not an environmental impact assessment was carried out before the addition of phosphoric acid into drinking water in Northern Ireland. (AQW 3341/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the use of orthophosphoric acid to minimise lead levels

in the water supply has been in use for some time by the water industry in Britain.

Prior to the use of orthophosphoric acid in the North, environmental impact assessments were carried out in specific locations using the read across implications of similar assessments completed across the water industry.

Flooding Prevention

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the steps taken by Northern Ireland Water to prevent the recurrence of flooding in the Mourne View Estate, Newcastle. (AQW 3343/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the Mourne View Estate is low lying and prone to flooding during periods of intense rainfall, which in the past has overwhelmed the public sewer system and the local Murlough Sewage Pumping Station.

NIW has completed a Drainage Area Study for Newcastle which examined the structural condition and capacity of the sewerage system. Remedial work has now commenced and will be implemented over the next three years. The Study recommended the upgrade of Murlough Sewage Pumping Station but this work will not be completed until 2010, as other downstream remedial work needs to be implemented first.

This work should substantially reduce the risk of out-of-sewer flooding in the Mourne View area and in the interim NIW will continue to monitor closely the performance of Murlough Sewage Pumping Station and take any necessary action to prevent or reduce flooding problems.

Drain Cleansing Teams

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm the last date on which drain cleansing teams were working in Valentia Place and Bryansford Gardens, Newcastle. (AQW 3344/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service have advised that the road gullies on Valentia Place and Bryansford Gardens, Newcastle were last cleaned on 13 November 2007.

This was the second gully clean in 2007, in line with Roads Service's gully cleaning policy to clean gullies in urban areas twice annually.

DRD Strategy for NI 2025

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a timescale within which the first 5 year review of 'Shaping Our Future: the Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025', will be completed and published. (AQW 3377/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The 5 year Review of 'Shaping our Future: the Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025' has been referred to the Regional Development Committee for consideration. Once I have received views from the Committee, I would be bringing the Review to the Executive as a cross-cutting issue. I then hope to publish the Report. Given the steps still to be taken, I expect publication to take place in May / June.

Garden Dwellings

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm whether or not he intends to remove domestic gardens from the definition of Brownfield/ previously developed sites, as currently set out in (i) the Regional Development Strategy; and (ii) Planning Policy Statement 12: Housing in Settlements, as unanimously agreed by the Assembly on 1 October 2007. (AQW 3378/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am proposing, in the 5 year Review of the RDS, to exclude the gardens of dwellings from the definition of previously developed land. The RDS Review document has been referred to the Regional Development Committee for consideration. Once I have received views from the Committee, I would intend to bring the Review to the Executive as a cross-cutting issue. I then hope to publish the Report in May/June.

The Department of the Environment recently assumed responsibility for Planning Policy Statement 12: Housing in Settlements from my Department and will take forward any future work on this document in general conformity with the Regional Development Strategy.

Flooding of Minor Roads

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to ensure that the clearing of minor roads that are flooded is given priority. (AQW 3385/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has plans in place to deal with roads related flooding incidents, ensuring a 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, response. While not an emergency service, Roads Service is committed to

co-operating with, and assisting the blue light services and other statutory agencies as far as possible, to ensure quick and appropriate responses are made to flooding incidents.

Roads Service seeks to restore normality to minor roads that are flooded, having regard firstly, for the safety of the public and Roads Service personnel, but also the prevention of traffic disruption and the protection of homes and property. However, as you may expect, in the event of traffic disruption, resources would be targeted to busier routes carrying the greater volume of traffic.

Public Transport in West Belfast

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm whether or not he plans to introduce a public transport system within the Colin area of West Belfast. (AQW 3386/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: A public transport system already exists within the Colin area of West Belfast. Translink has advised me that it operates the bus routes set out in the table below.

Service	Metro Route Details
10a Ladybrook via Finaghy Road North	Queen Street, Castle Street, Divis Street, Falls Road, Andersonstown Road, Finaghy Road North, Ladybrook Park & Ladybrook Cross.
10b Poleglass via Shaws Road & Suffolk Road	Queen Street, Castle Street, Divis Street, Falls Road, Andersonstown Road, Shaws Road, Suffolk Road, Stewartstown Road, Pembroke Loop Road & Belstele Road
10c Poleglass Direct	Queen Street, Castle Street, Divis Street, Falls Road, Andersonstown Road, Stewartstown Road, Pantridge Road & Pembroke Loop Road
10d Lagmore (Mount Eagles) via Stewartstown Road	Queen Street, Castle Street, Divis Street, Falls Road, Andersonstown Road, Stewartstown Road, Dunmurry Lane, Cheery Road, Twinbrook Road, Stewartstown Road, Lagmore Dale, Lagmore Drive, Lagmore Avenue & Mount Eagles
10e Lagmore (Mount Eagle) via Glen Road & Dunmurry Lane	Queen Street, Castle Street, Divis Street, Falls Road, Glen Road, Suffolk Road, Dunmurry Lane, Cherry Road, Twinbrook Road, Stewartstown Road, Twinbrook Roundabout, Stewartstown Road, Lagmore Dale, Lagmore Drive & Lagmore Mount Eagles
10f Lagmore View via Glen Road	Queen Street, Castle Street, Falls Road, Glen Road, Suffolk Road, Glen Road, Stewartstown Road, Pantridge Road, Pembroke Loop Road, Belstele Road, Stewartstown Road, Lagmore Dale, Lagmore Avenue & Lagmore View

Service	Metro Route Details
10g Falls Park via Lagmore	Late Night Service Lagmore (Mount Eagles), Lagmore Dale, Stewartstown Road, Glengoland Roundabout, Stewartstown Road (Woodbourne), Stewartstown Road (Suffolk Road), Andersonstown Road (Slivevegallion Drive) & Kennedy Centre
10h Black's Road via Stewartstown Road	Queen Street, Castle Street, Divis Street, Falls Road, Andersonstown Road, Stewartstown Road, Black's Road & Oakhurst / St. Annes
81 Glencolin via Springfield Road	Queen Street, Upper Queen Street, Grosvenor Road, Springfield Road, Monagh Road, Monagh Link, Monagh By-pass, Glen Road & Glen Road Terminus
81a Poleglass via Grosvenor Road	Queen Street, Upper Queen Street, Grosvenor Road, Springfield Road, Monagh Road, Monagh Link, Monagh By-pass, Glen Road, Suffolk Road, Stewartstown Road, Bel Steele Road, Brianswell Road & Pembroke Loop Road
82 Glencolin via Whiterock & Turf Lodge	Queen Street, Upper Queen Street, Grosvenor Road, Falls Road, Whiterock Road, Upper Springfield Road, Monagh Road, Monagh Link, Monagh By-pass, Glen Road & Glen Road Terminus
82a Poleglass via Falls Road	Queen Street, Upper Queen Street, Grosvenor Road, Falls Road, Whiterock Road, Upper Springfield Road, Monagh Road, Monagh Link, Monagh By-pass, Glen Road, Suffolk Road, Stewartstown Road, Bel Steele Road, Brianswell Road & Pembroke Loop

Service	Ulsterbus Route Details
530 Lisburn via Blacks Road	Upper Queen Street, Great Victoria Street, Lisburn Road, Blacks Road, Stewartstown Road, Bel Steele Road, Stewartstown Road then on to Lisburn City Centre
531 Twinbrook via Blacks Road	Upper Queen Street, Great Victoria Street, Lisburn Road, Blacks Road, Stewartstown Road, Bel Steele Road, Stewartstown Road & Twinbrook Estate
532 Lisburn via Falls Road	Queen Street, Divis Street, Falls Road, Andersonstown Road, Stewartstown Road, Bel Steele Road, Stewartstown Road, then onto Lisburn City Centre

Note additional Express Services

0745 ex Twinbrook (233) via Lagmore, Poleglass, Dunmurry Lane, Motorway, Europa Buscentre

0750 ex Poleglass (235) via Glengoland, Blacks Road, Motorway, Europa Buscentre

1715 ex Queens Street (236) via Europa, Motorway, Blacks Rd, Poleglass, Lagmore

1735 ex Queens Street (236) via Europa, Motorway, Dunmurry Lane, Poleglass, Lagmore

Road Signage

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm whether or not road signage will be erected for Healy Park GAA grounds on the approach roads to Omagh, Co Tyrone. (AQW 3396/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's policy in relation to the provision of signing to privately managed premises, including sports grounds, is contained in Roads Service Policy & Procedure Guide (RSPPG E034).

Under this policy, directional signage to sporting facilities will only be provided where there is a clear road safety reason for doing so, or the facilities are hard to find and will generate a significant volume of traffic from outside the locality. In general, signage is not permitted if the premises are located on urban distributor roads or rural A or B class roads, on the basis that such premises can be found easily by following direction signage to the adjacent town or village.

The aim of this policy is to minimise sign clutter, which has an adverse impact on the environment, while taking account of road safety and traffic management issues.

I understand that Roads Service has not received any request for the provision of signage to Healy Park. That said, as these grounds are located on the Gortin Road, a B Class urban distributor road within the Omagh town boundary, and as the grounds can be easily located by following direction signs to Gortin, it is unlikely that such a request would be approved by Roads Service.

Road Signage

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm whether or not he will introduce a new 'Children at Play' template sign, for use in residential areas, similar to those that are used in the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 3410/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The 'Children at Play' sign is not prescribed in the Traffic Signs Manual used in the South, nor is it authorised for use. Where such signs have been erected, I understand that this has been without the approval of the Department of the Environment in the South. Their view, which my Department would support, is that a sign with the wording 'Children at Play' could engender a false sense of security in the children, inferring that it is safe for them to be playing in streets or at the roadside.

In residential areas, Roads Service provides traffic calming schemes to reduce vehicle speeds. Self enforcing traffic calming schemes can reduce vehicle

speeds to 20mph and are much more effective in making the road environment safer for all users.

For the reasons outlined above, I can confirm that I have no plans to introduce a 'Children at Play' sign.

Road Maintenance Work

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development whether or not the Roads Service will formally adopt Curleyhill Road, Strabane; and to confirm that it will urgently engage in surfacing and maintenance work. (AQW 3414/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Officials from my Department's Roads Service have advised that the Curleyhill Road, Strabane, is an adopted public road.

If the question relates to the private cul-de-sac adjoining Curleyhill Road, which has not been adopted, I would note that the responsibility for surfacing and maintenance of this section of road rests with those property owners whose property adjoins it.

I understand that Roads Service officials recently met with the owners of the properties in question, to provide an estimate of the costs required to bring the road up to adoption standard and to provide details of the sightlines required where their cul-de-sac joins the Curleyhill Road.

Roads Service officials have confirmed that they would formally adopt the cul-de-sac, if it is brought up to adoption standard by the owners of the properties adjoining it.

Bilingual Road Signs

Mr McCausland asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the organisations that have made representations to his department seeking legislative amendments to authorise the erection of bilingual road signs in Irish and English. (AQW 3431/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that within the last 3 years it has received requests for the erection of bi-lingual road signs in Irish and English from the following organisations:

- Newry & Mourne District Council;
- Cookstown District Council;
- POBAL;
- Irish Side of the British-Irish Secretariat;
- Foras na Gaeilge;
- Forbairt Feirste; and
- La Nua

As a result of these requests, and in keeping with the spirit of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, Roads Service is currently developing policy proposals which would lead to legislative amendment and enable the authorisation of a limited range of bi-lingual road signs.

For your additional information, I can confirm that the proposed draft policy will include provision for the inclusion of Irish or Ulster-Scots in addition to English on a limited number of sign types, and that the decisions to request the erection of individual signs will rest with the relevant local council.

Bus and Rail Services

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration he has given to additional bus or rail services in East Antrim. (AQW 3435/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: As regards bus services, the Goldline Express Services 253 to Ballyclare and 256 to Larne have been improved and will be re-examined under the Ulsterbus Strategic Review process, being carried out by Translink, in June 2008.

Additional services have been provided by Translink between Queens University and the University of Ulster Jordanstown Campus.

Services along the main Shore Road to Carrickfergus and onwards to Kilroot and Whitehead, which are subject to peak hour traffic delays, are being monitored to identify opportunities to restore reliability.

Rail services across the north are now running at full capacity in terms of rolling stock availability. In consequence, there will not be significant change in the East Antrim area in the short to medium term. However the Assembly has recently approved funding for the purchase of 20 new train sets to replace 13 old trains within the NIR fleet and to expand service capacity across the network. The procurement programme has already commenced, and the new trains are expected to enter service in 2011/12 and 2012/13, including on the line to Larne, with new additional services being introduced from 2012/13.

Light Railway System

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development whether or not (i) he has received and considered the light railway system proposals from Belfast Express Transit; and (ii) he has held meetings with any representatives from that group. (AQW 3436/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I did receive light rail system proposals from Belfast

Express Transit which had been passed previously to our consultants undertaking the feasibility studies into rapid transit for Belfast.

I have not held any meetings with representatives from that group but I am aware that the group has met with officials in the past.

Door-to-Door Transport Scheme

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of areas in which the Door-to-Door Transport scheme is operational.

(AQW 3478/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Door-to-Door Transport currently operates in the following 27 urban areas:

Antrim; Armagh; Ballymena; Ballymoney; Banbridge; Bangor; Carrickfergus; Coleraine; Comber; Cookstown; Craigavon; Downpatrick; Dundonald; Dungannon; Dunmurry; Enniskillen; Holywood; Larne; Limavady; Lisburn; Lurgan; Newry; Newtownabbey; Newtownards; Omagh; Portadown; and Strabane.

Door-to-Door Transport Scheme

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to extend the Door-to-Door Transport scheme.

(AQW 3480/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Door-to-Door Transport scheme will be extended to cover Belfast and Derry from 1 April 2008. My Department, in conjunction with Central Procurement Directorate, is currently in the process of finalising a tender exercise to determine which transport operator(s) will provide the services in these two urban areas. I shall make a public announcement regarding the outcome of this tender shortly.

A5 Dualling Project

Mr Bresland asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the proposed timetable for a preliminary route corridor assessment for the A5 dualling project.

(AQW 3524/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that it has commissioned consultants to undertake a route corridor study for the dualling of the A5 from Derry to the border at Aghnacloy.

This study will allow the production of a preliminary options report and recommend a preferred corridor by late 2008. I anticipate that subsequent work should

enable the identification of a preferred route within that corridor by mid 2009.

Beech Hill to Cloghoge A1 Road Scheme

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm whether or not (i) contractors have moved off the site of the Beech Hill to Cloghoge A1 road scheme; and (ii) this withdrawal is in relation to overdue monies not being paid to contractors by his department.

(AQW 3562/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has entered into a Design, Build, Finance and Operate (DBFO) contract with Amey Lagan Roads Limited (the DBFO Co) to design, construct, commission, operate and maintain several strategic road improvement schemes, including the A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue dual carriageway scheme.

I am advised that neither the DBFO Co nor their construction sub-contractor, Lagan Ferrovia, have moved off the site of the A1 Beech Hill to Cloghogue Dual carriageway scheme. However, a significant number of potential archaeological features have been uncovered that are impacting on the DBFO Co's programme for earth works on this scheme.

I am further advised that my Department is not withholding any monies nor is any money due to the DBFO Co in respect of this scheme at this time.

Road Flooding

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the steps that the Roads Service has taken to alleviate flooding at (i) 62; (ii) 63; and (iii) 64 Bernagh Green, Newcastle.

(AQW 3635/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has recently been informed of flooding at Bernagh Green, Newcastle.

Following investigation, it is proposed to provide a footpath gully. However, as the footpath is below the level of the adjoining Castlewellan Road, it will not be possible to connect the new gully to the main road drainage system. It is proposed therefore to connect the gully to a soakaway to be constructed in the grass verge between the footpath at No 63 Bernagh Green and the Castlewellan Road.

It is anticipated that the work will be carried out within the next six weeks.

Sewer Extension at Movilla Road, Newtownards

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2622/08, to detail the reasons why this work has not yet commenced; and to provide a timescale within which the work will begin. (AQW 3657/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that work to extend the sewer to provide first time sewerage services for a development at Movilla Road, Newtownards, commenced on 4 February and will be completed during March 2008.

The commencement of this work was delayed while NIW reassessed the scope of the project to ensure it could cater for future development in the area.

Potholes

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development if she will give an undertaking to deal urgently with the issue of potholes on the Loughmacrory Road, Omagh, County Tyrone. (AQW 3734/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Maintenance Standards are applied by my Department's Road Service to the entire road network and specify inspection frequencies, prioritisation and response targets for various classes of road. In accordance with these Maintenance Standards the Loughmacrory Road is inspected every eight weeks, with the next inspection due week ending Friday 15 February 2008.

Roads Service has advised that Loughmacrory Road was last inspected on 3 December 2007 and all recorded defects were repaired in accordance with the Roads Maintenance Standard.

There are no associated exceptional factors on the Loughmacrory Road that would warrant special attention over and above the stated Maintenance Standards and all faults detected by inspection, or reported will be repaired.

Road Works Programme

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will instigate an urgent works programme to deal with the poor state of rural ('B' and 'C' class) roads in West Tyrone. (AQW 3735/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service prepares annual work programmes covering the development and maintenance of the network, which reflect the

availability of finances. The 2007/08 financial year's work programme, which was agreed by each of the district councils, is presently well advanced.

In the West Tyrone constituency, Roads Service currently plans to spend in excess of £7 million in the 2007/2008 financial year on structural maintenance of the rural road network. This includes resurfacing/strengthening, surface dressing, patching and structural drainage. It represents 90% of the total resources being deployed on structural maintenance within the constituency.

Of course, it is always the case that if more funding was available, more maintenance work would be carried out and I can assure you that Roads Service will continue to make strong bids for additional structural maintenance funds. In the meantime, Roads Service will continue to make best use of the resources available to it to develop and maintain the road network.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Social Housing Projects

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail what plans she has to develop social housing projects in the Markets area of South Belfast. (AQW 3189/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): The current Social Housing Development Programme contains proposals for 51 homes to be provided in the Markets area. Twenty six are programmed for 2007/08 year and 25 for 2010/11. Two Environmental Improvement Schemes, 2 Cyclical Maintenance Schemes and two Revenue Replacement Schemes are also planned for the area. Details of these have been placed in the Assembly Library.

Development of Twinbrook Shops

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development to provide detail on the development of the proposed works at the Twinbrook shops, West Belfast. (AQW 3383/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The project is at an early stage but options are currently being developed to replace the existing shops at Jasmine End, Twinbrook, incorporate social housing on the site and establish a Social Economy Project for the Colin Neighbourhood Partnership that will help sustain the group.

Mobility Dwellings

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties that are suitable for people with physical disabilities. (AQW 3433/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The total number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties identified as “mobility dwellings” at 1 April was 5,965 representing 6.3% of the total Housing Executive housing stock.

The Housing Executive’s non-mobility stock can be made suitable for people with disabilities through major or minor adaptations. Major adaptations include extensions, through floor and stair lifts, re-arrangement of facilities within the home and change of heating. An average of 2,800 major and 5,600 minor adaptations are completed each year.

Disabled Housing Applicants

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the direction she has given to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in relation to applications for social housing from those with physical disabilities. (AQW 3434/08)

The Minister for Social Development: All applicants for social housing are assessed on their, or a member of their household’s, ability to manage adequately in their home. Applicants are subsequently awarded points and ranked accordingly on the waiting list. Disabled applicants with additional needs undergo a more detailed assessment by a Housing Support Officer/Welfare Officer who will also consider the available housing options.

In exceptional circumstances, where all other options are exhausted, consideration may be given to the special purchase of an appropriate dwelling by a Housing Association.

Short Fall in Grants

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to explain the reasons for the short-fall in (i) disability grants; and (ii) home improvement grants, for 2007/2008. (AQW 3447/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Housing Executive grants payment inspections were temporarily suspended in January 2008 while funding issues were clarified. They have however been reinstated. There is no shortfall in disability or home improvement grants for 2007/08.

Housing Executive Grant Applications

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the targets her department has in place for the processing of Northern Ireland Housing Executive grant applications. (AQW 3469/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The standards of service that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive aims to achieve at each stage for Renovation, Replacement and Home Repair Assistance grants are as follows:

- Receipt of a preliminary enquiry to be acknowledged within 10 working days and applicant advised of when the technical inspection may take place. There is no minimum standard for technical inspections as this varies according to the level of demand.
- The schedule of grant aided works to be issued within 12 weeks of the technical inspections.
- Formal grant approval to be issued within 6 months.
- On request inspections will be carried out on completed work within 2 weeks and payment made in a further 4 weeks where work is deemed to be satisfactorily complete and the grant applicant has provided all relevant invoices, guarantees and certificates.
- Ninety per cent of inspections for Disabled Facilities Grants to be carried out within 10 working days. 70% of Disabled Facilities Schedules of work to be issued within 20 working days. Seventy per cent of the formal grant approvals for Disabled Facilities grants to be issued within 40 working days.

Housing Executive Grant Applications

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive grant applications that have taken 12 months or more to be processed, broken down by Northern Ireland Housing Executive District. (AQW 3470/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive does not record information on the processing of grant applications in this form.

The length of time required to process a grant application depends on the level of demand and the available grants budget.

Enler Project in Dundonald

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the funding that her department will make available for the Enler Project in Dundonald, in the financial year 2008-09. (AQW 3472/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Now that the DSD budget for 2008/09 has been agreed I would hope to be able to make a decision on funding of this project shortly.

Warm Homes Grant Survey

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the timescales within which (i) a lone parent with a child under 16; (ii) a pregnant woman; (iii) a person aged 60 years or over; and (iv) a person in receipt of state benefits, will have to wait for a Warm Homes Grant survey to be carried out.

(AQW 3482/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Warm Homes Scheme has been very successful and it is now oversubscribed. I have asked officials to review the delivery of the scheme and develop a way forward which will address waiting times and will ensure that those people in greatest need get help first.

Warm Homes Grant Survey

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of (i) lone parents with a child under 16; (ii) pregnant women; (iii) people aged 60 years or over; and (iv) people in receipt of state benefits, currently waiting for a Warm Homes Grant survey to be carried out.

(AQW 3483/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Not all of the information asked for is available in the format requested. Information is not kept on the number of lone parents or pregnant women applying to the Warm Homes Scheme. There are 5,158 people aged over 60 waiting to be surveyed. All of the 6,071 people waiting to be surveyed are in receipt of a qualifying state benefit.

Local Community Fund

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the level of funding that has been allocated to projects in Castlederg through the Local Community Fund.

(AQW 3507/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I have placed in the Assembly Library tables detailing all funding from the Local Community Fund paid to organisations in or near the Castlederg area, totalling over £250,000 between 2003 and 2006 to the Glendereg area, and just under £60,000 to the Castledreg area since the re-launch of the fund in April 2006.

Omagh Masterplan

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development to (i) provide a list of sites in Omagh town which she has earmarked for development; and (ii) outline her plans for the release of land owned by the department where a private development interest is expressed.

(AQW 3509/08)

The Minister for Social Development: (i) My Department has currently earmarked no sites for development in Omagh Town. Consultants are currently working on the preparation of a Masterplan for Omagh Town Centre, which will provide the basis and justification for the Department's decision making on the promotion, timing and implementation of urban regeneration initiatives in the town centre in the coming years.

(ii) Future release of land owned by the Department where a private sector interest is expressed will be guided by the content of the Masterplan.

Omagh Masterplan

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development to (i) provide a definitive timeline for the completion of the masterplanning of Omagh town; and (ii) detail the measures she has in place to ensure that 'pipeline' schemes are not lost during the masterplanning process.

(AQW 3510/08)

The Minister for Social Development: (i) It is hoped to complete the Masterplan for Omagh Town Centre in the summer of 2008. (ii) The Consultants preparing the Masterplan have been made aware of any known "pipeline" schemes, and have indeed already been in contact with the developers to ensure that up to date information is obtained.

Home Improvement Grant Applications

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive Home Improvement grant applications, where completion has been delayed due to additional works being required, broken down by District Office Area.

(AQW 3513/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive does not record this information.

Where a builder identifies additional work to a Grants Office, an inspection will take place to establish that the additional works are necessary. The Grants Office always endeavours to make the necessary inspections within a reasonable period of time. Where such additional works are necessary and approved,

then additional grant money may be provided to cover the associated costs subject to the normal means testing arrangements.

In many cases the grant aided scheme would not be able to proceed without provision being made for the additional work in the grant. This is not a delaying factor, but an essential facility to enable the completion of grant works.

Technical Services Department Staff

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm whether or not the Northern Ireland Housing Executive plans to reduce the number of staff employed in their Technical Services Department in the Southern region. (AQW 3519/08)

The Minister for Social Development: As part of its manpower planning process the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has a rolling programme of efficiency reviews. Currently a review of Technical Services across the organisation is underway. It is anticipated that this will be completed by March this year. The findings will then be subject to consultation with staff and Trade Unions before the report is completed.

Housing Executive Grants

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the amount of grant provided by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in the Newtownards District, in each of the last three years, broken down by (i) disabled grants; and (ii) home improvement grants. (AQW 3544/08)

The Minister for Social Development: In the financial years, 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07 the Northern Ireland Housing Executive approved 433 grants at a value of £3.735m and completed 332 grants at an expenditure of £3.228m, in the Newtownards District Council Area.

The breakdown between Disabled Grants and Home Improvement Grants is as follows:

Approvals

- 173 Disabled Facilities Grants at a value of £2.043m.
- 260 Home Improvement Grants at a value of £1.692m

Completions

- 122 Disabled Facilities Grant at an expenditure of £1.632m
- 210 Home Improvement Grants at an expenditure of £1.596m.

Home Inspections

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm whether or not home inspections will be carried out in relation to Northern Ireland Housing Executive grant applications, for the period January to March 2008; and to detail the reasons why a home inspection would not be carried out. (AQW 3547/08)

The Minister for Social Development: During 2007, the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) of my Department continued to carry out a great deal of work in all areas of Northern Ireland including North Belfast.

EHS, through its Natural Heritage Grant Programme, provided core funding of £81k to the Belfast Hills Partnership which works with partners to improve management of the Belfast Hills, including Cavehill, Ligoniel and Throne Wood which are situated in North Belfast.

EHS also provided funding to Belfast City Council to enhance community access to and enjoyment of the Belfast Hills, and to develop a biodiversity strategy for the wider council area. In 2007, this support amounted to £61k for footpath restoration at Cavehill Country Park and a further £20k for a Biodiversity Officer.

EHS was also involved in the protection of the Belfast Hills through the Department of the Environment's planning policies; and officials have attended the Public Inquiry for the Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan to defend proposed environmental designations.

Also in 2007, EHS supervised the inspection of Belfast Zoo by a contracted Zoos Inspector. This inspection was required for the renewal of the licence for Belfast Zoo under the terms of the Zoo Licensing Regulations (NI) 2003.

EHS is in the process of leasing part of the North Foreshore to Royal Society for Protection of Birds (RSPB); the RSPB will manage the site to protect the lands designated under the Habitats Directive as a European Special Protection Area.

EHS monitors two rivers in the North Belfast area, the Milewater and the Three Mile Water. The Three Mile Water is monitored near Whiteabbey to test compliance with the EC Freshwater Fish Directive (FFD), under which it has been designated salmonid. The Milewater is not designated under the FFD; however it is monitored at two points to assess its chemical and biological quality.

EHS dealt with a number of water pollution incidents in North Belfast in 2007 and attended a number of minor incidents in the area including several calls from the Fire and Rescue Service.

A successful prosecution was heard in Belfast magistrate's court in 2007 relating to breaches of consent under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 at a site in Belfast docks.

EHS helped to inform proposals by Northern Ireland Water for the upgrade of the sewerage system in the Whitehouse and Greencastle areas of North Belfast.

The Waste Management section of EHS received 42 reports of alleged illegal controlled waste activity in the North Belfast area in 2007. Reports are being followed up. EHS has also been active in regulating legal waste facilities in the area.

The Licensing & Authorisations Section within EHS processed a considerable number of Pollution Prevention and Control (PPC) permits, waste licences/exemptions during 2007. EHS also has a range of permitted and licensed facilities which staff regularly monitor, inspect and audit.

Other Units processed a number of applications (new and renewal carriers) during 2007 and carried out producer visits/audits and site inspections to businesses throughout Northern Ireland.

EHS licensed certain sites for archaeological excavation by private sector companies. EHS monitored other archaeological sites which are statutorily protected by scheduling.

A number of requests for buildings to be listed were dealt with. Grant-aid for repairs to original building fabric was made in relation to three building. Five buildings in the area participated in European Heritage Open Days.

Housing Benefit

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development to detail what action she is taking to ensure greater uptake of housing benefit by those who are entitled to it. (AQW 3570/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive administer Housing Benefit in Northern Ireland. They employ a range of measures to encourage Housing Benefit uptake including the following:

- All new Northern Ireland Housing Executive tenants are advised of the Housing Benefit scheme on their offer of accommodation. When signing up for their new homes tenants are also encouraged to make an application for Housing Benefit.
- For existing Northern Ireland Housing Executive tenants (not currently in receipt of Housing Benefit) advice on the availability of the scheme is provided on their quarterly rent statements. All letters regarding rent arrears carry a similar explanatory

note. The subject is also covered, as a matter of standard practice, during all early tenancy counselling visits and interviews conducted by Northern Ireland Housing Executive staff regarding rent arrears.

- For social housing applicants, the issue of alternative tenures is discussed when the applicant is initially visited. These discussions include the provision of advice on the Housing Benefit scheme as it applies to the private rented sector.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive also provides a range of information leaflets and posters in its local District Offices promoting the Housing Benefit scheme as well as providing similar information on its website and to local community groups through the Housing Community Network.

Regeneration of the Village Area, South Belfast

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an analysis of the Budget allocation for her department, particularly in the context of the resources required for major projects such as the redevelopment of the Village area in South Belfast.

(AQW 3747/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The total budget for my Department for next year is approximately £530 million resource and £244 million net capital. It has not yet been allocated at a detailed level. However, I will shortly be making a statement to the Assembly in which I will set out my new Housing agenda.

Social Security Offices

Mrs McGill asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the reasons why (i) the plan to locate the Social Security Offices and the Job Centre, in the Strabane District, into a 'one stop shop' was halted last year; and (ii) the planning application to refurbish the existing Social Security Offices at Urney Road has been withdrawn. (AQW 3961/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Social Security Agency remains committed to the roll-out of a Jobs and Benefits service in Strabane to ensure that clients benefit from the same enhanced work focused service which is available elsewhere in the province. Whilst a planning application was submitted for a new office on the existing site at Urney Road, Strabane, Roads Service raised a number of issues regarding the level of on-site car parking. As these issues could not be resolved, a decision was taken to withdraw the planning application. A further planning application will be submitted once a way forward has been agreed.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Floodlighting Parliament Buildings

Mr Wells asked the Assembly Commission to detail (i) the cost of floodlighting Parliament Buildings; and (ii) the total number of hours per week that floodlights are on; and to confirm whether or not these floodlights are turned off after 1:00am. (AQW 3423/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): It costs the Northern Ireland Assembly approximately £1.70 per hour to run the flood lights and amenity lights around Parliament Buildings. This is based on the premise that the lights use 17kw of electricity per hour and that it costs approximately 10 pence per kilowatt.

The floodlights are lit for approximately 70 hours per week. The floodlights are controlled by a photocell which is on a time clock. The time schedules are amended for summer and winter with the lights being on for considerably shorter time during summer. The time set for the floodlights to come on during the winter is 5:00 pm to 12 midnight and again at 5:00 am to 8:00 am and 10:00 pm until 12:00 midnight during the summer. As the lights are fitted with a photocell the lights will not come on until it is dark and similarly will turn off if it is bright before this time.

Assembly Energy Conservation

Mr Wells asked the Assembly Commission to confirm whether or not an individual member of staff has been given operational responsibility for energy conservation in Parliament Buildings. (AQW 3430/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): The Assembly Commission can confirm that the Keeper of the House has delegated the operational responsibility for energy conservation in Parliament Buildings to the Head of Building Services. In order to fulfil this role staff from within Building Management Branch have been on Energy Training courses arranged through the Public Sector Energy Campaign and Energy Conservation Branch.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 22 February 2008

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Harassment Clauses

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 a greater number of exemptions from harassment clauses than those detailed on the recent proposals issued for public consultation on the European Union Gender Goods and Services Directive. (AQW 1825/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Rev Dr Ian Paisley and Mr M McGuinness): Each member state has an obligation to fully transpose all directives within a specified time period. Transposition is usually carried out through the introduction of domestic legislation which must fully implement the Directive. The inclusion of exemptions within such legislation must not affect the implementation of the Directive. If it does then it will be held that the directive has not been fully implemented and there is a strong risk of infraction proceedings for failure to fully transpose the Directive.

The exemptions under the Gender Goods and Services Directive, as set out in the consultation document, outline all those available to us under this particular Directive.

In December 2007, the Government Equalities Office, the lead Great Britain Department responsible for transposition of this Directive across the UK, confirmed that the Directive will now be implemented on a UK-wide basis.

Redevelopment of the Maze Site

Mr Lunn asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm the commitment to redevelop the Maze site by 2012. (AQW 3072/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Ministers are committed to the effective and affordable regeneration of the Maze/Long Kesh.

The Department of Finance and Personnel is presently considering the value for money business case and the potential affordability based on the outcome of negotiations last year with private sector developers.

Should the Executive decide to develop the former prison as currently proposed, the prospects of the location being available in time to participate in the London 2012 Olympics will be considered with any private sector development partner who may be appointed.

Freedom of Information Requests

Mr Hamilton asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the number of Freedom of Information requests, submitted to the Northern Ireland Executive by Mr Jim Allister since 8 May 2007, that relate directly to his work as a Member of the European Parliament. (AQW 3248/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: It is not possible to detail the number of Freedom of Information requests submitted to Northern Ireland Departments by Mr Jim Allister that relate directly to his work as a Member of the European Parliament since 8 May 2007, as it is not clear from his requests whether he is acting in his capacity as an MEP or not. However, from the available evidence on our tracking and monitoring system, only one out of the fifty-five requests that he has made appears to address European business.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the department's bids in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review; and (ii) the amount of funding that has been allocated against them in the Budget 2008-11. (AQW 3404/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Table 1 Comparison of OFMDFM Budget Bids (Sept 07) with Budget Allocations (January 08)

	2008/09			2009/10			2010/11		
Area of Spend	Bid £m	Allocation £m	Variance £m	Bid £m	Allocation £m	Variance £m	Bid £m	Allocation £m	Variance £m
Sustainable Development	0.2	0.3	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.1
International Relations	0.2	0.5	0.3	0.2	0.5	0.3	0.2	0.5	0.3
Victims & survivors	1.9	2.5	0.6	3.5	7.0	3.5	5.1	10.1	5.0
Older People	0	0	0	0.7	0.7	0	1.5	1.8	0.3
Children & Young People	0.3	0	-0.3	0.3	0.7	0.4	0.3	1.6	1.3
Anti-poverty & Good Relations	1.9	1.1	-0.8	2.0	3.1	1.1	2.1	3.6	1.5

Good Relations Indicators

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the consideration being given to the incorporation of Good Relations Indicators, announced in January 2007, into the forthcoming programme of cohesion and integration.

(AQW 3405/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

We are fully committed to building a shared and better future. As previously stated we will bring forward proposals for a programme of cohesion and integration for a shared and better future.

In setting strategic targets, key objectives and actions for the programme of cohesion and integration we will give consideration to progress already achieved including the actions and targets contained in 'A Shared Future: First Triennial Action Plan 2006'.

The Good Relations Indicators provide a robust monitoring tool to measure change and monitor effectiveness of good relations policies. As previously indicated the Good Relations Indicators Baseline Report published in January 2007, will provide the core measures to reflect the work currently being undertaken at central and local level to improve societal relations. The indicators will inform progress against targets and outcomes. This will be a part of the detailed proposals for the programme of cohesion and integration which will be brought forward by OFMDFM to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Executive and the Assembly in due course

Ministerial Code

Mr O'Loan asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the procedure in place for making a complaint in relation to matters provided for in the Ministerial Code. (AQW 3473/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

No specified procedure is set out in the Ministerial Code. If any Minister considers there has been a breach of the Code they can raise this for discussion at the Executive Committee but it is not the role of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to investigate such complaints.

Ministerial Code

Mr O'Loan asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the process to be followed when considering and ruling on a complaint made in relation to matters provided for in the Ministerial Code. (AQW 3474/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

No specified procedure is set out in the Ministerial Code. If any Minister considers there has been a breach of the Code they can raise this for discussion at the Executive Committee but it is not the role of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to investigate such complaints.

Gender Equality Strategy

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what consideration it is giving to the EU Gender Directive on Goods and Services in relation to the forthcoming Gender Equality Strategy. (AQW 3554/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The Gender Equality Strategy was published in 2006. There is nothing in the Strategy that is inconsistent with the Gender Goods and Services Directive, which is part of the wider framework of European legislation designed to put into effect equal treatment between men and women.

Northern Ireland Act 1998

Ms Anderson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the discussions that have taken place within the Executive in relation to the requirements of section 28E of the Northern Ireland Act 1998; and to confirm what plans are in place to publish the strategy. (AQW 3593/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: In line with its statutory obligation under Section 16 of the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006 the Executive Committee will shortly consider proposals on the adoption of a strategy to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on objective need. The adoption proposals will be outlined to the OFMDFM Committee in advance of the Executive Committee's consideration of same.

Victims' Commission

Mr Elliott asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail how the Victims' Commission will meet the additional financial requirement created by the appointment of 4 Victims' Commissioners. (AQW 3613/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Over the next 3 years we have secured a total of £36 million to support victims and survivors – an increase of £6 million over the allocation in the draft Budget and of £20 million over the previous 3 year period. This will ensure that we can deliver programmes which will have a direct impact on the lives of victims and survivors and support the important work to be carried forward by the Victims Commissioners designate.

Code of Practice on Consultation

Mr McCarthy asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether or not it has published advice to Northern Ireland Departments in relation to public consultation documents, corresponding to the code of practice on consultation issued by the Cabinet Office, in January 2004. (AQW 3624/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: In June 2007, OFMDFM issued a 'Policy Toolkit' designed to provide a practical overview of the key steps in the policy development process. Within the toolkit, a best practice template is provided for a consultation document developed from the Cabinet Office guidance. The Toolkit is available on OFMDFM's website: www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/policylink.¹

¹ <http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/policylink>

Public Consultation Documents

Mr McCarthy asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the number of public consultation documents issued by Northern Ireland departments in the last 6 months; and to detail the number of these that contained executive summaries. (AQW 3629/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Details of all public consultation documents issued by Northern Ireland Departments are recorded on the OFMDFM's consultation register which is accessible through OFMDFM's website (<http://www.consultationni.gov.uk>).

Details of each consultation document for the last 6 months are accessible from this source. Information on how many of these have an executive summary is not currently available.

Publishing Advice to Northern Ireland Departments

Mr McCarthy asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm whether or not it will take into account the Department of the Taoiseach 'Reaching Out Guidelines' on consultation for public sector bodies, when publishing advice to Northern Ireland departments. (AQW 3630/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: When publishing advice to Northern Ireland departments, OFMDFM will take into account best practice guidance.

In June 2007, the Cabinet Office published "*Effective Consultation*" as part of the review of the Code of Practice on consultation. This document has already noted the guidelines for consultation produced by the Department of the Taoiseach in the Republic of Ireland.

Meetings Held

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the number of meetings (i) the First Minister; (ii) the deputy First Minister; and (iii) the junior Ministers, have held with (a) delegations representing one or more of the district councils; (b) the Northern Ireland Local Government Association; and (c) the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, since May 2007. (AQW 3719/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The information requested is as follows:

The deputy First Minister met with a delegation from Newry & Mourne Council (3 October 2007).

Junior Ministers have met with a delegation from Dungannon Borough Council twice.

Legal Fees

Miss McIlveen asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the amount spent on legal fees by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People in bringing the failed application for judicial review in relation to Article 2 of the Law Reform (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. (AQW 3754/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Judicial Review took place over the years 2006/2007; the final hearing took place between 19th and 26th November 2007. Costs paid to date total £25,475.43, whilst outstanding legal fees are estimated to be £11,167. The total costs of the Judicial Review, therefore, are expected to amount to £36,642.43.

Programme for Government

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to report on the absence of references to the 'green economy', particularly to the new economic opportunities for dealing with environmental challenges, within the Programme for Government. (AQW 3767/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Programme for Government clearly sets out, both in the main body of the text and in the associated Public Service Agreement framework, the Executive's commitment to the principles of sustainability, particularly in relation to economic growth. Sustainability is one of the two cross-cutting themes underpinning the Programme for Government and sets out the Executive's commitment to ensure that the principles of sustainability underpin our approach to all activities including economic growth and social progress.

The importance the Executive attach to the principles of sustainability is further reflected through the inclusion of a distinct priority within the Programme for Government to *Protect and Enhance Our Environment and Natural Resources*. In addition, the Public Service Agreement framework sets out the key actions departments will take in this regard and includes a clear commitment to the delivery of the Sustainable Development Strategy and the development and delivery of the associated Implementation Plan for 2008-2011.

Our focus must be on ensuring a more sustainable future for all, and the Strategy recognises the principles of living within environmental limits, using sound science responsibly and promoting opportunity and

innovation. In that context, the Executive recognises the new economic opportunities afforded by the rapid growth in eco-innovation and environmental technology markets.

Inter-Agency Protocol on Flags

Mr Lunn asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the progress that has been made in relation to the implementation of the inter-agency protocol on flags. (AQW 3783/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The flags protocol was established in April 2005 by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in partnership with the Police Service of Northern Ireland to establish clear working relationships between agencies with responsibilities related to the flying of flags.

A report on the nature and quantum of flagging in the summer of 2006 was published by OFMDFM in January 2007. Among other detail, this showed an overall reduction of 44% in the number of flags being flown between July and September 2006. A follow-up survey was completed in the summer of 2007 and the outcome report for 2007 will be made available shortly.

A review of the flags protocol is currently underway.

Consultation Spending

Ms S Ramsey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the amount of money spent by all Government departments on consultations, during the last six months. (AQO 2052/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Information on the amount of money spent by Government departments on consultations over the last six months is not held by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, nor is it held centrally.

Written Assembly Questions

Mr Ross asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the number of written Assembly Questions received since May 2007; and (ii) the average length of time it takes to respond. (AQW 3825/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The total number of Assembly Questions received for Written Answer during the period 8 May 2007 to 31

January 2008 was 218. The average length of time taken to respond was 17 days.

Waste Recycling

Dr McDonnell asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the percentage of waste produced by the department that is recycled. (AQW 3947/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Most of the waste produced by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is managed by the Stormont Estate management team within the Department of Finance and Personnel. We understand that the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in replying to a similar Assembly Question tabled by the Member, will be providing details of the amount of waste produced, and the percentage recycled, within the Stormont Estate.

Victims' Commission

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the location of the offices for the newly established Victims' Commission. (AQW 4009/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Commission Designate for Victims and Survivors currently has offices in Goodwood House, 44-58 May Street, Belfast BT1 4NN.

Programme of Cohesion and Integration

Mr Ford asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what progress it has made in implementing a programme of cohesion and integration for a shared future. (AQO 2011/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: As we have previously said, we are fully committed to building a shared and better future for all. We will bring forward proposals for a programme of cohesion and integration for a shared and better future to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

The core of these proposals will be action to tackle racism, sectarianism and intolerance. The emphasis of the action will be support for local people to deal with local issues through their local solutions.

Community Relations Funding

Mr Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what measures are in place to ensure equality in relation to Community Relations funding. (AQO 1958/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are committed to ensuring that we build a shared and better future for all our people.

It bears repeating that we regard racism, sectarianism and intolerance as blights which we must overcome wherever they appear. To that end, funding is provided to all 26 District Councils to address issues at the local level which have been identified and prioritised by them to meet the needs of the local communities.

Proposals for a Programme of Cohesion and Integration which we will bring forward shortly will be subject to the rigorous equality proofing standards including an Equality Impact Assessment. These proposals will include an increase in funding for District Councils' action plans.

Regeneration of Maze Site

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) to provide a timescale within which a decision will be made on the regeneration of the Maze site, and (ii) to outline the impact that the delay in making a decision will have on hosting events in the Olympic Games, and the Fire and Rescue Services Games. (AQO 2083/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Ministers are currently considering the outcome of the competitive dialogue bidding process for the appointment of a private sector development consortium to regenerate the site in accordance with the vision set out in the unanimous report of the Maze Consultation Panel in 2005 and the Maze/Long Kesh Masterplan published in 2006. Officials in DFP are currently examining both the value for money business case and the potential affordability.

The design of the Multi-Sports Stadium at the Maze/Long Kesh is well advanced and has the approval of the governing bodies of the three sports involved. However, no commitment to timescales can be given until a decision is made about the appointment of a private sector development partner who would be responsible for the main construction works. Such an appointment will not be made until a decision is made by Ministers.

Child Poverty

Mrs McGill asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the scale of child poverty in (a) Omagh District Council area; and (b) Strabane District Council area; and (ii) the particular characteristics of child poverty in West Tyrone; and to outline its strategies that are aimed at eradicating child poverty in West Tyrone. (AQO 2070/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

Together with our Executive colleagues, we are committed to tackling child poverty in Northern Ireland. This is clearly outlined in our Programme for Government document (PSA 7) which includes commitments to:

- achieve by 2010 a reduction of “67,000 in the number of children living in poverty compared to the 1998 level of 135,000”; and
- work towards the elimination of severe child poverty by 2012.

The rate of child poverty in Omagh and Strabane District Council areas combined is 25% (Before Housing Costs) and 29% (After Housing Costs) the same as the average figures for Northern Ireland as a whole. The data in relation to the scale of child poverty in Omagh and Strabane District Council is only available as a combined figure due to sample size requirements.

A range of known characteristics such as worklessness, being in receipt of benefits, lone parenthood and large families with four or more children increase the risk of child poverty regardless of geographical location.

The Executive Committee will shortly consider the possible adoption of ‘Lifetime Opportunities’, as the Executive’s Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy, a statutory obligation under Article 16 of the St Andrews Agreement. This consideration will include an assessment on how the strategy will be implemented and monitored to ensure it is targeted towards those individual, groups and areas in greatest objective need.

It is expected that the OFMDFM Committee, which is currently carrying out an inquiry into child poverty here, will be invited to comment on the adoption proposals in advance of the Executive Committee’s consideration.

West Belfast and Greater Shankill Taskforce Report

Mr Adams asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail its proposals for

taking forward the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Taskforce Report 2002. (AQO 2067/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

Significant progress has already been made on delivery of the West Belfast and Greater Shankill (WBGS) Taskforce Report recommendations. This includes the formal approval, by OFMDFM and DFP, of the provision of Integrated Development Fund (IDF) support for 15 of the 17 local projects resulting from the recommendations. Work is continuing to bring forward for approval the two outstanding projects as soon as possible. A total of £23.1 million in IDF has been made available for these projects.

In addition, following the January 2007 report produced by local community representatives on the key outstanding Taskforce Report issues, a cross departmental Steering Group led by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, which includes OFMDFM, has been working closely with local community representatives to agree the way forward in progressing those issues. As a result, the Steering Group aims to submit an agreed Draft Action Plan, in Spring 2008, for approval by the Executive.

Victims’ and Survivors’ Scheme

Mr Bresland asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the progress made in delivering funding under the Victims and Survivors Scheme, through the Community Relations Council, for the financial year 2008/2009. (AQO 1953/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

The Core Funding and Development Grant schemes for victims and survivors currently operated by the Community Relations Council on behalf of OFMDFM will continue in 2008–2009 while consideration is given to transitional funding arrangements in anticipation of the new strategy for victims and survivors.

People with Disabilities

Mrs M O’Neill asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action it is taking to improve the lives of people with a disability. (AQO 2080/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister:

Since devolution a raft of legislation has been introduced which is aimed at improving the quality of life for people with a disability:

- The Disability Discrimination (2006 Order) (Commencement No.3) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 which brought into operation the Order’s provisions on the meaning of disability;

- The Disability Discrimination (2006 Order) (Commencement No.4) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 which brought into operation most of the outstanding provisions of the Disability Discrimination (2006) Order;
- The Disability Discrimination (Premises) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007;
- The Disability Discrimination (Service Providers and Public Authorities Carrying Out Functions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007; and
- The Disability Discrimination (Questions and Replies) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007.

Victims' and Survivors' Strategy

Dr Farry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline its intentions in relation to the implementation of a comprehensive strategic approach to Victims and Survivors.

(AQO 2008/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We hope to be in a position soon to discuss our proposals for a new strategy for victims and survivors with the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister and other key stakeholders including the Commissioners designate.

Older Person's Commissioner

Mr Brady asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the interim arrangements to be put in place, prior to the appointment of an Older Person's Commissioner, in order to ensure that work in this area is not neglected.

(AQO 2077/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: On 18th December 2007 we announced our decision to establish an Older People's Commissioner for Northern Ireland.

Consultants were appointed to undertake a review of the case for an Older People's Commissioner and will be undertaking three consultation events which will examine the possible role and remit of a Commissioner.

It is inevitable that the process will be lengthy due to the statutory processes involved which include the preparation of necessary legislation.

The appointment of an Older People's Commissioner is a key priority for OFMDFM and officials will endeavour to 'fast track' the process where possible.

Children's Issues

Mr Armstrong asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) when the Executive Sub-Committee on Children's Issues will be set up; and (ii) how often it will meet.

(AQO 2068/08)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The first meeting of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People is scheduled for 13 March. It is intended that the meetings will take place as often as business necessitates but at least on a quarterly basis.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Single Farm Payment

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of staff employed within the Single Farm Payment section in Orchard House, Derry/Londonderry. (AQW 3522/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): As at 4 February 2008, a total of 78 staff, including casual personnel engaged to cover seasonal administrative activity and other short term requirements, were employed within the Single Farm Payment (SFP) Branch in Orchard House.

In addition to the processing of Single Application Forms and the validation and payment of applications to the SFP, Aid for Energy Crop and Protein Crop Premium schemes, the Branch is responsible for the internal review of applications received under Stage 1 of the Review of Decisions Procedure and for the assessment of applications to transfer SFP Entitlements

Brucellosis Reactors

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 2819/08, to detail the action she is taking to address the increase in the number of herds with brucellosis reactors. (AQW 3523/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Brucellosis is a highly contagious and yet very difficult disease to deal with, as infection can lie dormant for years and not be evident in testing. Therefore, fluctuations in the disease incidence may be seen regularly, as one severe outbreak can lead to a clustering of disease where many herds are affected.

In light of the current upturn in disease figures, my officials, while continuing to implement the Brucellosis Control Program, are considering an initiative to be implemented where the disease incidence is of particular concern. The Brucellosis Control program continues to be implemented with emphasis on completing high risk tests and targeted tests (such as forward and backward traces) and the increased use of the ELISA test, especially in high risk Divisions.

Pre-movement testing for brucellosis continues and we are confident that the detection of reactor animals before movement to other herds has prevented and will continue to prevent outbreaks of brucellosis that would otherwise have occurred.

Epidemiological assessments of the disease trends are regularly undertaken. Discussions continue with counterparts in the South on brucellosis matters to share best practice and to assess what further measures can be taken to successfully reduce this disease here.

We depend on farmers to continue to play a pivotal role in the reduction in this disease. It is vitally important that farmers report any suspicions of Brucellosis, particularly abortions in cattle, without delay. The earlier we can detect the disease, the more likely it is that we will be able to stop it from spreading further.

Farm Nutrients Management Scheme

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what her assessment is of the current position of new entrants to the farming industry who, because of initial low stocking densities, are being denied grant aid under the Farm Nutrients Management Scheme; and to confirm whether or not she will make it her policy to ensure that grant aid is available to new entrants in order to provide slurry storage facilities to meet the future needs of their expanding herds. (AQW 3537/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Farm Nutrient Management Scheme assists existing farmers to comply with the Nitrates Directive. The scheme closed for applications on 31 March 2006. To prevent applications from those intending to set up slurry storage businesses, applicants who had no animals at the time of application have been ineligible. Eligible applicants with animals could apply for more capacity than is necessary to meet the minimum weeks storage requirement of the Nitrates Action Programme. This was to allow for variations in animal numbers and for additional flexibility in exceptionally wet years so that slurry can be spread when weather and ground conditions are optimum.

The scheme could not address future needs whether of farmers who have not applied or of new entrants. That is for future consideration in light of EU State Aid rules and the Department's priorities and resources.

Renewing Communities

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide an update on the progress of the Renewing Communities pilot scheme for rural areas. (AQW 3564/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Renewing Communities Pilot Scheme, launched in December 2006 at a cost of £0.5m, is now in its second year. Early indications are that progress has been good across the four groups that deliver the programme. The infrastructure is now in place to help isolated rural communities access support to develop capacity and derive closer links with Government. Development officers are employed to work with Groups and "one stop shop" information points are established. All Groups have produced action plans outlining intended outcomes within their area.

It was always the intention that the scheme would last for 2 years and I can advise that my Department is preparing to instigate a full review before the end of 2008. The review will assess in more detail the positive outcomes for the local rural communities and the wider rural population.

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of cases of Bovine Tuberculosis that have occurred in the North Down constituency in each of the last five years. (AQW 3577/08)

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. Therefore, the information for Newtownards DVO can be found below.

Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Number of Reactors	3199	3086	2807	2226	1857	1424

These animals are reactors disclosed at a TB skin test.

Aid to Farming Industry

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what plans her

department has to provide aid to (i) beef farmers; (ii) dairy farmers; and (iii) pig farmers, who (a) have left; or (b) are considering leaving, the farming industry.
(AQW 3598/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department continues to work for the increased economic sustainability of all farm businesses and offers an opportunity for assistance to all farmers including those in the sectors you refer to.

Farmers who have ceased production may be eligible to receive financial support from the Single Farm Payment which provides an assured level of income while they seek to reach sound business decisions on the way ahead.

Those farmers may also avail of support under agri-environment schemes like the Countryside Management Scheme.

Advice and assistance to those farmers considering leaving the industry will be available from the Rural Development Programme I announced last summer. It contains a range of innovative and focused measures to improve the competitiveness of farm businesses and to support those considering options other than farming. The Programme also provides financial and technical support for farmers or family members wishing to diversify.

Further assistance is available from the College of Agriculture Food and Rural Enterprise which provides a wide range of technical and business support to farmers across all sectors including; advice on legislative compliance and help to assess the competitiveness of their business and how to improve it. My Department's Supply Chain Development Branch helps groups of farmers work together and with industry partners to improve returns from their supply chain and to look at potential options for diversification where this is the desired course of action.

A re-skilling programme is also being developed for farmers who work full-time to enable them to gain new qualifications and find work in other industries.

Countryside Management Scheme

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide a timescale within which the Northern Ireland Countryside Management Scheme will be launched.
(AQW 3610/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Development of the new and improved Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS) is ongoing and it is anticipated that this scheme will be open to applications in late spring/early summer 2008.

Brazilian Beef

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is her assessment of the impact that the EU ban on Brazilian Beef will have on the Red Meat Sector.
(AQW 3614/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Any beef imported to EU Member States should be able to satisfy the animal health, welfare and hygiene standards that are currently required from our local industry. I have for a long time expressed a strong opinion on this issue.

I am pleased that a decision has now been taken to suspend, from 31 January 2008, imports of beef from Brazil until the Commission satisfies itself that the Brazilian industry stands up to the sort of scrutiny expected of local producers. Frozen and chilled meat already in transit from Brazil prior to 31 January 2008 will be allowed into the EU until 15 March 2008

This is a significant step and should reassure the local industry that their concerns, and those of the industry in the island of Ireland, are taken seriously. I expect that levels of imported Brazilian beef available on the market here will gradually fall as this suspension bites. I should, however, stress that this action has been taken for disease control purposes and not for reasons of trade protection. Any market shortfall, as a result of a reduction in meat supplies from Brazil, will be offset by the normal market forces of supply and demand.

I should also point out that, while no timescale has been given for the resumption of the Brazilian beef trade, it is possible that a number of holdings will be approved for trade to the EU following further auditing or inspection.

I welcome the recent decision and hope that it encourages the local industry that the standards required of them are being applied to Third Countries.

Forestry Service Centralisation

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what plans she has for the centralisation of the Forestry Service's regional offices to Belfast.
(AQW 3615/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have no plans to centralise any Forest Service regional offices in Belfast.

Supermarket Price Fixing

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what proportion of

the £116m fine, issued to supermarkets for price fixing in December 2007, was allocated to her department; and to detail how this money has been spent.

(AQW 3627/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The issue referred to relates to the activities of the large supermarkets and a number of dairy processors in Britain. Also, I wish to advise that the regulation of anti-competitive practice and agreements and the abuse of dominant position in the market are reserved matters. You will therefore appreciate that none of the penalties amounting to over £116 million were allocated to my Department.

Consultants Employed

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 2820/08, to detail (i) the remit of the 2 working groups established in relation to the Red Meat Task Force Report; (ii) the number of meetings they have had to date; and (iii) a timescale within which the groups will report.

(AQW 3645/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

- (i) At the last meeting of the Red Meat Task Force on 16 January it was agreed to form two working groups to bring forward cases that could potentially be used to bid for government support for the suckler beef and hill sheep sector. One group was tasked to look at a proposal around calf housing while the other was to examine wider considerations for support to this sector.
- (ii) The group examining the calf housing proposal met for the first time on the 1 February and will next meet on the 25 February. The group exploring wider considerations met on 22 January and also on 6 February. Both groups will have met twice before the next meeting of the Task Force.
- (iii) The groups will report back to the Red Meat Task Force at their next meeting on 27 February.

Meetings with Council Representatives

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of meetings she has held with (i) delegations representing one or more of the district councils; (ii) the Northern Ireland Local Government Association; and (iii) the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, since May 2007.

(AQW 3720/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Since my appointment I have held one meeting with a district council. On 14 November 2007 I met representatives of Omagh District Council to discuss the serious flooding in the town on 12 June that year.

In addition, I held discussions with the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) on 11 December 2007. There have been no substantive meetings with the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives.

Forest Development

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the total area of forest (i) harvested; and (ii) planted, in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 3790/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The tabulated figures set out the areas of forest sold for harvesting and areas of forest re-planted in each of three financial years.

	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	Totals
Hectares of DARD forest sold for harvesting	957	914	880	2751
Hectares re-established by planting	903	840	750	2493
	Hectares of forest currently managed for natural regeneration *			233

* 233 hectares of the estate is currently under re-establishment by natural regeneration in addition to the re-planting figures shown above.

Waste Produced

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the percentage of waste produced by the department that is recycled.

(AQW 3796/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Data is not collected in this form. However, the Department continues to make an active contribution to waste handling. For example, the Department's headquarters (Dundonald House) contributes to the Stormont Estate Waste Management Scheme and, at larger outlying sites, provision has been made for the segregation of paper, bottles, cans and toner cartridges for recycling.

Forestation

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her plans for forestation to improve the environment, enhance tourism, recreation and leisure over the next three years. (AQW 3808/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: In the Programme for Government 2008-2011, my Department has published plans to create an additional 550 hectares of woodland each year over the next three years. This will be achieved mainly by the conversion of private agricultural land to forestry through support provided by the Rural Development Programme.

We will encourage a wide range of types of forest which will improve the environment and enhance the landscape as well as support rural development and the production of renewable energy. Additional support is available to encourage new woodlands in areas which have a demonstrable potential to offer public access and value for informal recreation.

Next year my Department also intends to publish a strategy for recreation and social use of forests to provide a framework within which we can consider recreation, leisure and tourism issues.

Pomeroy Developments Project

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) the funding that has been delivered to Pomeroy Developments Project in (i) 2005; (ii) 2006; and (iii) 2007; and (b) the proposed funding for Pomeroy Developments Project in 2008 and 2009. (AQW 3812/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department has not provided any funding to Pomeroy Development Projects Limited and has no future funding plans for this group.

Communications Courses at Loughry College

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the reasons for her decision to withdraw the (i) undergraduate; and (ii) post-graduate communications courses from Loughry College. (AQW 3845/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The cessation of the undergraduate and post-graduate programmes in Communications at Loughry Campus is currently being considered but no decision has yet been taken. The proposal to withdraw these programmes reflects the budgetary pressures that

DARD and other Departments face under the new Programme for Government. In considering this proposal, I have written to Reg Empey, the Minister for Employment and Learning, to seek a meeting with him as the Communications programmes may fit better within the mainstream provision provided by DEL.

There are no plans to withdraw any other courses currently provided at Loughry Campus.

Staff Illness

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 2850/08, to detail how she ascertains whether sickness levels within her department compare favourably or otherwise with other Government departments. (AQW 3861/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Sickness levels across all the North's Government departments are monitored and analysed in detail by the Department of Finance and Personnel on a monthly basis. This information enables the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to ascertain how its sickness levels compare with the other Departments.

Promotion of United Kingdom Agricultural Products

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the discussions she has had with her ministerial colleagues in England, Scotland and Wales in relation to the promotion of United Kingdom agricultural products in the world market. (AQW 3868/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have met on several occasions with ministerial colleagues in England, Scotland and Wales to discuss a range of topical issues under my portfolio.

The Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) have responsibility for the promotion of red meat and red meat products on domestic and international markets. LMC in association with Invest NI participates in several trade missions annually to leading international food fairs including SIAL in France and ANUGA in Germany. Last October, I attended ANUGA which attracts large numbers of international traders.

Following the publication of the 'Fit for Market' report, the Regional Food Programme was launched to promote quality regional food by assisting the local agri-food industry to develop and expand profitable and sustainable markets.

The above Programme was subsequently complimented by the formation of Food Promotion Northern Ireland Ltd (FPNI), an industry group representing the entire supply chain, who are jointly taking forward and funding a domestic marketing campaign called 'Good Food is in our Nature', to promote local food.

My Department supported the showcasing of local food at the Smithsonian Festival held in Washington DC last year. I attended this event and also had the opportunity to meet with influential trade and government officials, including the US Secretary for Agriculture.

Additionally, I have attended many local functions to raise the profile of local food, for example, the RAFAEL project which encourages local food producers and processors to develop and successfully compete for business in the public sector, specifically in hospitals and schools.

Communications Courses

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the reasons for her decision to withdraw the (i) undergraduate; and (ii) post-graduate communications courses from Loughry College; and what plans she has to replace them.

(AQW 3912/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The cessation of the undergraduate and post-graduate programmes in Communications at Loughry Campus is currently being considered but no decision has yet been taken. The proposal to withdraw these programmes reflects the budgetary pressures that DARD and other Departments face under the new Programme for Government. In considering this proposal, I have written to Reg Empey, the Minister for Employment and Learning, to seek a meeting with him as the Communications programmes may fit better within the mainstream provision provided by DEL.

There are no plans to withdraw any other courses currently provided at Loughry.

Loughry Campus will continue to offer a range of education and training programmes focused on the needs of the local Food Industry.

Rivers Agency

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to the answer to AQW 3114/08, to clarify the criteria used by the Rivers Agency in determining receipt of a 'request for help

and assistance', in relation to flooding over the period 22 December 2007 to 2 January 2008. (AQW 4010/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The number of flooding related telephone calls received by the Rivers Agency was the criteria used in determining receipt of 'a request for help and assistance' in relation to flooding over the period 22 December 2007 and the 2 January 2008.

Chicken Waste

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the discussions her department has had in relation to the nitrates directive and chicken waste; and (ii) any proposals her department has considered for dealing with chicken waste, other than through incineration. (AQW 4107/08)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

- (i) The Nitrates Directive and chicken manure were discussed by the Expert Group on the Alternative Use of Manures (EGAUM) convened by DARD. The Group was established in March 2005 to examine alternatives to land spreading of manures which could help the intensive livestock production sectors comply with the Nitrates Directive. Recommendations were made to the DARD Minister in March 2006 by EGAUM.
- (ii) EGAUM reviewed worldwide research and examined a range of proven technologies for processing manures that are currently being used in other countries. In respect of the poultry industry, the group endorsed the technical approach being adopted by a consortium within the industry to develop a single poultry-litter fired electricity generator, capable of handling 300,000 tonnes of input per annum and producing up to 25MW of power. No formal alternative proposals for dealing with chicken manure have been received for consideration by the Department.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Constituency Meeting

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3258/08, to detail the reasons why representatives from the 3 other political parties, who represent the East Derry/Londonderry constituency, were not invited to attend the meeting. (AQW 3546/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): The meeting was arranged at my request and brought together representatives of the organisations directly involved in promoting the Milk Cup in Coleraine. It was not intended to exclude anyone with an interest in this event from the meeting.

Gaeltacht Quarter Steering Group

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the remit of the Gaeltacht Quarter Steering Group. (AQW 3663/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: A copy of the remit for the Gaeltacht Quarter Steering Group has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Gaeltacht Quarter Steering Group

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail how, when, and by whom the membership of the Gaeltacht Quarter Steering Group was determined. (AQW 3665/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Membership of the Gaeltacht Quarter Steering Group derives from a model proposed in the report 'Gaeltacht Quarter – The Establishment of a Development Board and Related Issues' which was jointly commissioned by DCAL, DSD and DETI to examine and make recommendations on, inter alia, the role, structure and governance arrangements of a Gaeltacht Quarter Board. The model was then refined in accordance with the demands of good governance and public accountability. Membership of the Steering Group was agreed with the Gaeltacht Quarter Shadow Board in 2007.

Meetings with Council Representatives

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of meetings he has held with (i) delegations representing one or more of the district councils; (ii) the Northern Ireland Local Government Association; and (iii) the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, since May 2007. (AQW 3721/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Since May 2007 I have held 9 meetings with delegations from district councils and one meeting with the Northern Ireland Local Government Association. I have not met with the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives.

Cultural Events

Mr F McCann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of (i) Irish language events; and (ii) Ulster-Scots events, he has attended since taking up office. (AQW 3727/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I have attended a total of 5 Ulster-Scots events as the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. To date I have received 4 invitations to Irish language events but have not attended any.

Creative-Industries Sector

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to report on the definition of the 'creative industries sector' as referred to in the Programme for Government. (AQW 3768/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The definition of creative industries referred to in the Programme for Government originates from Department for Culture Media and Sport research and is as follows:

"Those activities which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property."

The Department has adopted this UK definition of the creative industries which comprises the following 13 sectors:

- Advertising
- Architecture
- Art & Antique Market
- Crafts
- Design
- Designer Fashion
- Film & Video
- Interactive Leisure Software
- Music
- Performing Arts
- Publishing
- Software & Computer Services
- Television & Radio

Arts Funding

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to report on his department's projections for the level of (a) resource; and (b) capital funding per capita, for the arts, for the Budget period 2008-2011. (AQW 3771/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The table below details the projected per capita spend on the arts and arts infrastructure in Northern Ireland for the period 2008-2011:

	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
(a) Resource	£7.48	£7.73	£8.53
(b) Capital	£7.21	£6.12	£5.55

All figures are provisional and are based on population estimates published by National Statistics in August 2007. The resource figures include the Arts Council baseline allocations plus other arts funding which will be administered through the Council.

Irish-Language Newspaper

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in the context of the closure of the Irish-language newspaper, La Nua, what analysis he has made of the relationship between this event and (i) the level of fluent Irish-language speakers in Northern Ireland; and (ii) the level of demand for greater promotion of the Irish language. (AQW 3941/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I cannot comment on the contractual arrangements that pertain to the publication of La Nua. My officials are currently in discussion with a leading academic in the field of Irish language to explore how best to gather evidence on the extent and level of understanding of the Irish language in N.I. This will assist the department in determining the level of demand for the Irish language as part of the indigenous languages strategy.

Salmon Fishing on the River Bush

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the current state of (i) salmon fishing; and (ii) salmon stocks, on the River Bush. (AQW 3944/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: At the end of the 2007 angling season, a total of 760 salmon were taken by rods from the River Bush. This was an increase on 2006 when 314 fish were caught, and on 2005 when 273 were caught. The 2006 rod catch is the highest since 1998 and this is an encouraging sign.

- Catch per unit effort on the lower stretches of the river, in terms of fish per rod day, was 0.6 in 2007, compared with 0.45 in 2006 and 0.32 in 2005.
- 4825 salmon were counted at the trap at Bushmills Salmon Station in 2007, compared to 1527 in 2006 and 1475 in 2005. This count represents the total

run of fish to the river less those caught in the angling beats below Bushmills.

- The aim of salmon management measures is to maintain river populations above conservation limits. The conservation limit is defined as the number of spawners leading to long term optimum production from freshwater.
- The conservation limit on the River Bush has not been achieved since 1998 reflecting a very worrying downward trend in marine survival in the intervening years. Whilst the data for 2007 suggests that conservation limit will have been met, it is too early to determine if the underlying problem of marine survival has improved. These data will be available in March 2008.

Cultural Events

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of (i) Ulster Scots events; and (ii) Irish language events, he has attended since becoming Minister. (AQW 4045/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I have attended a total of 5 Ulster-Scots events as the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. To date I have received 4 invitations to Irish language events but have not attended any.

Community Festivals Fund

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the criteria used to set and allocate budgets for each local council, in relation to the Community Festivals Fund, for the financial year 2008-2009. (AQW 4056/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I refer the member to AQW 2763/08 which he tabled for answer on 24 January 2008. This details the criteria used to set and allocate budgets for each local council.

Further Education College and Library in Cookstown

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in light of the joint approach between his department and the Department of Employment and Learning in building a Further Education College and Library in Cookstown, what assessment he has made of the benefits in this type of approach; and to detail the plans there are to replicate this approach in other parts of Northern Ireland. (AQW 4117/08)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Southern Education and Library Board is required to

completed the Post-Project Evaluation of the new Cookstown Library; a process which will assess the benefits of the project. This is normally completed some time after a project is completed. I expect to receive a Post-Project Evaluation for Cookstown Library within the next twelve months.

Where relevant, I am keen for new libraries to be built in partnership with complementary facilities. Other examples include Strabane Library (with an Arts Centre), Grove Library (with sport and health facilities) and Armagh Library (with a creative arts centre).

As the programme to modernise our library buildings progresses the library service will continue to enter into beneficial partnerships where it is considered appropriate.

EDUCATION

Autism Spectrum Disorder Units

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education, in relation to the recently established key stage 1 Autism Spectrum Disorder Units, to confirm whether or not (i) they function independently or within a regional network; (ii) staff who work in such units, including classroom assistants, obtain autism specific training; and (iii) there is specific liaison with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in relation to the special medical needs of children attending these units. (AQW 3528/08)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): I am informed by the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards that established autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) units, as well as those recently approved, operate from a common staffing formula with shared guidance which is delivered in conjunction with the Autism Advice and Intervention Service in each Board area. All teaching and non-teaching staff who work in autism specific classes receive autism specific training.

Education and library boards (ELBs) liaise directly with local health trusts in relation to the therapeutic and medical needs of children in ASD units. This enables a planned approach to service delivery across the education and health sectors which can be implemented as an integral part of the educational provision. ELBs also, as part of the statutory special educational needs (SEN) framework, seek advice from local health trusts regarding any pupil either being assessed for or possessing a statement of SEN.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether or not her department has an autism specific (i) advisory; and (ii) supervisory team, to deal with the transition of those with Autism Spectrum Disorder from primary to secondary education; and to detail what liaison her department has had with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in relation to the medical implications of transition to adolescence. (AQW 3529/08)

The Minister of Education: The Department of Education (DE) does not have autism specific advisory or supervisory teams to deal with the transition of those with Autism Spectrum Disorder from primary to secondary education. It is the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) which are responsible under special education legislation for identifying, assessing and, in appropriate cases, making special educational provision for children with special educational needs in their areas. This legislation does not give DE any role in the identification and assessment of children's special educational needs, nor any power to intervene in the process which is intended to be conducted between parents, schools and Boards.

DE led a Transitions Inter-departmental Group, which included the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Since the publication of Group's Report in February 2006, each ELB has appointed 2 Transition Co-ordinators to strengthen the transition planning process in schools and provide a co-ordinated approach with other statutory agencies and advice givers.

Ag an chéad athbhreithniú tar éis 14ú breithlá páiste, tá dualgas reachtúil ar na Boird tuairim a iarraidh ar an Iontaobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta, a mbeidh impleachtaí míochaine an aistrithe san áireamh ann.

At the first annual review after a child's 14th birthday ELBs have a statutory duty to seek an opinion from the Health and Social Services Trust which will include the medical implications of transition.

Youth Services

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of money that has been spent on youth services by each Education and Library Board, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 3538/08)

The Minister of Education: Sa tábla a leanas tá mionsonraí caiteachais acmhainne agus chaipitiúil ar sheirbhísí ógra ag gach Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne i ngach ceann de na 5 bliana a chuaigh thart.

The following table provides details of resource and capital expenditure on youth services by each Education and Library Board in each of the last 5 years.

Board	2002/03 £000s	2003/04 £000s	2004/05 £000s	2005/06 £000s	2006/07 £000s
BELB					
Resource	3,883	4,357	4,469	4,140	4,343
Capital	197	50	319	156	668
NEELB					
Resource	3,282	3,845	3,771	4,074	4,245
Capital	352	166	357	247	1,062
SEELB					
Resource	3,063	3,243	3,795	3,998	3,773
Capital	175	110	618	512	823
SELB					
Resource	3,041	3,925	3,721	3,875	4,205
Capital	361	81	179	458	805
WELB					
Resource	3,039	3,444	3,485	3,612	3,413
Capital	213	380	265	744	544

School Maintenance Spending

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of money that has been spent on the maintenance of schools by each Education and Library Board, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 3539/08)

The Minister of Education: Mar seo a leanas atá an caiteachas ar chothabháil scoileanna ag gach Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne i ngach ceann de na 5 bliana a chuaigh thart:

Expenditure on the maintenance of schools by each Education and Library Board in each of the last 5 years is as follows:

EXPENDITURE ON MAINTENANCE (£'000)

Education and Library Board	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Belfast	£11,851	£10,096	£5,280	£3,972	£3,414
Western	£9,680	£9,483	£4,789	£3,634	£3,777
North Eastern	£4,770	£7,714	£4,301	£4,314	£5,520
South Eastern	£10,198	£6,784	£4,562	£1,844	£2,185
Southern	£9,082	£9,454	£6,229	£4,960	£5,353
TOTAL	£45,581	£43,531	£25,161	£18,724	£20,249

School Amalgamations

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the findings of the review of her decision to amalgamate St Patrick's and St Joseph's Primary Schools, Ahoghill. (AQW 3612/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá mo Roinn i dteagmháil leis an fhoireann i gComhairle na Scoileanna Caitliceacha faoi Chothabháil agus i mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Tuaiscirt ar cheisteanna a bhaineann leis an chónascadh atá molta le go dtig an cas a dhearbhu chomh luath agus is féidir.

My Department is in contact with staff in the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and North Eastern Education and Library Board on issues relating to the proposed amalgamation so that the position can be confirmed as soon as possible.

Meetings With School Principals

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of school principals that have requested meetings with her since May 2007. (AQW 3659/08)

The Minister of Education: Ó mhí na Bealtaine 2007, fuair mé 15 iarratas ar chruinnithe ó phríomhoidí scoile.

Since May 2007, I have received 15 requests from school principals for meetings.

Meetings With School Principals

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of meetings she has held with school principals since May 2007. (AQW 3660/08)

The Minister of Education: Ó mhí na Bealtaine 2007, bhí 21 cruinniú agam le príomhoidí scoile. Ag 8 gcinn de na cruinnithe seo bhí na príomhoidí ina gcuid de thoscaireacht ní ba mhó.

Since May 2007, I have held 21 meetings with school principals. At 8 of these meetings the principals made up part of a larger delegation.

Underperforming Teachers

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the sanctions she is considering in relation to teachers who have been assessed as underperforming. (AQW 3677/08)

The Minister of Education: Currently teachers who have been assessed as underperforming are subject to the agreed procedures for dealing with teachers (including principals and vice-principals)

whose work is unsatisfactory. These were drawn up jointly by the Employing Authorities in consultation with the Department and ratified by the Teachers' Salaries and Conditions of Service Negotiating Committee (Schools).

Is é a bpríomhaidhm feabhsú a chur i bhfeidhm a fhad le caighdeán sásúil oibre ach, sa chás go mbíonn obair mhúinteora go fóill míshásúil, tá freagracht ar an Bhord Gobarnóirí smachtbhannaí oiriúnacha a bheartú.

Their primary aim is to effect improvement to a satisfactory standard of work but, where a teacher's work remains unsatisfactory, it is the responsibility of the Board of Governors to determine appropriate sanctions.

Teacher Performance

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the criteria being proposed to assess teacher performance. (AQW 3678/08)

The Minister of Education: Teachers' performance is currently assessed through the Performance Review and Staff Development (PRSD) Scheme. The Scheme, which was ratified by the Teachers' Salaries and Conditions of Service Negotiating Committee (Schools) in 2004, is intended to assist Boards of Governors in their duty to ensure that the professional development and performance of teachers employed within their schools is reviewed annually. The review process includes an assessment of the teacher's performance against objectives set at the start of the school year and a Review Statement produced at the end of the school year, which may be used to inform decisions or recommendations about the teacher's performance.

Ar ócáidí, measann na Cigirí Oideachais agus Oiliúna go bhfuil feidhmiú múinteora míshásúil; nó, má bhíonn Bord Gobharnóirí imníoch faoi ghnéithe d'obair mhúinteora, féadann siad cigireacht fhoirmiúil ar obair an mhúinteora a iarraidh.

On occasion, the performance of a teacher observed during inspection is deemed by the Education and Training Inspectorate to be unsatisfactory; or, if a Board of Governors has concerns about aspects of the work of a teacher, it may request a formal inspection of the teacher's work.

Male Teachers

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of male teachers employed in primary schools in 2006/2007 in each of (a) the controlled sector; (b) the voluntary maintained sector; (c) the integrated sector; and (d) the Irish medium sector, and (ii) the corresponding percentage of all teachers in those sectors. (AQW 3679/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh mionsonraithe sa tábla faoi iamh.

The information requested is detailed in the attached table.

Primary School Types	Gender	Number	% split
Controlled	F	3347	86.60
	M	518	13.40
		3865	
Catholic Maintained	F	2939	80.79
	M	699	19.21
		3638	
Other Maintained	F	37	86.05
	M	6	13.95
		43	
Controlled Integrated	F	93	86.11
	M	15	13.89
		108	
Grant Maintained Integrated	F	211	83.73
	M	41	16.27
		252	
Overall	F	6627	83.82
	M	1279	16.18
		7906	
Irish Medium	F	73	79.35
	M	19	20.65
		92	

Male Teachers

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of male teachers employed in post primary schools in 2006/2007 in each of (a) the controlled sector; (b) the voluntary sector; (c) the integrated sector; and (d) the Irish medium sector, and (ii) the corresponding percentage of all teachers in those sectors. (AQW 3681/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh mionsonraithe sa tábla faoi iamh.

The information requested is detailed in the attached table.

Post Primary School Types	Gender	Number	% split
Controlled	F	2313	66.41
	M	1170	33.59
		3483	
Catholic Maintained	F	1952	64.83
	M	1059	35.17

Post Primary School Types	Gender	Number	% split
		3011	
Controlled Integrated	F	111	71.15
	M	45	28.85
		156	
Grant Maintained Integrated	F	450	69.44
	M	198	30.56
		648	
Overall	F	4826	66.13
	M	2472	33.87
		7298	
Irish Medium	F	13	40.63
	M	19	59.38
		32	

Male Head Teachers

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail the number and percentage of male head teachers in primary and post primary schools, broken down by Education and Library Board and sector, for each of the last five years. (AQW 3682/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh mionsonraithe sa tábla faoi iamh.

The information requested is detailed in the attached table:

NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF THOSE ON THE PRINCIPAL PAYSCALE IN PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS, 2007

Board	Management type	Primary		Post-primary	
		Number of male principals	% of all principals	Number of male principals	% of all principals
Belfast	Controlled	20	50%	5	63%
	Voluntary	0	0%	9	53%
	C Maintained	17	55%	6	50%
	Other Maintained	1	13%	1	100%
	Controlled Integrated	1	100%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	0	0%	1	50%
	Total	39	48%	22	55%
Western	Controlled	17	31%	9	90%
	Voluntary	0	0%	9	75%
	C Maintained	52	44%	12	63%
	Other Maintained	1	100%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	0	0%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	1	25%	2	67%
	Total	71	40%	32	73%
North Eastern	Controlled	66	55%	16	76%
	Voluntary	0	0%	8	73%
	C Maintained	29	43%	6	50%
	Other Maintained	0	0%	0	0%
	Controlled Integrated	2	40%	0	0%
	Grant Maintained Integrated	4	67%	5	100%
	Total	101	50%	35	70%

St. Patrick's and St. Brigid's Primary School, Ballycastle

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the reasons for the delay in the provision of a new school for St. Patrick's and St. Brigid's Primary School, Ballycastle. (AQW 3691/08)

The Minister of Education: Planning for the new school for St Patrick's & St Brigid's P.S. is well advanced with a revised Stage D submission (RIBA final sketch plans and costs) having been submitted to the Department in September 2007. This is being reviewed by the Department's technical advisers and it is expected that this will be completed shortly.

Má mheastar aighneacht Céim D a bheith sásúil, síltear go mbeidh tairiscintí á lorg go gairid don obair deartha iarmhair agus do thógáil na scoile úire.

Subject to the Stage D submission being considered satisfactory, it is anticipated that tenders for the remaining design work and construction of the new school will be sought shortly.

School Funding

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of funding allocated to each (i) primary; and (ii) post-primary school in the Upper Bann constituency, in each of the last three years. (AQW 3694/08)

The Minister of Education: The funding allocation delegated to each primary and post primary school in the Upper Bann Constituency in each of the last three financial years is set out in the following table:

School Reference	School Name	Delegated Resources excluding carry over 2004/05 £	Delegated Resources excluding carry over 2005/06 £	Delegated Resources excluding carry over 2006/07 £
5011594	Abercorn PS	805,948	860,066	863,466
5011114	Ardmore PS	81,917	73,332	113,519
5016117	Ballyoran PS	722,927	769,224	827,038
5410013	Banbridge Academy	4,156,557	4,520,507	4,753,065
5210047	Banbridge High School	2,146,827	2,329,103	2,469,982
5011174	Birches PS	181,212	204,931	215,323
5011602	Bleary PS	236,466	245,658	267,852
5016138	Bocombra PS	498,928	566,578	575,614
5066540	Bridge Integrated PS	934,071	969,158	1,009,310

School Reference	School Name	Delegated Resources excluding carry over 2004/05 £	Delegated Resources excluding carry over 2005/06 £	Delegated Resources excluding carry over 2006/07 £
5250216	Brownlow Int College	1,294,123	1,510,217	1,686,503
5011127	Carrick PS	802,134	841,121	925,679
5210043	Clounagh Junior High School	2,063,132	2,272,376	2,451,457
5011596	Craigavon PS	269,433	305,445	339,127
5210282	Craigavon Senior High School	2,422,586	2,574,029	2,750,055
5016065	Dickson PS	401,064	439,528	430,297
5016178	Donacloney PS	352,831	411,805	457,926
5230256	Drumcree College	1,550,369	1,502,208	1,594,213
5016080	Drumgor PS	653,682	677,982	743,201
5011189	Edenderry PS	701,732	733,574	756,212
5013019	Edenderry PS	849,576	913,488	964,062
5011129	Hart Memorial PS	660,681	680,343	728,558
5210054	Killicomaine Junior High School	1,595,050	1,708,539	1,772,726
5011124	King's Park PS	1,219,801	1,272,412	1,362,388
5230213	Lismore Comprehensive School	3,587,941	3,805,199	4,002,722
5011655	Loughbrickland PS	114,822	104,113	119,043
5410057	Lurgan College	1,477,469	1,628,845	1,720,111
5210271	Lurgan Junior High School	2,100,190	2,186,116	2,283,468
5010992	Lurgan Model PS	463,039	493,597	555,193
5011687	Maralin Village PS	497,070	520,797	518,256
5016007	Millington PS	1,128,744	1,228,393	1,333,271
5011651	Milltown PS	133,011	160,897	184,713
5016543	Moyallon PS	352,411	392,490	415,640
5260285	New-Bridge Integrated College	1,871,412	1,983,975	2,034,186
5410067	Portadown College	2,785,089	2,997,599	3,091,190

School Reference	School Name	Delegated Resources excluding carry over 2004/05 £	Delegated Resources excluding carry over 2005/06 £	Delegated Resources excluding carry over 2006/07 £
5066553	Portadown Integrated PS	514,670	534,993	566,292
5036586	Presentation PS	202,344	240,098	303,092
5011165	Richmount PS	264,708	291,940	291,998
5011664	Scarva PS	141,440	161,750	175,041
5046137	Seagoe PS	562,251	591,720	611,695
5031184	St Anthony's PS	1,125,057	1,201,487	1,330,051
5036101	St Brendan's PS	775,551	848,453	947,884
5036400	St Colman's (Bann) PS	247,909	265,762	265,071
5036633	St Francis PS	1,472,522	1,646,958	1,798,067
5036457	St Francis' PS, Aghhderg	258,363	283,440	315,580
5036173	St John The Baptist PS	752,350	830,559	898,347
5031669	St John's PS	309,680	339,062	354,277
5230070	St Mary's High School	2,004,577	2,155,352	2,273,511
5031164	St Mary's PS	231,851	259,520	261,409
5036006	St Mary's PS	243,821	279,445	306,494
5036009	St Mary's PS	201,204	214,310	219,465
5036043	St Mary's PS	912,095	1,012,328	1,042,880
5420056	St Michael's Grammar, Lurgan	2,257,228	2,424,690	2,514,587
5230076	St Patrick's College	1,718,226	1,787,913	1,818,417
5031168	St Patrick's PS	549,930	571,756	575,726
5031667	St Patrick's PS	214,846	258,457	267,766
5033324	St Patrick's PS	296,189	310,914	316,516
5230088	St Paul's Junior High School	1,592,697	1,721,696	1,808,036
5031160	St Teresa's PS	503,507	537,586	545,536
5031103	Tannaghmore PS	1,476,611	1,566,066	1,638,538
5011190	Tullygally PS	893,815	636,749	669,039
5011598	Waringstown PS	741,755	835,149	862,896

Meetings With MLAs

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of meetings she has held with MLAs since May 2007. (AQW 3788/08)

The Minister of Education: Ó mhí na Bealtaine 2007, bhí 21 cruinniú agam le CTR-anna.

Since May 2007, I have held 21 meetings with MLAs.

Fundamental Review of Special Education

Dr W McCrea asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 1030/07, to provide a timescale within which the fundamental review of Special Education will be released for public consultation. (AQW 3798/08)

The Minister of Education: I consider the needs of children with special educational needs (SEN) as an important part of my Ministerial responsibilities. Therefore I have taken time to consider the review proposals very carefully.

Tar éis dom iad a fhaomhadh, tabharfar na moltaí trí na próisis riachtanacha Tionóil sula n-eisítear iad i gcomhair comhairliúcháin fhoirmiúil phoiblí, fá lár 2008, de réir amscálaí reatha.

Following my approval, the proposals will be taken through the required Assembly processes prior to being issued for formal public consultation, which on present timescales will be mid-2008.

Primary School Teachers

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of teachers currently employed in primary schools in (i) the controlled sector; and (ii) the voluntary maintained sector. (AQW 3838/08)

The Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh mionsonraithe sa tábla faoi iamh.

The information requested is detailed in the attached table: -

Primary School Type	Teacher Number
Controlled	3846
Catholic Maintained	3611
Other Maintained	133
Controlled Integrated	123
Grant Maintained Integrated	262
Total	7975

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Review of Modern Apprenticeships

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the actions being taken to identify and correct inaccuracies in the 'Review of Modern Apprenticeships in the North West - Understanding demographics/trends to date and forecasting future scenarios'. (AQW 3512/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The Department has accepted the Report of the Study by PriceWaterhouseCooper. The report has been issued to various stakeholders and published on the Department's website.

If there are inaccuracies identified, they should be notified to the Department for consideration.

Migrant Workers

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of Agency staff currently working in Northern Ireland who are migrant workers. (AQW 3584/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: There are no official figures available on the number of agency staff who are migrant workers. It is not possible to obtain an accurate picture of the number of agency workers in Northern Ireland because of the way in which labour market statistics are gathered.

My Department will shortly commence detailed research into the private recruitment sector in Northern Ireland. This will include an assessment of the number of agency staff, including the number of migrant workers employed by agencies. My Department's employment agency inspector is collecting information from employment agencies during inspections on the number of migrant workers for whom work-finding services have been provided, but this work is at an early stage.

Recruitment Agencies

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of people currently in employment who have been recruited through a recruitment agency. (AQW 3658/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: There are no official figures available. However my Department will shortly commence detailed research into the private recruitment sector here. It is intended that this research will include an assessment of the number of temporary and permanent workers who have been recruited through employment agencies.

Labour Mobility

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give his assessment of the impact upon labour mobility in Northern Ireland of the continued communal divisions in society. (AQW 3803/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: The available data suggest that there is a possible negative impact on labour mobility of community division. My Department continues to assist individuals to access jobs wherever they are located and to assist employers to fill job vacancies. Research commissioned by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister and published in 2005 shows that religion has declined substantially as an explanatory factor for labour market outcomes over the previous decade.

South Eastern Regional College

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he is taking to identify a suitable location for the merger of the Kircubbin and Ballyboley campuses of the South Eastern Regional College. (AQW 3823/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: Kircubbin and Ballyboley are two of a large number of leased or rented locations that the South Eastern Regional College uses to deliver part time further education courses. Decisions on this type of accommodation are entirely a matter for the Governing Body of the college and would not normally involve the Department.

Meetings with MLAs

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of meetings he has held with MLAs since May 2007. (AQW 3827/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning: From May 2007 to date, in my capacity as Minister for Employment and Learning, I have held 10 meetings with MLAs on a range of constituency matters.

In addition, I have held several other meetings with fellow Ministers and members of the Departmental Committee.

In every case where an MLA has asked for a meeting, this has taken place.

Night Class Courses

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of people enrolled

in night class courses in the Upper Bann constituency, broken down by campus, in each of the last 5 years.
(AQW 3940/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

Enrolments on night class courses in Further Education Colleges located within the Upper Bann Constituency from 2001/02 to 2005/06 are detailed below

Academic year	Enrolments
2001/02	7,790
2002/03	7,448
2003/04	6,692
2004/05	6,829
2005/06	5,438

Source: Further Education Statistical Record

Note: - Breakdown at individual campus level is not available.
- The latest available data relates to the 2005/06 academic year. Data for 2006/07 is currently being validated.

Rewarding and Developing Staff Initiative

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2659/08, to outline the steps taken by his department to ensure that funding, allocated under the Rewarding and Developing Staff Initiative, to (i) Queen's University, Belfast; and (ii) the University of Ulster, was spent on their respective human resource strategies; and to confirm that his department has ensured that these strategies have been implemented. (AQW 3963/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Department's funding for the Rewarding & Developing Staff initiative (R&DS) is subject to robust systems of monitoring and evaluation.

The Department uses the Annual Monitoring Statement to (i) monitor institutions' progress against targets in relation to their human resources strategies and (ii) ensure that R&DS funding is spent in accordance with the objectives of the initiative.

The Northern Ireland higher education institutions received a positive report when an evaluation of their progress against R&DS objectives was carried out by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in 2004. The institutions are currently undergoing a self-assessment process, which will be analysed by HEFCE. This analysis will inform the Department whether the institutions have achieved the objectives of the initiative. Subject to satisfactory evidence being provided, conditions on R&DS funding will be removed.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the procedures involved in calculating the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA); and (ii) the rules and methods involved when calculating EMA in genuine cases of non-attendance.
(AQW 3971/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

- (i) EMA is a means tested allowance and is calculated on annual household income as shown below:

Household Income	EMA Entitlement (per week)
Less than £20,818	£30
£20,818 - £25,521	£20
£25,522 - £30,810	£10
Greater than £30,810	£0

- (ii) EMA is paid as normal in cases of authorised absence. It is at the discretion of the participating school or college to determine the genuine nature of non-attendance. As EMA is intended to cover costs incurred by attending education, unauthorised or long term absence does not qualify for EMA support.

Migrant Workers

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of migrant workers currently employed in Northern Ireland. (AQW 4087/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

There is no direct source for the information requested. An approximation can be derived from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) based on place of birth. The LFS estimates that in September – November 2007 there were 58,000 people aged 16 and over in employment in Northern Ireland who were born outside the UK. An estimated 46,000 of these were born outside both the UK and the Republic of Ireland. These figures are subject to sampling error, as detailed in the table below.

SAMPLING ERROR OF ESTIMATES OF PEOPLE BORN OUTSIDE THE UK/IRELAND

	Central Estimate	Lower Estimate	Upper Estimate
Born Outside UK	58,000	48,000	68,000
Born Outside UK & Republic of Ireland	46,000	38,000	54,000

Source: Labour Force Survey, September-November 2007
Lower and Upper Estimates based on 95% confidence limits

North West Lifelong Learning Association

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assurance he can give that funding for projects run by North West Lifelong Learning Association, through the North West Regional College, will be made available following the positive economic viability audit by FPM Accountants, Belfast.

(AQW 4145/08)

The Minister for Employment and Learning:

The Department does not provide core funding for community training organisations – the large number of such groups, many of them offering similar services, would not make this practicable.

However, I understand that North West Regional College has been in contact with North West Lifelong Learning Association to discuss the possibility of collaboration, under the terms of the Department's Further Education funding regulations.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

United States Investment Conference

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to confirm those details that have so far been made public in relation to the United States Investment Conference in May 2008. (AQW 3619/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Dodds): The Investment Conference was announced by Gordon Brown, when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, as an outcome of the St Andrews talks in May 2007. Since then, the event has been referenced at regular intervals. It has been the subject of numerous oral and written Questions in the Assembly, and has been referenced in several Press Releases issued by myself, First Minister and deputy First Minister, and by the US Administration.

The most public profiling events associated with the conference, were the two-day visit in October 2007 to Northern Ireland by US Ambassador Tuttle and US Ambassador Foley, who jointly led a delegation of senior executives from 17 major US corporations on a fact-finding mission and the visit to the United States by First and deputy First Ministers in December 2007.

The invitation process is well underway and the Office of the First and deputy First Ministers has sent letters to targeted US-based Chief Executive Officers. Formal invites are being issued by Invest NI this week

United States Investment Conference

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the (i) dates; and (ii) venues for the United States Investment Conference in May 2008. (AQW 3620/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The US NI Investment Conference is scheduled to take place on 7 - 9 May 2008. An announcement to confirm the dates was made on Tuesday 19 February 2008 and details of the venues will be released in due course.

United States Investment Conference

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the information that is currently available in relation to the United States Investment Conference in May 2008. (AQW 3621/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The conference has been referenced in numerous oral and written Assembly Questions, in Press Releases issued by myself, First and deputy First Ministers and by the US Administration.

United States Investment Conference

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the information that is available on the internet, and its location, for prospective investors, in relation to the United States Investment Conference in May 2008. (AQW 3622/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Work is nearing completion on a web page that will contain information about the US NI Investment Conference. This will be hosted on the Invest NI website.

Renewable Energy Scheme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of applications there have been for the Renewable Energy Scheme in 2006-2007. (AQW 3656/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: 1,895 applications were received in the 2006-2007 financial year under the Reconnect Household Renewable Energy Programme.

North-South Interconnector

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to provide costings for the under-grounding of the North-South electricity interconnector. (AQO 2065/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The latest indicative costings provided by NIE indicate that undergrounding the North-South interconnector would cost £490million compared to £56million for an overhead line.

The Coach Tourism Industry

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline his plans to encourage and develop the coach tourism industry. (AQW 3661/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I fully recognise the importance of coach tourism to the economy, and the contribution it makes to increasing visitor numbers throughout Northern Ireland, and I utterly deplore and condemn the acts of mindless vandalism which have destroyed two Irish coaches in Belfast recently. The inbound coach industry is trying to increase its potential in Northern Ireland, and such wanton recklessness does only harm to their efforts. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) has met the Confederation of Passenger Transport (NI) (CPTNI) on several occasions to provide strategic advice and direction in terms of marketing and visitor servicing.

Many of the issues facing the development of coach tourism such as parking and drop off points, relate to the functions of local government and other central government departments. NITB works with the Department for Regional Development (DRD), the Department of Social Development (DSD), the Northern Ireland Tour Guide Association (NITGA), CPTNI and local Councils on these issues and to encourage further development of coach tourism in Northern Ireland.

Renewable Energy

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what analysis he has made of the project on the Isle of Eigg, which has provided residents with 95% of their energy demand through renewable energy; and what plans he has to increase the use of renewable energy on Rathlin Island. (AQW 3673/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: DETI is aware of the Isle of Eigg project, but has not done a formal analysis.

The crucial difference to note in any analysis comparison between the Isle of Eigg and Rathlin Island is that Rathlin Island inhabitants are able to benefit from the link to the main distribution network in Ballycastle by undersea cable: this became operational in 2007.

Rathlin Island and its inhabitants are also able to benefit from the same incentives for renewable electricity generation as the rest of Northern Ireland.

Cultural Events

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what his assessment is of (i) Loyal Order events; (ii) Ulster Scots cultural activities; and (iv) Irish Language events, as tourism products. (AQW 3696/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) has identified five "Winning Themes" as key development priorities for Northern Ireland. NITB is working to maximise the marketing potential of these themes, one of which is cultural tourism.

NITB has identified four specific cultural tourism product areas for Northern Ireland: Heritage, Northern Ireland Today, Creative and The Arts.

Northern Ireland is unique in its cultural diversity and this uniqueness is an undoubted selling point for the region. Loyal Order events, Ulster Scots cultural activities and Irish Language events are all part of the range of opportunities available to visitors to enable them to engage with local people and culture.

NITB is aware of the opportunities that cultural tourism presents to Northern Ireland, and is working in partnership with many organisations including The Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland, The Ulster Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge, to ensure that these opportunities are properly exploited.

Sporting Tourism

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what his assessment is of (i) Northern Ireland football matches; (ii) Ulster rugby matches; (iii) Northern Ireland football tournaments; and (iv) Gaelic Athletic Association tournaments, as tourism products. (AQW 3701/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: All major sporting events in Northern Ireland, especially those involving visiting supporters generate visitor numbers and revenue to the economy. Other football tournaments such as the Milk Cup, also attract

considerable visitors as participants and provide events with spectator interest.

All have the potential to generate positive PR through word of mouth and through print, radio and television advertising.

I understand that over the past two years, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), has been developing, in partnership with Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), a new 10-year Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation in Northern Ireland. The contribution to tourism of sport generally, including sports matches and tournaments, has emerged as an important issue in the development of the Strategy. A final Strategy is expected to be ready later in the Spring.

Information about sports with links to relevant websites is available on Tourism Ireland's www.discoverireland.com website.

Lough Neagh

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he has to (i) maximise the tourist and leisure potential of Lough Neagh; and (ii) consult with surrounding local councils in order to ensure the maximum tourist potential of the Lough.

(AQW 3703/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Lough Neagh and its many attractions are included in all the marketing strategies for which the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) is responsible, including websites, publications and targeted campaigns to promote tourism growth in Northern Ireland.

Lough Neagh's main strengths are recognised in activity products. The majority of marketing activity is driven through websites www.discovernorthernireland.com, Regional Tourism Partnerships' websites and The Countryside Access & Activities Network's (CAAN) dedicated activity websites, www.outdoorni.com, www.walkni.com and www.cycleni.com. NITB also engages with the Lough Neagh Partnership to develop the tourist and leisure potential of the Lough.

NITB is currently drafting its Corporate Plan 2008-11 and all local councils will be consulted during the process. The Plan will provide a framework to maximise tourism potential across the whole of Northern Ireland.

Inward Investment

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to report on whether or not the 6,500 new jobs from inward investment referred to in PSA

Target 1(2) are considered to be gross or net.

(AQW 3764/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The 6,500 jobs that will be promoted through inward investment by Invest NI client companies during 2008/09 – 2010/11 are expressed in gross terms.

The PSA Framework details a range of targets (including the promotion of 6,500 inward investment jobs) that are aimed at improving Northern Ireland's manufacturing and private services productivity. These targets reflect the planned impact of Invest NI/DETI interventions over the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) period.

Aside from DETI/Invest NI interventions, the overall economy will create many additional jobs, while others may be lost. Measuring job creation in net terms is therefore not an appropriate indicator of Invest NI's success in promoting jobs through inward investment.

Inward Investment

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to set out the baseline for measuring the delivery of 6,500 new jobs from inward investment referred to in PSA Target 1(2).

(AQW 3765/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Over the period 2004/05 – 2006/07, Invest NI attracted inward investment that promoted 9,465 new jobs. Around 50% of these provided salaries above the median salary in the Northern Ireland private sector, with 34% having salaries at least 25% above the private sector median.

The PSA target represents a significant shift from job promotion to a focus on high-value investments, offering higher salary levels and higher productivity. It also reflects a future market for mobile, and contestable, inward investment projects that is likely to be characterised by a fewer number of projects which will be generally smaller in size to those assisted in the past in terms of job promotion potential. Of the 6,500 new jobs to be promoted through inward investment, 85% will have salaries above the private sector average and 42% will offer salaries at least 25% above the private sector average.

Meetings with MLAs

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of meetings he has held with MLAs since May 2007. (AQW 3787/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has had 17 meetings with MLAs since May 2007.

Recycling Waste

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the percentage of waste produced by the department that is recycled.

(AQW 3791/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
Approximately 85% of the Department's paper waste goes for recycling. Facilities are provided for the recycling of all used printer cartridges and all of the Department's surplus electrical equipment, including Information Technology. This equipment is recycled as part of a central Northern Ireland Civil Service Contract.

Renewable Energy Scheme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what consideration he has given to changing the arrangements for grant payment for applications made under the Renewable Energy Scheme, so that the grants are paid prior to work being carried out.

(AQW 3795/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
The Department is not considering changing the arrangements for grant payments for applications under the Renewable Energy Scheme. In line with normal government practice grant payments are made on the basis of vouched and approved expenditure.

Fossil Fuels

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the action his department is taking to investigate alternatives to fossil fuels as a source of energy.

(AQW 3822/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
The Department's work relating to the identification of alternative means of energy production is focused on renewable sources of energy.

The recently published Grid Study researched the resource potential for different renewable technologies on the island of Ireland in 2020, the extent to which the renewable generation 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 study will 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 to obtain quickly 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 just under two years, DETI has also supported work to stimulate the development of alternative energy sources and, in particular, Energy from Waste, microgeneration technologies and biomass. DARD, 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.

Local Government Meetings

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of meetings he has held with (i) delegations representing one or more of the district councils; (ii) the Northern Ireland Local Government Association; and (iii) the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, since May 2007.

(AQW 3882/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
Between May 2007 and 25 February 2008, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has met delegations of one or more of the district councils 5 times; the Northern Ireland Local Government Association once; and the Society of Local Chief Executives once.

Land Owned By Invest NI

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount of land, by acreage, owned by Invest NI in the Foyle constituency that is currently (i) in use; and (ii) not in use; and to detail the parliamentary constituency with (a) the most; and (b) the least amount of land, including the acreage, owned by Invest NI.

(AQW 3895/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:
Invest NI currently holds 419 acres of land in the Foyle

constituency. In the context of this question, Invest NI has interpreted the term “in use” to mean land that has been leased to client companies. By this definition, 312 acres in the Foyle constituency are “in use” leaving 107 acres “not in use” i.e. remaining available for lease to client companies.

Invest NI land is held for clients company projects with an approved business case and a demonstrable property need. Invest NI’s landholding is a key offering to its clients and is considered an asset. Having had two very successful years in site sales, Invest NI’s available landholding has now reduced to approximately 800 acres.

The parliamentary constituency where Invest NI’s land holding is greatest is Foyle with circa 419.2 acres.

Invest NI currently holds no land in the Belfast East constituency.

The figures used are correct as at 31 October 2007.

Assembly Questions

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the number of written Assembly Questions he has received since May 2007; and (ii) the average length of time it takes his department to respond. (AQW 3908/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: DETI has received 250 written Assembly Questions since May 2007. The average length of time taken in responding to these questions was 7.3 days.

Air-Fares

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the cost of (i) first class; (ii) business class; and (iii) standard class air-fares, for his department, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3915/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The cost of air fares for the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment for each of the last three years was:

April 2005 - March 2006

- | | | |
|-------|-------------|------------|
| (i) | First Class | Nil |
| (ii) | Business | £78,482.44 |
| (iii) | Economy | £6,841.85 |

April 2006 - March 2007

- | | | |
|-------|-------------|------------|
| (i) | First Class | Nil |
| (ii) | Business | £28,058.56 |
| (iii) | Economy | £14,638.27 |

April 2007 - Present Day 2008

- | | | |
|-----|-------------|-----|
| (i) | First Class | Nil |
|-----|-------------|-----|

- | | | |
|-------|----------|------------|
| (ii) | Business | £42,960.90 |
| (iii) | Economy | £20,576.76 |

Businesses in the Countryside

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the meetings he has held with the Minister of the Environment in relation to easing the planning restrictions placed on businesses in the countryside. (AQW 3918/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has not met the Minister of the Environment specifically on this issue; however, it has been discussed at the Inter-departmental Rural Planning Committee on which both Ministers sit.

Funding of Hotels

Mr Brady asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the funding his department has given to each hotel, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3972/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: From 1 April 2004 to 31 March 2007, the funding offered by Invest NI to each hotel, in each of the last 3 years is detailed in the following table:

Financial Year Ending	Hotel	Invest NI Assistance Offered
31 March 2005	Beechlawn Hotel	£43,983
	Crawfordsburn Inn	£9,167
	Drummond Hotel	£8,600
	Dunsilly Hotel	£13,428
	Hastings Hotels Group	£356,164
	Hotel Carlton	£167,811
	Killyhevlin Hotel	£36,472
	Kilmorey Arms Hotel	£200,000
	Mahons Hotel	£10,000
	Malmaison	£96,480
	Manor House	£16,662
	Radisson SAS	£235,819
	Ramada Da Vinci's Hotel	£41,734
	Silverbirch Hotel	£15,200
	White Horse Inn	£7,000

Financial Year Ending	Hotel	Invest NI Assistance Offered
31 March 2006	Carrybridge Hotel	£200,000
	Clandeboyne Lodge Hotel	£38,642
	Drummond Hotel	£97,250
	Fir Trees Hotel	£9,000
	La Mon House Hotel	£22,396
	Magherabuoy House Hotel	£445,000
	Ramada Da Vinci's Hotel	£10,000
	Slieve Donard Hotel	£2,540,000
	The Merchant Hotel	£137,204
	Tower Hotel	£12,780
	Valley Hotel	£5,710
	White Horse Hotel	£15,920
31 March 2007	Adair Arms Hotel	£6,618
	Castle Hume	£3,500,000
	Dunadry Development Company	£27,411
	Express by Holiday Inn Antrim	£28,364
	Galgorm Hotel	£1,676,767
	Holiday Inn Express Craigavon	£475,000
	Radisson Roe Park Hotel	£22,989
	Tullymore House Ltd (Ten Square & Galgorm)	£34,166
	White Horse Hotel	£17,930

Rose Energy

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail any discussions his department has had with Rose Energy; and to confirm whether or not his department has committed any financial aid to Rose Energy's proposals for a chicken waste plant in Glenavy. (AQW 4108/08)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: During the last 2 years my Department (including Invest NI) has participated in 6 meetings with representatives of Rose Energy. Discussions with Invest NI are ongoing. No financial aid has been committed by either DETI or Invest NI to Rose Energy's proposals for a chicken waste plant in Glenavy.

ENVIRONMENT

Environment and Heritage Service

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on the activities of the Environment and Heritage Service in North Belfast during 2007. (AQW 3457/08)

The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster): During 2007, the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) of my Department continued to carry out a great deal of work in all areas of Northern Ireland including North Belfast.

EHS, through its Natural Heritage Grant Programme, provided core funding of £81k to the Belfast Hills Partnership which works with partners to improve management of the Belfast Hills, including Cavehill, Ligoniel and Throne Wood which are situated in North Belfast.

EHS also provided funding to Belfast City Council to enhance community access to and enjoyment of the Belfast Hills, and to develop a biodiversity strategy for the wider council area. In 2007, this support amounted to £61k for footpath restoration at Cavehill Country Park and a further £20k for a Biodiversity Officer.

EHS was also involved in the protection of the Belfast Hills through the Department of the Environment's planning policies; and officials have attended the Public Inquiry for the Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan to defend proposed environmental designations.

Also in 2007, EHS supervised the inspection of Belfast Zoo by a contracted Zoos Inspector. This inspection was required for the renewal of the licence for Belfast Zoo under the terms of the Zoo Licensing Regulations (NI) 2003.

EHS is in the process of leasing part of the North Foreshore to Royal Society for Protection of Birds (RSPB); the RSPB will manage the site to protect the lands designated under the Habitats Directive as a European Special Protection Area.

EHS monitors two rivers in the North Belfast area, the Milewater and the Three Mile Water. The Three Mile Water is monitored near Whiteabbey to test compliance with the EC Freshwater Fish Directive (FFD), under which it has been designated salmonid. The Milewater is not designated under the FFD; however it is monitored at two points to assess its chemical and biological quality.

EHS dealt with a number of water pollution incidents in North Belfast in 2007 and attended a number of minor incidents in the area including several calls from the Fire and Rescue Service.

A successful prosecution was heard in Belfast magistrate's court in 2007 relating to breaches of consent under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 at a site in Belfast docks.

EHS helped to inform proposals by Northern Ireland Water for the upgrade of the sewerage system in the Whitehouse and Greencastle areas of North Belfast.

The Waste Management section of EHS received 42 reports of alleged illegal controlled waste activity in the North Belfast area in 2007. Reports are being followed up. EHS has also been active in regulating legal waste facilities in the area.

The Licensing & Authorisations Section within EHS processed a considerable number of Pollution Prevention and Control (PPC) permits, waste licences/exemptions during 2007. EHS also has a range of permitted and licensed facilities which staff regularly monitor, inspect and audit.

Other Units processed a number of applications (new and renewal carriers) during 2007 and carried out producer visits/audits and site inspections to businesses throughout Northern Ireland.

EHS licensed certain sites for archaeological excavation by private sector companies. EHS monitored other archaeological sites which are statutorily protected by scheduling.

A number of requests for buildings to be listed were dealt with. Grant-aid for repairs to original building fabric was made in relation to three buildings. Five buildings in the area participated in European Heritage Open Days.

Planning Policy Statements

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment to detail which Planning Policy Statements she is responsible for developing, which ones are currently being revised, and to give a timescale within which each updated statement will be published.

(AQW 3573/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department is now responsible for the preparation of all PPSs in Northern Ireland.

At present my Department is currently revising the following PPSs:

- PPS 4: Planning and Economic Development;
- PPS 5: Retailing, Town Centres and Commercial Leisure Developments; and
- PPS 12: Housing in Settlements (the Affordable Housing policy), all of which I propose to publish in the next financial year.

In addition PPS 14: Sustainable Development in the Countryside is due to be published in April 2008.

Delivery of Business Needs

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment what is her assessment of the implications of the Budgetary process in relation to the capacity and resources of her department to deliver business needs, particularly in (i) the Planning Service; and (ii) the Planning and Environmental Policy Group.

(AQW 3603/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Budget 2008-11 provided my Department with total current expenditure funding of £137.8m (£2008/09), £136.8m (£2009/10) and £135.7m (£2010/11). The Department has also been allocated capital expenditure funding of £5.7m (£2008/09), £16.2m (£2009/10) and £182.6m (£2010/11). The table attached at Annex A, which is also shown in the Budget 2008-11 document, details how this additional funding has been allocated against the various departmental spending areas.

The Budget allocation will enable my Department to take forward an enhanced approach to Road Safety and work with partners in order to achieve more ambitious road casualty reductions. The allocation will also ensure a more effective approach to road transport compliance and enforcement that will contribute to improved road safety, a reduction in vehicle related crime and a cleaner environment through reduced emissions.

Through the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) the Budget allocation will enable my Department to enhance environmental protection and improvement through Better Regulation. This includes development of the EHS dedicated environmental crime team to combat the illegal dumping of waste and the establishment of a new strategic development and delivery support team to co-ordinate cross cutting environmental regulation activities and effectively target actions to provide a cleaner and healthier environment for all. Furthermore, the implementation of the Air Quality Strategy and the objectives under the Water Framework Directive will lead to reduced carbon emissions and better water quality.

The Budget allocations will also allow the Programme Delivery Support Unit (jointly funded by my Department and the Strategic Investment Board) to support district councils, and the three Waste Management Groups, in taking forward major waste procurement plans. Other grant support will continue to be provided to district councils including the de-rating element of the general grant. The Budget allocation will also allow district councils to play a

key role in the NI Civil Contingencies Programme mainly in the preparation of emergency plans.

My Department will also be able to develop, in part, an agreed programme for the modernisation and structural reform of local government as endorsed by the Executive.

I also intend to undertake a fundamental review of the Planning Service which will be committed to systemic reform of the planning process, both in the short to medium term and also in the longer term, to ensure that it is fit for purpose. These proposals for reform will ensure that the system is well-positioned to support the future economic and social development needs of Northern Ireland, that it has streamlined efficient processes and that it facilitates open and transparent consultation. Additional resources for this review have been secured for 2008/09 only. Bids for further resources for 2009/10 and 2010/11 will be made at the appropriate time.

Finally, the capital allocation to my Department will provide funding to district councils to cover a percentage of the overall costs associated with compliance with the EU Landfill Directive targets. These require a reduction in the amount of biodegradable municipal waste disposed at landfill to 75% of 1995 levels by 2010 and 50% of 1995 levels by 2013 as well as an improvement in recycling rates from the current level of 23% to 35% by 2010 and 40% by 2015. The additional funding of £3.1m (£2008/09), £13.7m (£2009/10) and £180.2m (£2010/11) will be allocated and monitored by the Department's Planning and Environmental Policy Group. This capital subvention will ultimately lessen the impact of these waste infrastructure costs being passed on to ratepayers.

ANNEX A BUDGET 2007

DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT - CURRENT

	Plans			
Objective and Spending Area	2007-08 £m	2008-09 £m	2009-10 £m	2010-11 £m
Objective A				
Road Safety Services	5.5	6.4	6.8	7.2
Driver Vehicle Agency	5.1	4.9	5.3	5.3
Environment and Heritage Services	61.1	61.1	60.1	59.8
Planning Service	11.8	14.3	12	11
Local Government Services	51.2	51.1	52.5	52.3
Total Objective A	134.7	137.8	136.8	135.7

	Plans			
Objective and Spending Area	2007-08 £m	2008-09 £m	2009-10 £m	2010-11 £m
Objective A				
Total	134.7	137.8	136.8	135.7

DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT - CAPITAL

	Plans			
Objective and Spending Area	2007-08 £m	2008-09 £m	2009-10 £m	2010-11 £m
Objective A				
Road Safety Services	0	0.5	0.5	0.5
Driver Vehicle Agency	0.6	0.4	0.3	0.2
Environment and Heritage Services	8.6	4.7	15.3	181.8
Planning Service	0.6	0.1	0.1	0.1
Local Government Services	0			
Total Objective A	9.8	5.7	16.2	182.6
Total	9.8	5.7	16.2	182.6

West Tyrone Area Plan

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of the Environment to provide a timetable within which the draft West Tyrone Area Plan will be published. (AQW 3611/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Strategic Environmental Assessments which accompanied the draft Northern Area Plan and the draft Magherafelt Area Plan have been the subject of judicial review. The Court in its judgement accepted the Department's argument that neither the Magherafelt and Northern Area Plans nor the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2004 should be quashed and instead granted a number of declarations. The declarations however raise issues which impact on the Department's ability to progress some development plans, including the West Tyrone Area Plan.

While my Department has recently lodged an appeal against the declarations, officials are considering at present whether or not it would be appropriate to continue work on the plan and its associated SEA until the Court of Appeal has ruled on the appeal. I regret, therefore, that I am not in a position to provide a timetable for publication of the draft West Tyrone Area Plan.

Development of the Maze Site

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the content of requests received by her department from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to the development of the Maze site. (AQW 3625/08)

The Minister of the Environment: There have been frequent contacts between representatives of OFMDFM and Planning Service officials since 2005 with regard to the development of the Maze Site. Consultants working on behalf of OFMDFM produced a Master Plan for the site in 2006. At present Planning Service officials are engaged with OFMDFM's consultants in a 'Scoping' exercise under Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999.

Non-Governmental Organisations

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the amount of funding allocated to non government organisations in the past three financial years. (AQW 3626/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The table below sets out the total funding given to non government organisations as well as statutory advisory bodies in each of the last three years.

Department	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Environment	£3,982,731	£3,880,388	£4,001,715

Planning Service

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment, further to the commitment in the Programme for Government that Planning Service will process major applications, subject to pre-consultation, within a six month period, to detail how this process will be managed in relation to (i) the main activities to be undertaken, including timeframes and associated resources; (ii) the review process; (iii) the consultation process; and (iv) the reform process. (AQW 3628/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Programme for Government refers to a six month target being applied to large scale planning proposals. These are proposals which are considered to have significant economic or social implications for the whole or a substantial part of Northern Ireland. They will be handled by the Strategic Projects Division of Planning Service and the six month target will apply provided there have been pre-application discussions with an agreed outcome.

Within the Strategic Projects Division I have recently agreed to the creation of two multi-disciplinary teams – which are comprised of planning staff as well as professionals from other relevant disciplines – to help to further enhance the efficiency of the service that is provided. I am hopeful these multi-disciplinary teams will be in place by Spring of this year.

My officials have also published guidance for prospective developers/applicants on pre-application discussions. This will assist in the development of procedures for meaningful pre-application engagement between the Planning Service, our key consultees – some of whom will be represented in our multi-disciplinary teams – and applicants. As part of the pre-application discussions, an indicative timescale for processing the application will be provided. Clearly, if this is to be a success in terms of speeding up the process there will be obligations on everyone involved in the planning process, including agents, through a mutual commitment to improve the quality of applications and maximise the prospects of getting through the statutory process quickly.

The process for managing all of the proposed reforms and improvements to the planning system, including the multi-disciplinary teams that will be key to the delivery of this Programme for Government commitment, will be overseen by the Planning Service Management Board. In addition, my officials have put in place programme and project management systems to ensure delivery of the reform programme.

Water Quality Tests

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the waterways in the South Down constituency that are failing water quality tests. (AQW 3643/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Environment and Heritage Service monitors a number of rivers and lakes in the South Down constituency. Chemical and biological monitoring is carried out on rivers and lakes to check for compliance with the EC Freshwater Fish Directive (FFD) and to assess the chemical and biological quality of the water.

Water quality monitoring in the South Down area since 2004 has identified a number of waterways which have failed to comply with the FFD and several which have been recorded as being of lower than usual chemical or biological quality. (As the constituency boundary may cross catchments, some of the rivers included below may be outside the area of interest.)

Failures to comply with the FFD within the South Down area have been recorded in at least two of the last three years in:

- the lower reaches of the Upper Bann

- the Muddock River
- the Blackstaff River
- the Jerrettspass River
- Lough Gullion
- the Silent Valley Reservoir

Lower than usual chemical or biological quality has been recorded in:

- the lower reaches of the Upper Bann
- the Muddock River
- the Ballybay River
- the lower reaches of the Cushier River
- the Drumadonnell River
- the Blackstaff River
- the upper reaches of the Newry/Clanrye River
- the Bessbrook River
- the Jerrettspass River
- a number of minor watercourses throughout the area

Lower quality classifications and failures to comply with the FFD are generally attributable to diffuse pollution within catchments, but in a few instances are believed to be related to point source effluent discharges.

The Minister of the Environment:

BUDGET 2008-11 RESOURCE ALLOCATIONS – ANNEX A

Spending Proposal	Bid Order	Total Bids			Bids met from Resource Allocations			Variance between allocations and bids		
		2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Road Safety Services- new initiatives/ partnerships to reduce number of road casualties	1	800	1,600	1,600	500	1,200	1,600	-300	-400	0
Enhanced Road Transport Compliance (Driver & Vehicle Agency) to improve road safety	1	780	1,395	1,670	780	1,395	1,670	0	0	0
Enforcement and better Regulation for environmental protection	2	870	1,255	1,980	770	1,255	1,980	-100	0	0
Implementation of reform within the Planning Service	3	950	980	1,115	2,150	150	250	1,200	-830	-865
Costs associated with the Programme Delivery Support Unit to support the Councils with their Waste Management Plans	4	600	600	800	200	600	800	-400	0	0
Cost of Implementing RPA - Planning Service & Local Government- to address issues such as finance, estates, shared services	5	4,450	5,500	8,150	-	800	5,000	-4,450	-4,700	-3,150
Emergency Planning for NI Civil Contingencies Programme - Grant to District Councils	6	700	700	700	-	700	700	-700	0	0

Gaeltacht Quarter Steering Group

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the reasons for the Planning Service's representation on the Gaeltacht Quarter Steering Group. (AQW 3664/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Planning Service is represented on the Steering Group for the Gaeltacht Quarter to provide advice and guidance on any planning/development issues that might arise as a result of any proposals that the Development Company might propose in taking forward this initiative led by the Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) her department's bids in relation to the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR); and (ii) the amount of funding her department has received against each of those bids in the Budget. (AQW 3675/08)

Spending Proposal	Bid Order	Total Bids			Bids met from Resource Allocations			Variance between allocations and bids		
		2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Costs to put in place a regime to deal with waste and contaminated land	7	1,500	1,500	1,500	-	400	1,000	-1,500	-1,100	-500
Subtotal		10,650	13,530	17,515	4,400	6,500	13,000	-6,250	-7,030	-4,515
Marker bids										
Illegal dumping - for the removal and disposal of waste from the RoI (1)	9	8,200	5,200	2,600	-	-	-	-8,200	-5,200	-2,600
Overall Total		18,850	18,730	20,115	4,400	6,500	13,000	-14,450	-12,230	-7,115

Notes: (1) These are estimated costs and are dependant upon whether or not the Department is liable for a third of the overall removal and disposal costs.

Sewerage Capacity

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment what her assessment is of the sewerage capacity for future development in (i) Newcastle; (ii) Ballynahinch; (iii) Downpatrick; and (iv) Ardglass. (AQW 3705/08)

The Minister of the Environment: 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 sewerage capacity for future development when the full assessment of wastewater treatment works in the four areas requested is complete.

District Councils, the National Trust, the Mourne Heritage Trust and others to find appropriate solutions to the problem. EHS has for many years supported erosion control projects in the Mournes and more recently has grant aided the National Trust and the Mourne Heritage Trust to carry out such works.

I have recently made a sum of £500,000 available to address access issues within the Mourne AONB and some of this money may be allocated towards the employment of additional rangers whose presence could discourage the illegal use of bikes in that area. EHS is currently seeking the views of landowners, Trustees and graziers on how these funds can be used most effectively.

I recommend that any reports of inappropriate use of the Mournes by those using quad bikes and trail bikes are referred to the Mourne Heritage Trust who will pass them on to EHS and the Safer Mournes Partnership.

Clough Castle

Erosion of the High Mournes

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the steps she is taking to prevent the erosion of the High Mournes by those using quad bikes and trail bikes. (AQW 3706/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department, through Environment and Heritage Service (EHS), followed up on a report of damage caused by trail bikes in the Eastern Mournes in 2005. No further reports of damage in that area were received. However, EHS has recently learned that the use of quad bikes in particular is becoming a significant problem in the Mournes.

I am fully aware that the Mourne Mountains are being used by an increasing number of people for recreational activities and that this has created some erosion problems. EHS is working closely with the

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the surveys that have been carried out by her department at Clough Castle, following the demolition of the adjacent building. (AQW 3708/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Clough Castle, county Down, is one of the best-preserved Anglo-Norman motte and bailey castles in Northern Ireland. The earthworks of this castle are believed to have been built in the twelfth century, and the stone tower on top of the motte was built in phases in the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. A portion of the monument was archaeologically excavated in the early 1950s, greatly adding to our understanding of the Anglo-Norman earldom of Ulster. However, there have not been any new detailed surveys of the monument in recent decades.

Planning permission was granted for the redevelopment of the adjacent site on 30 July 1999. At that time

it was considered that the level of disturbance associated with the buildings that have now been demolished would have effectively destroyed any buried archaeological remains at that location.

The monument itself is owned by the National Trust and leased to my department as a monument in State Care. The Environment and Heritage Service of the department continues to carry out routine management of the monument such as grass and hedge-cutting, clearing litter, and maintaining public access to the motte and bailey. The monument is routinely inspected to monitor its condition.

Any future planning proposals in its vicinity will be considered in line with published policy guidelines, particularly those of Planning Policy Statement 6, Planning, Archaeology and the Built Heritage.

Pre-Application Planning Process

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the requirements on planning officials, in relation to communication with the public and elected representatives, with specific reference to the pre-application process. (AQW 3709/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Pre-application discussions are available for - strategically important applications including those with significant economic implications; major commercial industrial and other public sector proposals; major Quality Initiative housing schemes; and major infrastructure projects.

The primary purpose of pre-application discussions is to allow Planning Service to provide general advice and identify key issues that need to be considered as part of the planning application submission.

The discussions will focus on key planning policies, relevant constraints and other material issues, including the need for an environmental assessment (ES), transport assessment (TA) and retail impact statement (RIA).

All the relevant information received including Planning Service written response will be placed on a file and will be available for public inspection on request.

Since pre-application discussions are not part of the formal planning application process, they are not subject to the normal requirements of advertising and neighbour notification and it may not therefore become public knowledge that a pre-application discussion has been requested.

However, Planning Service advises applicants to ensure that the concerns of neighbours and the wider community have been fully considered, discussed and addressed. This should include discussion, as appropriate, with the local Council and elected representatives,

relevant third party interest groups, neighbouring land/ or property owners and any tenants on the site.

If the public or elected representatives are aware of a pre-application discussion and wish to make representations to Planning Service these will be documented on the file and where appropriate taken as material considerations in the determination of the planning application.

Otter Survey

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the organisations that will be involved in the otter survey planned for 2009-2010. (AQW 3713/08)

The Minister of the Environment: At this stage it is proposed that the survey of Otters scheduled for 2009-2010 will be publicly advertised and a contractor will be appointed following normal procurement procedures. It has been the usual practice that surveys of wildlife taking place in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are funded on a proportionate basis by Environment and Heritage Service and the National Parks and Wildlife Service in the Republic.

Air Quality Impact Assessment

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment pursuant to her answer to AQW 3067/08, (i) to detail the proposed methodology to be used in the air quality impact assessment; and (ii) to confirm if the study has been carried out to date, and if so, to outline the findings of this study. (AQW 3756/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Air Quality Impact Assessment will involve:

- Establishing current air quality through existing monitoring information and additional background monitoring specific to the project; and
- use of Air Dispersion Modelling, using software acceptable to the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS), to predict the effect on local air quality for the worst possible combination of maximum emissions and climatic conditions.

When complete, the Assessment will be available for examination on public registers at Lisburn City Council Offices and EHS offices in Belfast.

To date no Air Quality Impact Assessment has been submitted by Rose Energy.

‘Chicken Litter’ Power Plant

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment to detail any pre-application submissions that have

been made to the Planning Service in relation to the construction of a 'Chicken Litter' power plant in Glenavy. (AQW 3758/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Agents acting on behalf of Rose Energy PLC submitted a pre-application consultation document to Planning Service which was received on 4th January 2008. This comprised a document detailing the scope and extent of the work being conducted to support the forthcoming planning application and environmental statement. It also included a scoping checklist for the environmental statement and a site plan for the proposed plant.

Tree Protection

Mr Ford asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to extend the protection afforded to trees within (i) designated conservation areas; (ii) proposed and designated areas of townscape character; and (iii) the settings of listed buildings. (AQW 3759/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Recent legislative changes now mean trees within a Conservation Area are afforded the same protection as those which are the subject of a Tree Preservation Order (TPO). Trees located within proposed and designated Areas of Townscape Character and within the curtilage of listed buildings are not afforded the same protection as trees within a Conservation Area unless they are subject to a Tree Preservation Order. However current planning policy seeks to ensure where such trees make an important visual, historic or amenity contribution to the area they should be retained and the Department will seek appropriate protection measures when processing planning applications, through the imposition of planning conditions or by making a TPO. In some instances development may be considered acceptable subject to conditions requiring new tree planting or re-planting.

Changes to legislation made in 2003 and 2006 which extended the protection afforded to trees in Conservation Areas also introduced further powers including the power to make a provisional TPO with immediate affect and enhanced enforcement powers to require replacement of trees removed without consent and I have no proposals to introduce any new legislative measures at present.

Cavanacaw Gold Mine

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the measures in place to monitor the environmental implications of the Cavanacaw gold mine, Omagh, County Tyrone, in terms of water

pollution, noise, dust, and visual amenity to the immediate area and for the local community. (AQW 3761/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The 'Gold Mine' site at Cavanacaw outside Omagh is regulated by the Environment & Heritage Service (EHS) under two separate pieces of legislation:

- (i) the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, and
- (ii) the Industrial Pollution Control (Northern Ireland) Order 1997.

The site will shortly be placed on the EHS consent compliance and assessment monitoring programme to check compliance of the effluent discharge from the site against conditions of the Water Order consent.

The company was issued with an Industrial Pollution Control (IPC) Authorisation on 1 December 2005 detailing techniques that must be followed to control releases to air. The company has implemented the requirements of the Authorisation and this coupled with the fact that the process operations at site are carried out under wet conditions have minimised releases to air. The Authorisation does not however cover noise or visual amenity; noise control is a matter for councils.

Visual Amenity was one of the considerations taken into account during the Public Inquiry into the Cavanacaw Gold Mine proposal prior to planning permission being granted. If any breach of planning permission or unauthorised development is reported to Planning Service this will be investigated thoroughly and the appropriate action taken.

Civic Amenity Sites

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an assurance that all future plans for civic amenity sites are subject to an environmental impact assessment. (AQW 3762/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Waste infrastructure planning applications are subject to examination under Schedule 2 11(b) of The Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999.

The consideration of waste infrastructure planning applications, such as civic amenity sites, within the EIA Regulations is effectively a 2 stage procedure. The first stage is to establish if the proposal triggers any of the applicable threshold and criteria that require an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Determination to be undertaken. The applicable threshold and criteria are: (i) the disposal is by incineration; or, (ii) the area of the development exceeds 0.5 hectare; or (iii) the installation is to be sited within 100 metres of

any waterway or water in underground strata or, marine waters.

If it is established that the planning application triggers any of the 3no. threshold and criteria then the Department is required to carry out an EIA Determination to establish if the planning application requires to be accompanied by an Environmental Statement (ES). Whether or not an ES is required will be based on a number of factors including site specific considerations and the detail of the proposal. In carrying out EIA Determinations expert advice is sought in many cases from other statutory bodies.

I am therefore unable to provide you with an assurance that all future plans for civic amenity sites are subject to an environmental impact assessment since it is inevitable that some planning applications will not trigger the relevant threshold and criteria set out in Schedule 2 11(b) of The Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999 due to their size and location.

Drink-Driving Law

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of the Environment to detail her proposals in relation to changing the law on drink-driving. (AQW 3780/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My officials are liaising with counterparts in Great Britain about a range of measures to deter drink driving and reduce casualties.

One issue under consideration is appropriate blood alcohol limits. I have already announced that I favour a reduction in the current limits, although no decisions have been made yet. At a recent Environment Committee meeting, I discussed lowering the limit from 80mgs of alcohol per 100mls of blood to 50mgs for most drivers. This could be accompanied by a lower limit of 20mgs for inexperienced drivers, LGV drivers and motorcycle riders, in line with European Union recommendations.

Also under consideration is the possibility of random breath testing and the use of alcohol ignition interlocks.

I intend to consult shortly on these proposals and on a range of other road safety measures.

Conservation Area Guide

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement on the implementation of the Conservation Area Guide, during consideration of planning applications in conservation areas. (AQW 3781/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Conservation area guidance provides design guidelines aimed at encouraging applicants to bring forward new development proposals which are sympathetic to the existing character of the area. As such it represents important supplementary guidance to the main policy tests aimed at protecting the character and appearance of a conservation area set out in Planning Policy Statement 6 "Planning Archaeology and Built Heritage". It is a material consideration in the determination of a planning application within a conservation area.

Within the Development Plan Team in each Divisional Planning Office there is a conservation area officer whose role includes providing advice based on policy and guidance to development control staff processing planning applications in conservation areas. Planning Service also employs consultant conservation area architects to assist in the assessment of the detailed design of development proposals in conservation areas.

Tourist Accommodation

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the information the Planning Service requires from applicants in order to prove the need for tourist accommodation in the countryside. (AQW 3816/08)

The Minister of the Environment: In assessing applications for rural tourist accommodation the need for the development is material to the determination of a planning application. A range of information may be requested by my Department in order to demonstrate a need for tourist accommodation. This will be dependent on the scale and location of the development proposed and may include one or a number of the following:

- expressions of support from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and other appropriate bodies such as a local community groups or tourism based organisations;
- expressions of support from local elected representatives;
- a 'Tourism Need Statement' which would demonstrate that the development would be in the public interest in terms of inward investment and employment opportunity;
- where applicable, confirmation of grant-aid funding in order to facilitate the tourism accommodation;
- a feasibility study for consideration and assessment by the Economics Branch in the Department for Regional Development which provides this service to my Department.

Dundrum Bay

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment, prior to a decision being taken on sand extraction under licence, to confirm whether or not she will retain the crab and oyster grounds at Dundrum Bay. (AQW 3840/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department is working closely with DARD Fisheries in order to afford the proper protection to native ecosystems in relation to any potential impacts from the current marine aggregate extraction proposal. This proposal, by the company South East Mounne Aggregate, is at the pre-application stage and is for an area outside of Dundrum Bay to the south-east. The crab and oyster grounds at Dundrum Bay should therefore not be affected.

Dundrum Bay

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the discussions she has had with fishing organisations in relation to sand extraction under licence at Dundrum Bay. (AQW 3841/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department maintains contacts with the fishing industry through the auspices of DARD Fisheries Division. This approach is adopted because DARD Fisheries have the most up to date contact lists combined with the expertise to collate and interpret industry responses. The fishing industry has been contacted by DARD in relation to the current marine aggregate extraction proposal and they have received the Environmental Impact Assessment, although the proposal is still at pre-application stage. The industry has made significant comments to EHS through DARD and has met with DARD officials about the proposal. The DARD Minister has corresponded with me on this issue, requesting that fishing interests are fully taken into account and I have responded reassuring her that this will be the case.

Cormorants in Northern Ireland

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of cormorants in Northern Ireland in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3842/08)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department estimates, from the best available data, that the number of cormorants present during the past three breeding seasons and the past three winters is as follows:

BREEDING POPULATION

Year	Population
2007	715
2006	742
2005	754

WINTERING POPULATION

Year	Population
2006/07	3124
2005/06	3172
2004/05	3246

No wintering data is available yet for 2007/08.

Cormorants Culled

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of cormorants culled under licence, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3843/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The number of cormorants culled under licence, in each of the last 3 years, is as follows:

2007	92
2006	77
2005	63

Cormorants Culled

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of licences issued to cull cormorants, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3844/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The number of licences, all for the control of cormorants for the purpose of preventing serious damage to fisheries, issued by the Department in each of the last three years is as follows:

2007	19
2006	19
2005	18

Hydro-Electricity Scheme

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the reasons why a fisheries impact assessment was not required for the Hydro-Electricity

Scheme on the River Camowen, Omagh.
(AQW 3849/08)

The Minister of the Environment: On 14 November 2007, the Department granted full planning approval on land adjacent to the Camowen River for construction of a Hydroelectric Generation Station to provide power for Omagh College and Leisure Complex.

Given the nature of the proposed operations, the application was subject to extensive consultation with the relevant environmental agencies comprising Environment & Heritage Service – Water Management Unit; the Rivers Agency; the Foyle, Carlingford & Irish Lights Commission (the Loughs Agency); and the Department of Culture, Arts & Leisure (DCAL) - Inland Fisheries.

All of these agencies ultimately replied with an opinion to approve the application.

In particular, EHS confirmed that it had carried out an Article 6 “Test of Significance” Assessment under the EC Habitats Directive 1995 which addressed the issue of fish migration and had granted the developer a licence to abstract and impound water subject to detailed operational conditions as required under the Licensing Regulations 2006.

DCAL advised that it was satisfied that adequate fishery protection measures had been included in the design, including the provision of gratings to prevent ingress of fish and alterations to the existing fish pass to ensure that a compensatory flow of water was maintained in the river.

The Loughs Agency advised that it had no objections in that the developer would seek an exemption from DCAL under the 1996 Fisheries Act which would replicate the previous agreement with the Agency restricting periods of operation to between 1 October and 31 March in any given year, apply the precautionary approach when operational and carry out a Fish Impact Assessment to the satisfaction of the Agency prior to commencement of the facility. The period of operation would also be reviewed against the findings of this Study and any similar future studies undertaken by the developer, the Agency or their agents in partnership or independently.

DCAL issued an Exemption on 10 October 2007 relating to the period of operation; a requirement that DCAL and the Loughs Agency have 24 hours access to the facility; that abstraction of water cease upon written notification from either party if operations adversely affect the fisheries of the Foyle catchment; and that the permit may be revoked at any time under the Fisheries Act 1966.

Given the above advice, the Department was satisfied with the proposed development based on its

intrinsic merits and issued a planning permission on that basis.

Waste Produced

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the percentage of waste produced by the department that is recycled. (AQW 3863/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The percentage of waste by the Department of the Environment that is recycled is 71%, as detailed in the Environment and Heritage Service Follow-up Waste Stream Audit Report 2006.

This compares to 34% in 2004.

Work continues throughout the Department towards its recycling target of 80% of total waste arisings by the end of 2008.

George Best Belfast City Airport

Dr Farry asked the Minister of the Environment to provide details of the consultations that will be held with Belfast City Council, North Down Borough Council, and the public, in relation to the relaxation of the planning agreement for George Best Belfast City Airport.[R] (AQW 3875/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The George Best Belfast City Airport authorities requested a review of the 1997 Planning Agreement in July 2004 in the context of removing the seats-for-sale provision. My Department consulted widely on the proposed review, including holding an Examination in Public (EiP) in June 2006.

Belfast City Council and North Down Borough Council have already been consulted as part of the initial public consultation on the proposals in 2004. Both Councils were also invited to make representations to the EiP and Council representatives attended the public hearings to present oral evidence.

Further consultation will take place with the Councils prior to finalising the review, probably through the respective planning committees.

In view of the extensive consultation already undertaken as part of the review, no further public consultation is planned.

George Best Belfast City Airport

Dr Farry asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the level of (i) environmental impact assessments; and (ii) health impact assessments, that will be conducted ahead of any relaxation of the planning

agreement for George Best Belfast City Airport.
(AQW 3876/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The planning application for the existing terminal building was subjected to an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), which was an important consideration in granting permission in 1999. Any further planning application for expansion of the airport including the proposed runway extension would also be subjected to an EIA.

The EIA addresses all aspects of the environment likely to be significantly affected by the development, including any health impacts. Agencies such as the NI Health & Safety Executive and the Environmental Health Department of Belfast City Council would also be consulted to ensure that these issues are properly addressed.

No separate additional EIA is considered necessary in relation to the review of the 1997 Planning Agreement.

Planning Applications

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of the Environment what her assessment is of the number of planning applications that have been approved for apartments along the Old Shore Road, Carrickfergus, in the last 5 years. (AQW 3905/08)

The Minister of the Environment: In the last five years, that is 2003 to 2007 inclusive, four planning applications involving apartments have been approved along Old Shore Road, Carrickfergus.

Plastic Carrier Bags

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to confirm whether or not her department has any plans to introduce legislation to discourage the use of plastic carrier bags. (AQW 3914/08)

The Minister of the Environment: There are currently no plans to introduce legislation to discourage the use of plastic carrier bags.

Plastic Carrier Bags and Litter

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment to provide a timescale within which she will impose a levy on plastic carrier bags; and to detail the action she is taking to reduce the amount of litter created by take-away restaurants. (AQW 3919/08)

The Minister of the Environment: There are currently no plans to introduce a levy on plastic carrier bags.

District Councils already have significant powers available to them under the Litter (Northern Ireland) Order 1994 to deal with litter in all of its forms. District Councils can issue Street Litter Control Notices to prevent a build up of litter in certain areas, for example, areas outside certain shops or fast food outlets. These impose requirements on occupiers of premises to keep the area clean.

Under the Clean Neighbourhoods Agenda my officials have considered options for making the process surrounding the issue of Street Litter Control Notices more effective to help to reduce the problems of litter generated by fast food outlets and other businesses. However, primary legislation preceded by consultation work with key interested stakeholders will be required to implement any stronger and more effective legislative provisions for District Councils.

The Programme for Government sets out an ambitious programme for my Department and I am currently considering when to introduce Clean Neighbourhoods legislation in the light of the range of key goals set for my Department.

Motorcycle Track at Nutts Corner

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 294/08, to detail how her department has monitored the racetrack over the past 5 months; and to provide an update on the continued development at this site. (AQW 3958/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Planning Service Enforcement officers have surveyed and mapped the subject site. These investigations confirm that the race track is making use of the long established features of the old air field, and as a consequence there is no breach of operational development taking place.

To date, my Department has no substantive evidence to suggest that the permitted development rights available to the race organisers are being exceeded.

Coastal and Marine Forum

Mr Storey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the work carried out by the Coastal and Marine Forum with regard to Rathlin Island. (AQW 3983/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Coastal and Marine Forum, in partnership with my officials, is engaging with local and other bodies to determine the viability of employing a temporary development officer for Rathlin Island. It is intended that this officer would promote the island in terms of economic benefit, environmental awareness

and social well-being to assist and sustain the island community.

Lough Neagh Water

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 3502/08, to confirm whether or not the Rose Energy company's proposals for a chicken waste plant will be located in an area of scenic beauty or high scenic value. (AQW 4047/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I can confirm that the site for the proposed development lies within an Area of High Scenic Value as set out in the Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015.

Quarrying

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to the answer to AQW 3504/08, to confirm how long the quarrying in the Belfast hills will continue under existing planning permissions. (AQW 4048/08)

The Minister of the Environment: This question has been asked and answered several times in the past. I can only repeat that as far as my Department is concerned the existing planning permissions are valid, and allow the quarry to remain open until the reserves are exhausted. Closure cannot be dictated by the Department of the Environment, and this question can only be answered by Whitemountain Quarries Ltd as it will depend on the rate of extraction.

The draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 (BMAP) recognises that the 'Belfast Hills' are a striking landscape feature which provide Belfast City with its unique natural setting. The 'Hills' are regarded as one of Northern Ireland's finest assets and as such are designated in BMAP as greenbelt, an Area of High Scenic Value and an Area of Constraint on Mineral Development in order to protect the setting of the Metropolitan Urban Area.

However, the draft Plan acknowledges the role minerals development has in the provision of employment and meeting the needs of the construction industry. However, it also recognises the significant impact that quarrying can have on the countryside and the need for a sustainable approach that protects and conserves the countryside. With this in mind Policy COU 8 of draft BMAP proposes that planning permission will not be granted for extraction and/or processing of minerals within the Area of Constraint on Minerals Development. (ACMD)

The Department has also introduced legislation through the Planning (Reform) Northern Ireland (Order) 2006 to carry out an initial review of old mineral permissions (ROMPS) in line with the rest of

the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. This review will not provide the Department with powers to close an existing working quarry through the refusal of planning permission. It will, however, provide the Department with greater control on established quarries by reviewing their planning conditions and ensuring that these are updated in line with current legislation and working practises.

Motor Tax Evasion

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the total revenue lost as a result of motor tax evasion, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 4090/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Department for Transport (DfT) annual survey of evasion of vehicle excise duty produces only one measure for Northern Ireland, which is the rate of evasion "in traffic" (i.e. effectively the rate observed at the roadside). The size of the survey does not provide sufficient data to enable statistically valid estimates of the amount of revenue lost as a result of evasion in Northern Ireland. I am setting out below the rate of evasion in traffic and the amount of vehicle excise duty collected in each of the last 3 years. However, DfT have stated that due to improved methods of collecting data in the 2007 evasion survey, the 2007 estimates are the first data point in a new statistical series and are not directly comparable with earlier years.

VEHICLE EXCISE DUTY COLLECTED IN NI

2004/05	£122 million
2005/06	£130 million
2006/07	£134 million

RATE OF EVASION OF VEHICLE EXCISE DUTY IN TRAFFIC IN NI

2005	5.4%
2006	5.0%
2007	2.3%

Electricity Interconnector

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what recent contact she has had with Northern Ireland Electricity, in relation to a planning application for the North-South electricity interconnector.

(AQO 2069/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I have not had any contact with NIE in relation to this

matter. However, my officials in Planning Service's Environmental Unit have had meetings with NIE at its request in October 2005, February 2006, September 2007 and February 2008. The meetings took the form of pre-application discussions and dealt with the need for an environmental statement to accompany a planning application, the content of the environmental statement and the final presentation of the planning application, which is expected in April. Our involvement to date does not compromise our regulatory role when the application is received.

Affordable Housing

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on initiatives she is taking to ensure that private sector developers make a greater contribution to the provision of social and affordable housing. (AQO 2039/08)

The Minister of the Environment: In my previous answer to Mr Burns [AQO 1468/08] on 25 January 2008 I indicated that responsibility for PPS 12: Housing in Settlements had transferred to my Department from the Department for Regional Development on 15 January. I recognise the importance of the review of PPS 12 in relation to Affordable Housing, in particular the need for developer contributions and I have now asked my officials to liaise with colleagues across departments to consider in detail how best to progress this matter, including the practical and operational issues arising. Due to the cross cutting nature of the policy, discussion with my Executive colleagues will be required.

Flooding Damage

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to assist the residents of Venton Lawns in Laurelvale following the damage done to their homes due to the flooding on 21 January 2008. (AQO 2002/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance to District Councils, which was established by the Department of the Environment in June 2007 to deal with widespread flooding across Northern Ireland, closed on 12 September 2007. In accordance with the terms of the Scheme, any applications from councils for incidents that occurred after that date are ineligible for payment.

I intend to consider the lessons learned from the Scheme and look at the possibility of introducing a new scheme and whether such a scheme could extend to those affected by flooding incidents that have occurred since 12 September 2007.

Planning Service

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (i) her timetable for reform of the Planning Service, including a target date for its completion; and (ii) the finances that it will be allocated up to 2010-11. (AQO 2023/08)

The Minister of the Environment: In November 2007 I announced that I intended to bring forward proposals for reform of the planning system in Northern Ireland. Although the question refers to the Planning Service, it is important to note that the reform programme will go well beyond the Agency and will relate to the entire planning system.

(i) In relation to the timetable, I would advise that reform of the planning system will be a continuous process over the short, medium and long term and will therefore not have a definitive target completion date. However, there are a number of key milestones and targets towards which we are working, not least of which are our PSA commitments.

Short term reform measures currently underway are focusing on helping to tackle workload pressures and producing early improvements in efficiency and effectiveness in the handling of planning applications. A number of the measures are being taken forward as pilots, with projects running until March 2008, at which point they will be reviewed and consideration will be given to whether to roll them out more widely across Planning Service Divisions.

For the medium to longer term, the reform programme will focus on more comprehensive changes to the planning system. These phases of the work will involve research and policy development, public and stakeholder engagement, formal consultation on the emerging proposals, and legislative change. The changes that do not require legislative provision will be rolled out between now and March 2011. For those requiring legislative change, our PSA commitment is to bring forward the relevant legislation by March 2011.

A detailed timetable has been prepared for phase 1 of the work, which runs until summer 2008 and will culminate in the publication of reform proposals for public consultation.

(ii) In addition to the work that is being done within existing resources to re-engineer the planning process to make it more efficient and effective, the budget recently approved by the Northern Ireland Assembly included an allocation to the reform programme over the next 3 years of - £2,150,000 in 2008/09, £150,000 in 2009/10 and £250,000 in 2010/11.

Dundrum Bay

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment whether or not she has received inquiries in relation to sand extraction under licence for Dundrum Bay; and to detail the companies that submitted these inquiries. (AQO 2030/08)

The Minister of the Environment: Assuming you are referring to marine aggregate extraction, I can confirm that my Department is dealing with a single proposal from a company called South East Mourne Aggregate to extract 300,000 tonnes of marine sand and gravel per annum over a 30 year period. The proposal is for an area immediately south of Dundrum Bay and was initiated in 2000. It is still at the pre-application stage and no licence has been issued.

Review of Public Administration

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of the Environment what assessment has she made of the willingness of departments to transfer functions to local government under the Review of Public Administration. (AQO 2022/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Emerging Findings of the review of local government aspects of the RPA that I published on 19 October 2007 set out my Ministerial colleagues' initial positions on the functions that they considered should transfer to local government. Responses to the Emerging Findings paper submitted to my Department and collated from the focused process of engagement with stakeholders, and the views expressed by Members of this House during the Take Note debate on 13 November 2007 were shared with relevant Executive colleagues and the Executive Sub Committee during late November and December. I have been working closely with my Ministerial colleagues since then to consider those responses and agree a way forward, particularly in relation to the set of function that should transfer to local government.

Bog Meadows Nature Reserve

Mr F McCann asked the Minister of the Environment to outline her departmental expenditure on the conservation and development of the Bog Meadows Nature Reserve, in each of the last three years. (AQO 2033/08)

The Minister of the Environment: I am fully aware of the importance of the Bog Meadows Local Nature Reserve as a haven for wildlife which local people can visit and enjoy. I am pleased that my Department's Environment and Heritage Service has

provided financial support to the Ulster Wildlife Trust which manages the site as part of its wider Nature Reserves programme.

This support, at an average of 49% of management costs, amounted to approximately £5.5k in the current year and £8.5k in each of the two previous financial years. This money is directly used for conservation works and the employment of a warden at the Bog Meadows. Further support of some £70k has also been provided during the current financial year towards the Trust's Education and Awareness programmes, part of which is to introduce young people to open spaces such as the Bog Meadows.

Affordable Housing

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment what plans she has to implement a fast-tracking system for progressing major social and affordable housing scheme applications through the existing planning system. (AQO 1990/08)

The Minister of the Environment: The Programme for Government refers to a six month target being applied to large scale planning proposals. These are proposals which are considered to have significant economic or social implications for the whole or a substantial part of Northern Ireland – which may include applications for major social and affordable housing schemes, depending on their scale and local significance. Such applications – normally more than 300 units - will be handled by the Strategic Projects Division of Planning Service and the six month target will apply provided there have been pre-application discussions with an agreed outcome.

Within the Strategic Projects Division I have recently agreed to the creation of two multi-disciplinary teams –teams which are comprised of planning staff as well as professionals from other relevant disciplines – to help to further enhance the efficiency of the service that is provided. I am hopeful these multi-disciplinary teams will be in place by Spring of this year.

Where a planning application for a major social and affordable housing scheme is not handled by the Strategic Projects Division – for reasons relating to its scale and local significance – priority will still be given to the application in terms of the staff resources and active case management that are applied to its processing. We have committed to formal pre-application discussions for all Housing Association applications.

My officials have also published guidance for prospective developers/applicants on pre-application discussions. This will assist in the development of procedures for meaningful pre-application engagement between the Planning Service, our key

consultees – some of whom will be represented in our multi-disciplinary teams – and applicants and their agents. As part of the pre-application discussions, an indicative timescale for processing the application will be provided. Clearly, if this is to be a success in terms of speeding up the process there will be obligations on everyone involved in the planning process, including applicants and agents, through a mutual commitment to improve the quality of applications before they are submitted and maximise the prospects of getting through the statutory process quickly.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Government Spending

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail Government spending, broken down by county, on (i) oil; (ii) diesel; and (iii) electricity for (a) 2005; (b) 2006; and (c) the first 6 months of 2007. (AQW 2871/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): The table attached provides information on oil, diesel and electricity spending in 2005/2006, 2006/2007 and the first 6 months of 2007/2008.

A breakdown by County could only be provided at disproportionate expense.

Fuel Type	2005 - 2006	2006 - 2007	2007 - 2008 (6 mths)
Oil (heating)	15,624	14,907	2,197
Diesel (vehicles)	15,191	15,628	3,461
Electricity	56,074	66,325	12,728

Notes

- All amounts are in £k and are for full financial year 05/06, full financial year 06/07 and first 6 months 07/08.
- Oil is the total amount spent on heating oil for buildings.
- Diesel is the total amount spent on diesel for vehicles; there may be a slight discrepancy in these figures as several Departments were unable to separate diesel and petrol charges and have included both.
- Electricity is the total amount spent on electricity for buildings.
- DHSSPS were unable to provide any figures for 2007–2008.
- DRD were unable to provide any Water Service figures for 2007–2008.

Bond Financing

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what is his assessment of the role Bond Financing could play in assisting the economy. (AQW 3565/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The use of bond finance has the potential to lever in additional funding to Northern Ireland for investment in public sector infrastructure.

While the use of such additional funding would involve the need to make a return on the bond, and thus must be considered in the context of the wider social and/or economic return to be derived from the investment, as a key driver of increased productivity such investment would have a positive role in terms of assisting the economy.

However, the present financial framework within the UK precludes the use of bond finance by the Executive, and thus prior Treasury agreement would be needed before this issue could be pursued. I am currently considering the merits of such an approach.

Debt Recovery

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the outstanding (i) domestic debt; and (ii) non-domestic debt, from the 2006-07 rating round; and to outline the progress made in recovering this debt. (AQW 3641/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The total rating debt (arrears) for the 2006/07 rating year amounted to £88.3M.

The outstanding debt for 2006/07 at the 11 February has been reduced to £42.3M. Of this total £15.8M relates to the domestic sector and £26.5M to the non-domestic sector.

Land and Property Services continues to pursue the recovery and collection of all outstanding rating debt.

Rating Appeals

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the number of domestic valuations for rating purposes that are still under appeal; and (ii) the date on which these appeals will be completed. (AQW 3644/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In 2006/07 some 28,000 domestic ratepayers asked for an informal review of their capital value. Those reviews still outstanding at 31 March 2007 (around 13,200) were taken forward by Land and Property Services as formal reviews. These original challenges were all completed by 30 November 2007.

Since 1 April 2007, around 4,000 new applications for review have been received by the District Valuers; of these, some 1,800 have also been completed and 2,200 are currently in progress. Land and Property

Services aims to have the majority of these applications completed within the next three months.

Some of these reviews, together with some new assessments have been referred on appeal to the Commissioner of Valuation with 465 appeals currently ongoing. However, as applications to the District Valuer and appeals to the Commissioner of Valuation are lodged and completed on an ongoing basis, there can not be a definite date when all such cases will be completed.

Capital Assets

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the capital assets, and their value, that have been sold in each the last 5 years, for which approval was (i) granted; and (ii) refused, by HM Treasury, for the local re-investment of the proceeds of the sales. (AQW 3646/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Statement of Funding Policy sets out the role of HM Treasury regarding the retention of Capital Receipts by the Northern Ireland Executive.

The provisions of the Statement of Funding Policy prior to the Chancellor's Financial acted as a disincentive to the disposal of assets by Northern Ireland Executive Departments, and no approvals for asset sales were sought over the past five years.

However, as a result of the position negotiated in the Chancellor's Financial Package the Northern Ireland Executive is now able to automatically retain the full value of planned asset sales, with the exception of proceeds from privatisation.

Death Certificates

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to review the use of the term 'Death by Hanging' on death certificates that are issued to families of suicide victims. (AQW 3698/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is not the responsibility of my Department to review the terms used for cause of death. If the death is from unnatural causes, as is the case in death by hanging, the doctor or PSNI officer reports the death to the coroner and the coroner determines the cause of death on evidence provided by a pathologist. The district registrar is legally bound to record the cause of death as stated by the coroner.

Physical Punishment of Children

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the substantive legal position in

relation to physical punishment of children.

(AQW 3749/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am assuming that this is a request to detail the law relating to the defence of reasonable punishment. That defence arises in the context of criminal proceedings and is, therefore, a matter for the Northern Ireland Office.

Government Land Sales

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline his policy on ring-fencing money raised from land sales by Government departments, for the use of the department that owned the land.

(AQW 3782/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The money raised from lands sales by government departments is not ring-fenced for the use of the department that owned the land.

All monies arising from the disposals of assets are a matter for the Executive to consider either as part of the budget or in-year monitoring processes.

It would be counterproductive if additional funding raised from the disposal of assets were to be ring-fenced for the use of the department which formerly 'owned' the asset as the departments with the greater need for additional funding are not always those with the greatest potential to realise capital assets.

In-Year Monitoring Rounds

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give his assessment of his ability to address unforeseen or changing demands from in-year monitoring rounds in the context of a commitment of first call of resources up to £20 million per annum to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. (AQW 3792/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There are a broad range of factors which will impact upon the ability of the Executive to address unforeseen or changing demands from in-year monitoring rounds.

These include the level of over-commitment and Departmental allocations agreed during previous Budgets rounds. In addition, the level of reduced requirements declared by Departments, particularly in the early part of the year, will increase the amounts available to meet pressures.

The Executive has adopted a balanced approach with respect to the Budget decision to allow the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to have first call on resources up to £20 million as part of the in-year monitoring process. This commit-

ment will allow the Department to plan to deliver more service improvements than it otherwise would have been able, without increasing the level of over-commitment at Block level to an unsustainable level.

Economic Research Institute

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on the comments received by the Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland (ERINI) in response to the draft Budget 2008-2011 in relation to its proposals regarding the level of the regional rate. (AQW 3799/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Executive's draft Budget was launched in the Assembly on 25 October 2007 and included provision for a cash terms freeze in domestic Regional Rates and a real terms freeze in terms of non-domestic Regional Rates.

The approach adopted by the Executive balanced the need to provide appropriate levels of funding for public services, against the significant pressures faced by local households in the context of the significant increases in domestic Regional Rates experienced in recent years.

In its response to the draft Budget, the Economic Research Institute for Northern Ireland (ERINI) suggested that the Executive should reconsider its position on domestic Regional Rates. This was on the basis that holding domestic Regional Rates constant in cash terms was inconsistent with the principle of parity and hence would weaken the NI Executive's negotiating position in seeking additional funds from Treasury. In addition, a reduction in Regional Rates was deemed regressive whilst the funding from a moderate increase would address some of the pressures from the draft Budget.

In terms of parity, the approach taken by the NI Executive is similar to that in England and Scotland in terms of Regional Rates whilst there is an inconsistency in ERINI putting forward the case for a reduction in the rate of Corporation Tax, and then calling for the level of taxation on local households to be increased.

Whilst, increasing the level of Regional Rates could potentially provide additional resources for Departments, significantly more can be achieved through improved efficiency in the public sector rather than further increasing the burden on households.

The revised Budget unanimously agreed by the Executive on 21 January 2008 and passed by the Assembly on 29 January 2008 provides significant additional funding for public services without the need to increase the Regional Rate.

Council for Voluntary Action

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on the comments received by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) in response to the draft Budget 2008-2011 in relation to its proposals regarding the level of the regional rate. (AQW 3800/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Executive's draft Budget was launched in the Assembly on 25 October 2007 and included provision for a cash terms freeze in domestic Regional Rates and a real terms freeze in terms of non-domestic Regional Rates.

The approach adopted by the Executive balanced the need to provide appropriate levels of funding for public services, against the significant pressures faced by local households in the context of the significant increases in domestic Regional Rates experienced in recent years.

The need to reduce the taxation burden has been recognised more generally by the UK Government in terms of the overall outcome from the Comprehensive Spending Review and by the Scottish Government in its commitment to not increase Council Taxes in the coming years.

In its response to the Executive's draft Budget, the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action stated its view that those on higher incomes would benefit most from the Executive's approach to Regional Rates, whilst the funding from a moderate increase could be used to enhance provision with respect to Health, the Arts and Social Housing. This approach fails to recognise the large numbers of low income working households in Northern Ireland who struggle to meet the costs of rates bills, on top of rising costs in other areas, and hence will derive significant benefit from the approach adopted by the Executive.

Whilst, increasing the level of Regional Rates could potentially provide additional resources for Departments, significantly more can be achieved through improved efficiency in the public sector rather than further increasing the burden on households.

The revised Budget unanimously agreed by the Executive on 21 January 2008 and passed by the Assembly on 29 January 2008 provides significant additional funding for the public services specified by NICVA without the need to increase the Regional Rate.

Confederation of British Industry

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on the comments received by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) in response to

the draft Budget 2008-2011 in relation to its proposals regarding the level of the regional rate. (AQW 3802/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Executive's draft Budget was launched in the Assembly on 25 October 2007 and included provision for a cash terms freeze in domestic Regional Rates and a real terms freeze in terms of non-domestic Regional Rates.

The approach adopted by the Executive balanced the need to provide appropriate levels of funding for public services, against the significant pressures faced by local households in the context of the significant increases in domestic Regional Rates experienced in recent years.

In its response to the Executive's draft Budget, the Confederation of British Industry welcomed the commitment to limit non-domestic Regional Rate increases to 2.7%, in recognition of the significant costs faced by the business sector over the Budget period. The organisation also suggested that there would be merit in the same rate of growth being applied to the domestic Regional Rate in order to provide additional resources for public services.

The need to reduce the taxation burden has been recognised more generally by the UK Government in terms of the overall outcome from the Comprehensive Spending Review and by the Scottish Government in its commitment to not increase Council Taxes in the coming years.

Almost 10,000 submissions were received in response to the public consultation process on the draft Budget and associated Programme for Government and Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland. Although a broad range of issues were identified the main themes resolved around the need for additional funding for specific areas. The revised Budget document agreed unanimously in the Executive on 21 January 2008 and passed in the Assembly a week later included increased support for Mental Health, the Arts, Libraries, Victims, and Children & Young

People, representing a positive response to the main issues raised in the public consultation.

Whilst, increasing the level of Regional Rates could potentially provide additional resources for Departments, significantly more can be achieved through improved efficiency in the public sector rather than further increasing the burden on households.

Childcare Vouchers Scheme

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether or not he can confirm that the Northern Ireland Civil Service will implement the Child Care Vouchers Scheme in early 2008, and if so, will he provide a specific date by which it will be fully implemented. (AQW 3815/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Northern Ireland Civil Service is committed to introducing a salary sacrifice childcare voucher scheme and work has been underway for sometime to ensure that it can be delivered as part of the new payroll system which will become operational later this year. The new system is in the final stages of development and testing and is likely to be introduced before the summer.

Departmental Waste

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the percentage of waste produced by each department across the Northern Ireland Civil Service that is recycled. (AQW 3865/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department of Finance and Personnel operates a Waste Management Action Plan requiring each DFP building, to have an individual action plan which seeks to reduce the amount of waste going to landfill. The attached table details the waste streams recycled on the various sites across the Department.

WASTE STREAMS RECYCLED ON THE VARIOUS SITES ACROSS DFP

	Paper	Cardboard	Magazines / Phone Books	Furniture / Refurbishment / Donated to Charity	Electrical Equipment	Metal Products - Drink / Food Cans	Photocopier Toner Cartridges / Printer Cartridges	Mobile Phones	Polystyrene / Plastic
Rathgael House	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Craigtanlet Buildings	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Rosepark Annex	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	0%	100%	100%	0%
Victoria Hall	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	0%	100%	0%	0%
McAuley House	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%

	Paper	Cardboard	Magazines /Phone Books	Furniture / Refurb- ishment / Donated to Charity	Electrical Equipment	Metal Products - Drink / Food Cans	Photocopier Toner Cartridges / Printer Cartridges	Mobile Phones	Polystyrene / Plastic
VLA Ballymena	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
VLA Lisburn	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	0%	100%	100%	0%
Queens Court	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	0%
Londonderry House	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Lincoln Buildings	100%	80%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	0%	100%
RCA Portadown	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Boaz House	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	0%	100%	0%	0%
River House	100%	45%	60%	100%	100%	55%	65%	100%	60%
Clare House	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Security Guard HQ	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
PD Stores	100%	0%	100%	100%	100%	0%	0%	100%	0%
Rosepark Workshops	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	0%	100%	0%	0%
Goodwood House	100%	100%	0%	100%	100%	0%	100%	100%	0%
Bankmore House	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Royston House	100%	0%	0%	100%	100%	0%	100%	100%	0%
Academy House	100%	0%	100%	100%	100%	0%	100%	0%	0%
Oxford House	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Civil Service Job Losses

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to list the number of civil service job losses anticipated over the next three years, broken down by department. (AQW 3870/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The number of Civil Service post reductions anticipated over the next three years to deliver cash-releasing savings of 3% a year, including a 5% per annum real-terms reduction in administration costs, is not known at this time. Government Departments are in the process of developing for publication their Efficiency Delivery Plans which will set out how they will achieve their efficiency targets, and it is anticipated that information on the extent of reductions will be known at that time.

Current estimates of reductions in staffing levels, over the next 3 years, in connection with the ongoing reform agenda and the Review of Public Administration, suggest an overall reduction of some 1900 full-time equivalent posts. The following table shows a breakdown by Department.

ESTIMATED RPA & REFORM AGENDA REDUCTIONS (FTE) 2008/09 – 2010/11 AS AT 1ST JANUARY 2008

Department	* Review of Public Adminis- tration	Reform Agenda (Human Resources & Accommo- dation)	Total
DARD	0	66.6	66.6
DCAL	-10	1	-9
DE	193	29.4	222.4
DEL	0	9	9
DETI	0	42	42
DFP	0	140	140
DHSSPS	249	33	282
DOE	600	15	615
DRD	202	152.9	354.9
DSD	0	182	182
OFMDFM	0	0	0

Department	* Review of Public Administration	Reform Agenda (Human Resources & Accommodation)	Total
Total	1234	670.9	1904.9

* Figures represent estimated number of staff transferring to new Public Sector employers.

Minus figure represents an increase.

Varney I Report into Northern Ireland Tax Policy

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to make a statement to the Assembly in relation to the outcome of the Varney I Report into Northern Ireland Tax Policy.

(AQW 3877/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have already expressed, in the Assembly, my disappointment at the outcome of the Varney I Report though I have always urged caution in terms of expectations in this Review. The report does however provide useful analytical material on the dynamics of the Northern Ireland economy.

Varney I Report into Northern Ireland Tax Policy

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to publish a comprehensive rebuttal of the Varney I Report into Northern Ireland Tax Policy.

(AQW 3879/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Executive Ministers have been invited to engage with Sir David Varney as part of his second review into the competitiveness of the Northern Ireland economy. This will afford Ministers the opportunity to register concerns relating to the findings presented in the first Varney Report. I will be conveying my concerns over the initial findings directly to Sir David Varney at meetings over the coming weeks.

Economically Active People

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the percentage of economically active people, that both live and work in the Foyle constituency; and to detail the parliamentary constituency, other than Foyle, that has the largest percentage of economically active who live in the Foyle constituency working in it.

(AQW 3898/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: At

the time of the 2001 Census there were 41,523 economically active people resident in Foyle constituency, of whom 36,225 were in employment and 5,298 were unemployed. Of those in employment, 31,217 (86 percent) worked in the Foyle constituency. A further 1,495 (4 percent of those in employment) worked in the East Londonderry constituency.

Assembly Questions

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the number of written Assembly Questions he has received since May 2007; and (ii) the average length of time it takes his department to respond.

(AQW 3907/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have received a total of 201 written Assembly questions between the 8th May 2007 and the 31st January 2008. The average length of time taken by my Department to respond was 6.4 days per question.

Communication Access

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the facilities which allow hard of hearing and deaf people to access services provided by the department; (ii) the format or method of communication involved; and (iii) how deaf and hard of hearing people are made aware of the services available and how to access them.

(AQW 3989/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department's main areas of contact with customers are recruitment, statistical research and services such as registration of births, deaths and marriages, land and property issues and the provision of government buildings.

In all these areas the Department provides appropriate facilities such as induction loop systems, textphones, signers, pagers and alerters depending on the nature of the service to the customer and or member of staff.

Customers and staff are made aware of these services through a variety of methods, such as information booklets, customer information leaflets, training and awareness sessions and through the publication of our Disability Action plan. This is available at <http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/pub-ps-dfp-draft-disability-action-plan>.

Mullaghglass Landfill Site

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to indicate what provision exists for home owners, living near Mullaghglass landfill site, to receive a reduction in their rates. (AQW 4083/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Ratepayers living near the Mullaghglass landfill site may apply to the District Valuer (Lisburn) within Land and Property Services for revision of their capital value rating assessments.

Some 37 ratepayers in this locality have already received reductions ranging from 20% to 25%, to reflect the impact of the landfill site, following applications to the District Valuer.

Some of these ratepayers have invoked the next stage of the appeals process and are currently awaiting the decision of the Commissioner of Valuation

Assembly Questions

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of written Assembly questions he has answered each month, since May 2007. (AQW 4096/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The table below details the written Assembly questions answered since May 2007.

May 2007	13
June 2007	27
July 2007	29
August 2007	0
September 2007	8
October 2007	31
November 2007	20
December 2007	30
January 2008	18
Total	176

Multiple Deprivation

Mr F McCann asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the top twenty most deprived wards, according to the index of multiple deprivation. (AQO 2051/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measures were published by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency in May 2005.

Based on the overall multiple deprivation measure, the twenty most deprived electoral wards in Northern Ireland are:

Ardoyne, Ballymacarrett, Brandywell, Clonard, Creggan Central, Creggan South, Crumlin, Duncairn, the East ward in Strabane, Falls, New Lodge, Shankill, The Diamond, The Mount, Twinbrook, Upper Springfield, Water Works, Westland, Whiterock and Woodvale.

Under-Representation of Protestants

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the progress being made in addressing the under-representation of Protestants amongst those being recruited to the general service grades of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. (AQO 1945/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The most recent competitions at Administrative Assistant and Administrative Officer levels have shown a significant increase in the proportion of applications from Protestants compared to previous competitions. At both levels the proportion of applications from Protestants has been closer to that which would be expected given the profile of the Northern Ireland workforce.

Departmental Capital Allocations

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what role his department played in determining departmental capital allocations in relation to the Budget. (AQO 1973/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Strategic Investment Board was responsible for working with departments to identify capital programmes/ projects for inclusion in the Investment Strategy. My officials were kept informed of these negotiations and advised on the overall resource availability.

My department was responsible for taking on board concerns raised during the consultation process on the Draft Budget and ensuring that the revised Budget and Investment Strategy addressed these where possible.

Efficiency Targets

Mr Burnside asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the contingency plans that are in place in relation to those departments that fail to meet their efficiency targets, in the present three year budgetary cycle. (AQO 1976/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As part of the recent Budget process, the Executive agreed the need for Northern Ireland Departments to deliver 3% per annum cash releasing efficiency savings. This will provide additional spending power to Departments over the next three years to improve the level and quality of services provided to local people.

It is the responsibility of individual Ministers to determine how their respective Departments will deliver against this target whilst the publication of Efficiency Delivery Plans will provide assurance that this is being taken forward in a strategic manner.

In addition to setting out the actions Departments will take to deliver the savings and accountability arrangements, the EDPs also specify the key risks and interdependencies to implementation as well as the associated contingencies.

Varney Report

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on the development of the second Varney Report. (AQO 2019/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Sir David Varney has requested individual meetings with Executive Ministers with a key role in delivering economic development policy in Northern Ireland. These meetings will take place over the next few weeks. Ministers will then have the opportunity to submit evidence to Sir David under a covering Executive paper. This Executive paper will reiterate the importance that we place upon economic development within our Programme for Government.

Civil Service Relocation Policy

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what analysis he has made of the recent change in the Civil Service Relocation policy by the Scottish Executive. (AQO 1978/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have not had the opportunity to analyse the changes personally but I understand that the new relocation policy is now much more aligned with asset management and the need to demonstrate efficiencies and value for money. It is a very interesting development particularly as the Scottish experience of relocation is relatively mature. I believe their original strategy was announced in the late 1990s.

I would therefore expect the review team that has been established by the Executive to look at what has happened in Scotland as well as the lessons to be learned from England, Wales and the Republic of Ireland.

Reform of the Education Sector

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the provision made in the Budget for the costs of reforming the education sector. (AQO 2028/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The 2008-2011 Budget increases current expenditure on education from £1.72 billion this year to £1.96 billion in 2010-11, an increase of 14.1% over the period. Under the Investment Strategy 2008-2018 there will also be some £3.5 billion available for capital investment in the education estate over the next 10 years, with some £0.7 billion available over the 3 year Budget period.

Decisions concerning the allocation of the provision made available in the Budget to the education sector are the responsibility of the Minister for Education, who is currently considering the detailed distribution of resources across education services, including those areas which relate to reform. DFP approval will be required for any expenditure proposals which arise and are outside the existing delegation arrangements

Location of Public Sector Jobs

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what his assessment is of the review of the location of public sector jobs. (AQO 1962/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The review was unanimously approved by the Executive as a means of helping Ministers to come to an agreed approach on the whole issue of dispersal. I welcome the review and I believe it is an opportune time to consider the distribution of public sector jobs in light of the Executive's clearly stated priority of encouraging private sector investment and growing the economy. We can therefore use the review positively and I look forward to seeing the team's findings in due course.

Civil Service Employment Targets

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail his plans to set targets in relation to the number of civil servants employed in Northern Ireland. (AQO 1972/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Executive's Budget, which was approved by the Assembly on 29 January, includes a target for the Northern Ireland Civil Service to deliver year on year efficiencies amounting to 5% of administration costs in each of the three years covered by the Budget period. Each Department is in the process of developing for publication its Efficiency Delivery Plan

which will set out how it is to achieve its efficiency targets, and it is anticipated that these plans will result in reductions in staff numbers.

Irish-Language Speakers

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of Irish-language speakers, according to the last census, who 'speak, read, write and understand Irish'. (AQO 2049/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Of those aged 3 and above at the time of the 2001 Census, 75,125 people indicated that they could speak, read, write and understand Irish. This represents 4.6% of all those who were aged 3 and above.

Year	NI Depts
1998	207
1999	207
2000	209
2001	217
2002	227
2003	218
2004	225
2005	237
2006	226
2007	227

Efficiency Savings

Mrs M Bradley asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) his department's plans to deliver the 3% year on year efficiency savings over the next three years; and (ii) the staffing implications of those plans. (AQO 1991/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: My department has identified, and is committed to delivering, cash-releasing efficiencies of at least £14.8m by 2010-11.

Detailed Efficiency Delivery Plans are currently being finalised. However my department has targeted a range of areas in order to generate cash-releasing efficiencies including:

- Maximising receipts and extending charging in respect of services provided by DFP, particularly to non-NICS customers;
- Realising potential savings from the release of accommodation following 'Fit for Purpose' staff reductions (target of 2,300 posts) across the NICS;
- Efficiency targets for Land and Property Services;
- Targeted GAE and staffing reviews across the Department; and,
- Recognition of costs recovered in respect of rate collection.

At this stage, my department anticipates reductions in staffing levels in the order of 75 to 100 posts over the three-year Budget period.

Senior Civil Servants

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of senior civil servants in each of the last ten years. (AQO 2046/08)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The number of senior civil servants in the eleven Departments and their Agencies is as follows:

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Afterschools Programmes

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not he will allocate an additional 12 months funding until January 2009 to afterschools programmes, in order to sustain them until responsibility is transferred to the Department of Education. (AQW 3506/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Policy responsibility for early years and childcare functions, which includes afterschool services, has already transferred to the Department of Education since November 2006. It is therefore for the Department of Education to determine the future funding position of these programmes.

DHSSPS involvement since November 2006 has been solely to act as a funding mechanism for the support of After-School provision with regard to CYPP monies. This funding arrangement and DHSSPS remit was to cease on 31 March 2008, but as a special measure I have extended funding to after-school groups from my own resources until on 30 June 2008 to reflect the end of the school year.

Regional Suicide Prevention Helpline

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the criteria used to select the provider of the new Regional Suicide Prevention Helpline. (AQW 3650/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Tender for the provision of the new Regional 24/7 Crisis Response Helpline for

Northern Ireland was managed by the Central Procurement Directorate's Supplies and Services Division, in accordance with the standard public service procurement procedures.

The criteria used to evaluate the tenders were as follows: -

- Proposed Approach for Service Provision: including capacity, emergency intervention arrangements, and ability to meet performance standards and all mandatory clinical and safety standards.
- Previous Relevant Experience: including experience of providing a helpline type service and experience in providing support to vulnerable/suicidal people.
- Cost.

Relative Needs Per Capita

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give his assessment of the effectiveness of targets to address the gap in terms of relative needs per capita, between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQW 3667/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Budget settlement for the CSR period here is based on the settlement Northern Ireland receives from HM Treasury, which uses the Barnett formula to allocate resources to Northern Ireland. This formula does not take account of differential need and so a substantial needs gap remains, as was also assessed by Professor Appleby.

Resources are allocated to individual N. Ireland Departments based on the Executive's priorities and no targets have been set to reduce the current needs gap between here and England. The final budget has been agreed for the CSR period and I am committed

to ensuring that the best possible use is made of the the entire health and social care budget for the benefit of patients, clients, carers and staff.

We must also focus our efforts across government on reducing inequality and disadvantage, and in my Department we will be investing in targeted Public Health initiatives and other initiatives which assist people to engage knowledgeably in regard to their own health and to manage their own conditions, as advocated by the Wanless report and Professor Appleby.

Emergency Calls

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of emergency calls received by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service in each (i) constituency; and (ii) council area, in each of the last three years; (b) the number of these calls that were malicious; and (c) what percentage this represents. (AQW 3702/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is set out in the attached tables.

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) has advised that hoax caller statistics also include those who hung up without leaving details, no case was at the scene or nothing was found at the scene.

The 2005 data covers the period April – December 2005 as NIAS did not record data on the basis of Constituency or Council area prior to this. The "Unknown" data field relates to information which could not be allocated to a Council or Constituency area.

This information may be subject to amendment following routine data cleansing by NIAS of its information management systems and databases.

Constituency	2007			2006			2005		
	Calls Logged	Total Hoaxes	% total	Calls Logged	Total Hoaxes	% total	Calls Logged	Total Hoaxes	% total
Belfast East	7065	194	3%	6835	164	2%	4983	160	3%
Belfast North	10092	341	3%	9638	336	3%	6657	262	4%
Belfast South	10104	384	4%	9701	334	3%	6668	279	4%
Belfast West	9047	323	4%	8855	376	4%	6390	318	5%
East Antrim	5571	105	2%	5397	131	2%	3695	103	3%
East Londonderry	5831	163	3%	5549	141	3%	3832	152	4%
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	5699	134	2%	5022	174	3%	3535	125	4%
Foyle	8657	306	4%	7737	351	5%	5528	243	4%
Lagan Valley	5917	146	2%	5598	160	3%	3946	123	3%

Constituency	2007			2006			2005		
	Calls Logged	Total Hoaxes	% total	Calls Logged	Total Hoaxes	% total	Calls Logged	Total Hoaxes	% total
Mid Ulster	5333	120	2%	4831	213	4%	3125	107	3%
Newry & Armagh	6594	234	4%	5911	243	4%	3908	175	4%
North Antrim	6950	170	2%	6392	161	3%	4771	185	4%
North Down	6118	134	2%	5953	204	3%	4241	176	4%
South Antrim	6595	143	2%	5994	144	2%	4113	127	3%
South Down	6873	195	3%	6202	194	3%	4499	172	4%
Strangford	6416	170	3%	5938	173	3%	3982	123	3%
Upper Bann	7437	217	3%	6647	209	3%	4540	155	3%
West Tyrone	5387	176	3%	4168	188	5%	3043	141	5%
Unknown	10080	4580	45%	9865	4846	49%	6497	3365	52%
Grand Total	135766	8235	6%	126239	8742	7%	87953	6491	7%

Council	2007			2006			2005		
	Calls Logged	Total Hoaxes	% total	Calls Logged	Total Hoaxes	% total	Calls Logged	Total Hoaxes	% total
Antrim	3762	76	2%	3314	80	2%	2214	66	3%
Ards	4971	149	3%	4460	136	3%	3122	103	3%
Armagh	3203	95	3%	2895	74	3%	1845	71	4%
Ballymena	4235	104	2%	3883	101	3%	3120	138	4%
Ballymoney	1564	34	2%	1483	36	2%	963	28	3%
Banbridge	2217	70	3%	1871	53	3%	1285	30	2%
Belfast	31068	1108	4%	29751	1034	3%	20951	889	4%
Carrickfergus	2640	44	2%	2649	57	2%	1807	39	2%
Castlereagh	4158	97	2%	4062	96	2%	2769	71	3%
Coleraine	4347	119	3%	4190	105	3%	2859	112	4%
Cookstown	2210	57	3%	2029	140	7%	1271	53	4%
Craigavon	5949	167	3%	5402	169	3%	3680	132	4%
Derry	8657	306	4%	7737	351	5%	5528	243	4%
Down	4930	124	3%	4528	125	3%	3238	119	4%
Dungannon	3536	77	2%	3197	97	3%	2090	74	4%
Fermanagh	2937	71	2%	2552	102	4%	1940	72	4%
Larne	2021	39	2%	1874	42	2%	1338	41	3%
Limavady	1484	44	3%	1359	36	3%	973	40	4%
Lisburn	6695	171	3%	6440	220	3%	4634	175	4%
Magherafelt	2349	49	2%	2075	48	2%	1359	33	2%
Moyle	1151	32	3%	1026	24	2%	688	19	3%
Newry & Mourne	5423	204	4%	4808	242	5%	3346	160	5%
Newtownabbey	5304	123	2%	5211	149	3%	3564	111	3%
North Down	5488	119	2%	5404	191	4%	3829	166	4%

Council	2007			2006			2005		
	Calls Logged	Total Hoaxes	% total	Calls Logged	Total Hoaxes	% total	Calls Logged	Total Hoaxes	% total
Omagh	3302	110	3%	2346	110	5%	1811	87	5%
Strabane	2085	66	3%	1822	78	4%	1232	54	4%
Unknown	10080	4580	45%	9871	4846	49%	6497	3365	52%
Grand Total	135766	8235	6%	126239	8742	7%	87953	6491	7%

Northern Ireland Cancer Fund

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not he has received correspondence from the Northern Ireland Cancer Fund for children, in relation to funding beyond March 2008. (AQW 3712/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have received recent representations from two sources on behalf of the Northern Ireland Cancer Fund for Children about future funding arrangements for the project after its current funding from the Children's Fund comes to an end in March 2008. Some funding has been identified in the Budget to support Children's Fund-type activity after this date. Decisions about funding for individual projects should be announced shortly.

Home Start Funding

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the funding available for Home Start in Newtownards, the Ards Peninsula and the Comber area. (AQW 3740/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The centrally ringfenced and time-bounded Children's Fund which supports Home Start Ards, Peninsula and Comber is set to end in March 2008. Decisions about funding for individual projects which are the responsibility of my Department should be announced shortly.

Kidney Problems

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether or not he intends to provide for patients in hospitals to be routinely tested for Kidney problems, as has been proposed in Britain. (AQW 3741/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are no plans to introduce routine testing for kidney disease. However, early kidney disease can often be detected through tests which are currently

performed preoperatively or in the general assessment of many patients in primary and secondary care.

Care Packages

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people awaiting care packages, broken down by Health Trust Area. (AQW 3743/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: At 30 September 2007, 655 people were awaiting community care packages in Northern Ireland, of which 427 were waiting in the community and 228 in an acute setting.

HSC Trust	Waiting in the Community	Waiting in an Acute Setting ¹	Total Waiting for Community Care
Belfast HSC Trust	162	80	242
Northern HSC Trust ¹	128	96	224
South Eastern HSC Trust	95	38	133
Southern HSC Trust	8	2	10
Western HSC Trust	34	12	46
Northern Ireland	427	228	655

Source: DHSSPS Information returns CC5b & DD1.

¹ Information is currently provisional and subject to change.

Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his plans in relation to recruitment and retention of building workers and tradesmen at the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital, Omagh. (AQW 3744/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have no plans to introduce a local recruitment and retention premium for building workers employed in the Health and Social Care. There is no evidence to suggest that there is any difficulty

recruiting this staff group locally. There are no plans to award the building workers a national recruitment and retention premium similar to that paid to the maintenance crafts.

Wet Age Related Macular Degeneration

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps are in place to ensure that sufficient resourcing and capacity is being created at the (i) Belfast Health and Social Care Trust; and (ii) Western Health and Social Care Trust, in order to ensure that all patients, who require intravitreal treatment for wet age related macular degeneration (AMD), are able to access such treatment.

(AQW 3772/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The allocation of funding for specialist hospital drugs is a matter for Health and Social Services Boards, as commissioners of services. The recent budget settlement includes additional funding for hospital and specialist drugs of £39m by 2010/11, which will allow the health service to improve access to specialist therapies for a range of conditions, including sight-preserving treatments.

Boards are currently providing funding for treatment with anti-VEGF drugs for patients with the greatest clinical priority. To date, 120 people in Northern Ireland have been treated. Boards and Trusts will be expected to plan for the immediate development of services to preserve the sight of people affected by age-related macular degeneration, consistent with the emerging evidence base for the treatment of this condition.

Decisions on the resources and capacity needed to deliver new treatments for wet AMD in the longer term will depend on the outcome of the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence appraisal of these new technologies. The Institute's final guidance is expected to be published in June 2008.

Wet Age Related Macular Degeneration

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to confirm whether or not, in line with Scotland and significant numbers of Primary Care Trusts in England, that all patients, being treated for wet age related macular degeneration, can gain access to Intravitreal Triamcinolone Acetonide treatments for disease in their first eye, as recently recommended by the National Institute of Clinical Excellence.

(AQW 3773/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The National Institute for Health and

Clinical Excellence (NICE) has not appraised or recommended intravitreal triamcinolone acetonide for treatment of wet age related macular degeneration (wet AMD).

NICE is currently appraising ranibizumab (Lucentis) and pegaptanib (Macugen) for the treatment of wet AMD and published preliminary recommendations for consultation in 2007. Final guidance is expected to be published in June 2008.

My Department has established a link with NICE whereby all guidance published by the Institute from 1 July 2006 is reviewed locally for its applicability to Northern Ireland and, where appropriate, is endorsed by the Department for implementation in Northern Ireland. The guidance on Lucentis and Macugen will be considered under these arrangements in due course.

In the interim, the decision on whether to fund a particular treatment is a matter for Health and Social Services Boards, as commissioners of services, taking into account local circumstances, the strategic objectives established for the HSC and demands and pressures generally for access to a wide range of new effective drug therapies. I understand that Boards are currently funding treatment with Lucentis or Macugen for patients with the greatest clinical priority.

Regional Suicide Prevention Scheme

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the criteria used to evaluate the new Regional Suicide Prevention Scheme.

(AQW 3774/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Suicide Prevention Strategy "Protect Life – A Shared Vision", which was launched on 30 October 2006 contains over 60 actions which aim to reduce the high rate of suicide in N Ireland.

Criteria for evaluation have yet to be determined. An overarching draft evaluation framework for the Strategy has been developed for discussion at the Suicide Strategy Implementation Body. The framework, when agreed, will provide for a comprehensive evaluation to be undertaken. In implementing the evaluation framework the findings of the Health Committee Enquiry into Suicide Prevention will be taken into account.

Victims' Mental Health

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the plans he has to work in a joined up approach with the Victims' Commissioners, to ensure that there is a provision of

evidenced based treatment for the mental health needs of victims. (AQW 3775/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have not yet been approached for a meeting by the Victims' Commissioners. However, I look forward to meeting them and to providing whatever assistance I can to improve the mental wellbeing of victims.

Assessment of Dementia

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is his assessment of the projections pertaining to the incidence for all types of dementia in over 65 year olds, in each of the Health and Social Care Trust areas. (AQW 3776/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The incidence of dementia in the over 65 year olds is recognised to increase significantly with further aging. Although such long term projections of morbidity are always tentative, given the general increase in life expectancy in Northern Ireland I would expect that we must be prepared for substantial increases in the numbers of people likely to be affected over the coming years.

Patients with Dementia

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the policies in place to prevent and manage elder abuse, particularly community-dwelling patients with dementia, within each Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 3777/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A range of legislative and procedural measures are in place to protect vulnerable adults, regardless of their physical and mental health or where they live. These include the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults (NI) Order 2003; the Regional Adult Protection Policy and Procedural Guidelines; and the Joint Protocol for the Investigation of Alleged Incidents of Abuse. These arrangements apply across Northern Ireland.

In addition, the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (NI) Order 2007 will introduce a new registration scheme in Northern Ireland for those individuals working with children or vulnerable adults.

Regional Suicide Prevention Helpline

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the

evidence used to demonstrate the success of the pilot project for the suicide prevention helpline in North and West Belfast, upon which the new Regional Suicide Prevention Helpline is based. (AQW 3778/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The pilot telephone helpline in North and West Belfast was developed as part of the implementation of the Northern Ireland Suicide Prevention Strategy, and latterly it was receiving in the region of a 100 calls per day (approx 50% of the calls came from outside the N&W Belfast area). I decided to establish a regional 24/7 crisis response helpline because of the high volume of calls and because there was clear demand emerging from elsewhere in Northern Ireland. In coming to this decision, I took into account that it can take a long time for any service to be fully evaluated in terms of its impact on the suicide figures and also that, internationally, there is relatively sparse evidence available on what interventions are most effective in terms of suicide reduction. This new region-wide service, providing support to young people and adults, will be evaluated during the first year. The findings from the ongoing audit of the pilot scheme will also be fed into the future operation of the regional helpline.

The new 24/7 regional crisis response helpline is supported by relevant counselling and peer mentoring support services and, while we continue the modernisation of our local mental health provision, it will provide immediate and much needed help for vulnerable people across Northern Ireland at times of crisis in their lives.

Meetings with MLAs

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of meetings he has held with MLAs since May 2007. (AQW 3786/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I can advise that from taking up office on 8 May 2007 I have held 45 meetings with MLAs.

Please note this does not include Executive meetings, NSMC meetings, BIC meetings, meetings with the Assembly Health Committee or RPA Executive Sub Committee meetings.

Parent Craft/Breast Feeding Service

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give a timescale within which a dedicated Parent Craft/Breast Feeding co-ordinating service will be reinstated to serve the Mid-Ulster hospital catchment area. (AQW 3809/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The dedicated Parent Craft/ Breast Feeding co-ordinating service in the Mid-Ulster hospital catchment area is currently unavailable as a result of staff illness. However in the interim the promotion of breastfeeding and parent craft continues to be delivered as a core function of all midwives and health visitors.

Gambling Addiction

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment he has made in relation to the adequacy of funding for the treatment of patients with gambling addiction related illnesses. (AQW 3817/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: People with gambling addiction related illnesses are treated within mainstream mental health services. In particular, they have access to psychotherapy, counselling and other support services. The recent Budget announcement has enabled me to allocate significant additional resources over the next three years to develop mental health services.

No information is available centrally on the numbers being treated for gambling addiction related illnesses in any of the categories (i) to (iv) listed in AQW3818/08

There is no record of patients receiving treatment solely for a gambling addiction although those patients with a co-existent mental illness or alcohol problem may receive therapy for gambling as part of their treatment. It is not possible, therefore, to estimate the number of people receiving assistance through health services for a gambling addiction or the cost of treating them.

Gambling Addiction

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients being treated for gambling addiction related illnesses in (i) primary care; (ii) secondary care; (iii) specialised mental health services; and (iv) specialised addiction services. (AQW 3818/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: People with gambling addiction related illnesses are treated within mainstream mental health services. In particular, they have access to psychotherapy, counselling and other support services. The recent Budget announcement has enabled me to allocate significant additional resources over the next three years to develop mental health services.

No information is available centrally on the numbers being treated for gambling addiction related illnesses in any of the categories (i) to (iv) listed in AQW3818/08

There is no record of patients receiving treatment solely for a gambling addiction although those patients with a co-existent mental illness or alcohol problem may receive therapy for gambling as part of their treatment. It is not possible, therefore, to estimate the number of people receiving assistance through health services for a gambling addiction or the cost of treating them.

Gambling Addiction

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost incurred by his department in treating patients with gambling related illnesses, in each of the last 5 years. (AQW 3819/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: People with gambling addiction related illnesses are treated within mainstream mental health services. In particular, they have access to psychotherapy, counselling and other support services. The recent Budget announcement has enabled me to allocate significant additional resources over the next three years to develop mental health services.

No information is available centrally on the numbers being treated for gambling addiction related illnesses in any of the categories (i) to (iv) listed in AQW3818/08

There is no record of patients receiving treatment solely for a gambling addiction although those patients with a co-existent mental illness or alcohol problem may receive therapy for gambling as part of their treatment. It is not possible, therefore, to estimate the number of people receiving assistance through health services for a gambling addiction or the cost of treating them.

Suicide Prevention

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the funding available for joint training sessions in suicide prevention, for health staff, community workers and churches. (AQW 3820/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As part of the implementation of the NI suicide prevention strategy my Department allocated £1.8m, to support local communities with the development of initiatives to tackle the high rates of suicide and self harm across NI. The Health Boards

were tasked with using this funding to develop local action plans which include the role out of additional training and development needs for community gate keepers. Initial discussions with the four main churches regarding their training needs have also taken place, and I look forward to receiving their proposals in due course.

In addition a further £200k has been allocated in 2007/08 to the Health Promotion Agency to roll out a GP Depression Awareness Training Programme across Northern Ireland.

Guidelines on Epilepsy

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3059/08, what is his assessment of his department's ability to meet the National Institute of Clinical Excellence guidelines on epilepsy, given the available number of consultant neurologists.

(AQW 3824/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guideline on the management of epilepsy in children and adults was endorsed by my Department on 31 January 2008 as being valid for Northern Ireland. NICE clinical guidelines are regarded as developmental good practice standards which the health and social care sector in Northern Ireland is expected to move towards over time.

In light of this, no formal assessment is made by my Department of the Health and Social Care sector's ability to meet specific NICE clinical guidelines. Health and Social Care organisations are expected to make this assessment internally in planning future services. These assessments should take account of the NICE guidance, local and regional priorities for health and social care, and availability of resources.

In carrying out its clinical and social care governance reviews, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority will look for evidence of action taken by health and social care organisations to comply with relevant NICE guidelines.

Ambulance Service Response Times

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the investigation into ambulance service response times by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service; to confirm whether or not (i) there were any geographic patterns in the discrepancies found; and (ii) any practices or pressures contributed to the misrecording

of response times; and to detail the action he is taking as a result of the investigation. (AQW 3830/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: During the period 1 April – 15 November 2007 it was found that a total of 123 arrival times had been falsified by 2 members of staff working within the Regional Emergency Medical Dispatch Centre (REMDC) of the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS). These falsified records represent approximately 0.5% of the total number of life-threatening Category A calls responded to during the period. There were no discernable geographical patterns in the discrepancies.

REMDC can often be a highly pressurised working environment and, although staff throughout the Trust are encouraged to maximise their contribution in providing the fastest possible response to patients, NIAS does not condone practices which falsify information and misrepresent performance. This is clearly understood by NIAS staff and has been re-enforced with the staff involved in this incident.

As a result of this matter NIAS has introduced improved procedures to ensure there is a thorough audit trail of any alterations made to the Command and Control ALERT computer software system. Clearly I am concerned that such falsification might damage confidence in figures produced by the ambulance service but I am assured that the improved procedures which are now in place will minimise the potential for any recurrence in the future.

Neurology Outpatient Capacity

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3059/08, to confirm the cost of payments to the independent sector and short-term locums, to address the shortfall in neurology outpatient capacity, in the last 12 months; and the impact of this approach on long-term continuity of care.

(AQW 3831/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: During 2006/07, a total of £288,663 was paid to independent sector providers to supplement health service capacity to ensure the reduction of waiting times for a first outpatient appointment in the neurology specialty to six months. No consultant neurologists were employed on a locum basis.

To date in 2007/08, a total of £190,999 has been paid to independent sector providers to supplement health service capacity to ensure the further reduction of waiting times for a first outpatient appointment in the neurology specialty to 13 weeks by March 2008. Two locums have been employed during the year at a total cost of £124,690.

Neurology Services

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3059/08, to give a commitment that a review of the provision of neurology services, as contained in the National Institute of Clinical Excellence recommendations, particularly in relation to the provision of long-term care for patients, will be undertaken. (AQW 3832/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has no plans at present to carry out a review of neurology services. The Department recently endorsed the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guideline on the management of epilepsy in children and adults. In endorsing this guideline for implementation in the health and social care (HSC) sector in Northern Ireland, the Department expects HSC organisations to review local practice against the guideline; to plan for its implementation; and to take it into account in their planning and delivery of services to patients presenting with a suspected seizure and those diagnosed with epilepsy.

Gynaecological Beds

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give an assurance that there will be no reduction in the provision of gynaecological beds in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 3834/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of gynaecological beds provided by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust will continue to be dependent on the demand for the service. There are no plans by the Trust to reduce provision.

Mixed Sex Wards

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (i) mixed sex wards, and (ii) complaints received by his department in relation to mixed sex accommodation, broken down by each hospital, in each of the last 12 months. (AQW 3862/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: (i) The following table shows the number of mixed sex wards that there were in each applicable hospital in Northern Ireland at 11 February 2008

Health and Social Care Trust / Hospital	Number of mixed sex wards at 11 February 2008
Belfast HSC Trust	
Belfast City Hospital	19
Cancer Centre	5
Forster Green	1
Knockbracken	5
Mater Infirmorum	8
Musgrave Park Hospital	16
Royal Victoria	30
Muckamore Abbey	4
Young People Centre	1
Northern HSC Trust	
Antrim	11
Braid Valley	2
Causeway (inc Ross Thompson unit)	9
Holywell	9
Mid Ulster	5
Moyle	2
Whiteabbey	6
Whiteabbey PNU	1
South Eastern HSC Trust	
Ards	1
Bangor	1
Downe	1
Downshire	3
Lagan Valley	7
Lagan Valley PNU	1
Thompson House	1
Ulster	25
Southern HSC Trust	
Craigavon Area hospital	1
Craigavon PNU	4
Daisy Hill	2
Longstone	3
Lurgan	5
Mullinure Hospital	2
South Tyrone	2
St Lukes	3
Western HSC Trust	

Health and Social Care Trust / Hospital	Number of mixed sex wards at 11 February 2008
Altnagelvin Hospital	19
Erne	2
Gransha	1
NWIH*	1
Lakeview	5
Tyrone County	3
Tyrone & Fermanagh	3
Waterside	4
Waterside (Ward 5)	1
Northern Ireland	235

Source: Health and Social Care Trusts

* This relates to activity performed by the Western Health and Social Care Trust in facilities provided by the North and West Independent Clinic.

Many Trusts stated that where a mixed sex ward was in operation, within such a ward, patients were cared for in single sex bays. Bays would only be mixed sex in exceptional circumstances such as Intensive Care Unit / High Dependency Unit beds or to allow a patient to be admitted to a ward rather than wait on a trolley in Accident and Emergency. In such cases, patients would then be moved to a suitable bed, in either a single sex ward or single sex bay, as soon as practically possible.

(ii) Information on complaints received in specific relation to mixed sex accommodation in each hospital is not collected centrally by the Department of Health.

Waste Produced

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the percentage of waste produced by the department that is recycled. (AQW 3864/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Department of Health and Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) staff occupy five premises: Castle Buildings on the Stormont Estate, Centre House, Londonderry House and Lincoln Buildings in Belfast, Waterside House in Londonderry and Health Estates in Dundonald.

The Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) provides facilities for waste recycling for DHSSPS staff occupying Castle Buildings. The current figures available (June 2007 – December 2007) show that an average of 25% of waste produced from Castle Buildings was recycled with the remainder going to landfill.

Recycling schemes are in operation at Centre House, Londonderry House, Lincoln Buildings, Waterside House and Health Estates. However, because the DHSSPS does not manage these schemes the percentage of waste produced by the department that is recycled is not available.

Mixed Sex Wards

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the guidance he has given to each of the five Health and Social Care Trusts on the use of mixed sex wards for patients with mental health issues; and to detail the number of mental health (i) single sex wards; and (ii) mixed sex wards, in each of the Trusts. (AQW 3866/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have given no guidance on the use of mixed wards for patients with mental health issues. All hospitals in Northern Ireland aim to accommodate patients in single sex ward areas as far as possible. I have instructed that all new hospitals in Northern Ireland should aim to provide single rooms for patients.

The following table shows the number of (i) single sex wards; and (ii) mixed sex wards, in the mental health programme of care for each applicable hospital in Northern Ireland at 11 February 2008.

Trust / Hospital	Mental Health Programme of Care	
	(i) Single sex wards	(ii) mixed sex wards
Belfast		
Belfast City Hospital	2	0
Forster Green Hospital	0	1
Knockbracken	7	5
Mater Infirmorum	2	1
Royal Victoria	0	0
Windsor House	2	0
Young People's centre	0	1
Northern		
Causeway (inc Ross Thompson unit)	0	1
Holywell	3	9
Whiteabbey PNU	0	1
South Eastern		
Downshire	4	3
Lagan Valley PNU	0	1
Southern		

Trust / Hospital	Mental Health Programme of Care	
	(i) Single sex wards	(ii) mixed sex wards
Craigavon PNU*	0	4
Mullinure Hospital	0	1
St Lukes	4	3
Western		
Gransha	2	1
Northern Ireland	26	32

Source: Health and Social Care Trusts

* **Note** – with effect from May '08 mixed sex wards in Craigavon Psychiatric Unit (CPN) will be relocated within the new psychiatric unit at Craigavon Hospital which is all single sex bed en suite accommodation with designated female only day rooms. Many Trusts stated that where a mixed sex ward was in operation, within such a ward, patients were cared for in single sex bays. Bays would only be mixed sex in exceptional circumstances such as Intensive Care Unit / High Dependency Unit beds or to allow a patient to be admitted to a ward rather than wait on a trolley in Accident and Emergency. In such cases, patients would then be moved to a suitable bed, in either a single sex bed or single sex bay, as soon as practically possible.

Aerosol and Substance Abuse

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the initiatives his department has in place to tackle the problem of aerosol and substance abuse. (AQW 3874/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The implementation of the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs (NSD) began in October 2006. The overall aim of this five year strategy is to reduce the level of Alcohol and Drug related harm in Northern Ireland, including the harm related to aerosol and substance misuse.

The NSD is outcome based, with actions being taken to achieve its aims and objectives at both being taken forward at both regional and local level. Regionally, the Department takes forward a range of actions including research and public information campaigns. The Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland has produced information leaflets, guidance and booklets on volatile substance abuse for parents, retailers and professional, and the Department is giving consideration to proposals to commission further research in this area during 2008.

Locally, the four Drug and Alcohol Co-ordination Teams (DACTs) are implementing their individual Action Plans, which they developed in response to local need and in support of the overarching outcomes in the NSD. The four DACTs were allocated a total of £4.8 million in 07/08 to implement their Local Actions

Plans, including the provision of mentoring, counselling, and treatment services for young people in each Health and Social Services Board Area. As per good practice, work is undertaken locally on aerosol and other volatile substance abuse as part of a wider approach to alcohol and drug misuse, and not as an issue in isolation.

Health Centre in Rathfriland

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update on the current status of the proposed health centre in Rathfriland, Co Down. (AQW 3886/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The new Health and Care Centre in Rathfriland remains a high priority within the Primary and Community Care Infrastructure (PCCI) Programme. The business case for the project is currently being assessed with further input required from the Trust before a decision on approval can be taken.

The Trust has advised that they are experiencing difficulties with availability of suitable sites. The sites identified in the current business case are no longer available and they are currently assessing alternative sites in Rathfriland. Once this is completed the Trust will revise and resubmit the business case.

GP Telephone Service

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of cases that were referred by the pilot out-of-hours on-call GP telephone service, to a location outside the Magherafelt and Cookstown District Council area; and to outline locations concerned. (AQW 3891/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In the period 22 January 2008 to 11 February 2008 17 patients have been referred to Accident & Emergency Centres outside the District Council areas mentioned, these being the Causeway Hospital in Coleraine and the Antrim Area Hospital. During the same period 33 patients have been referred to Primary Care Centres in Ballymena, Coleraine, Moneymore and Whiteabbey. Patients referred under this service are directed to attend the nearest Centre irrespective of Council boundaries.

Out-of-Hours Service

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3314/08, to detail the number of written submissions that were made by community

groups who received the discussion document.
(AQW 3896/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In total 38 written submissions were received by the Western Health and Social Services Board to the discussion document issued in May 2004. 19 of these written responses were made by community groups, the remainder coming from other stakeholders.

As part of the consultation process 5 public meetings were organised in conjunction with the Community Networks. These meetings were advertised in the local press and other channels and funding was provided by the Western Health and Social Services Board. The following table details the dates and locations of the meetings and the number of people who attended these meetings:

Date	Location	Number of Attendees
31 August 2004	The Junction, Bishop Street, Londonderry (NW Community Network)	22
1 September 2004	Clinton Building, Enniskillen (Fermanagh Rural Network)	22
2 September 2004	Omagh Community House, Omagh (Omagh Forum for Rural Associations)	35
6 September 2004	Enterprise Centre, Strabane (Strabane & District Community Network)	Not Known
7 September 2004	Gorteen House Hotel, Limavady (Oakleaf Community Network)	60

The Western Health and Social Services Council also organised public meetings in each of the 5 District Council areas within the Western Health and Social Services Board area. The dates and locations of these meetings are listed below however, the number of attendees at these events is not known:

Date	Location
19 August 2004	Silverbirch Hotel, Omagh
24 August 2004	Clinton Centre, Enniskillen
26 August 2004	Enterprise Centre, Strabane
31 August 2004	Radisson Hotel, Limavady
2 September 2004	Waterfoot Hotel, Londonderry

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Written Assembly Questions

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of written Assembly Questions he has received since

May 2007; and (ii) the average length of time it takes his department to respond. (AQW 3909/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have received 843 written Assembly Questions in the period from 15 May 2007 to 1 February 2008. The average number of days taken to respond was 8 days.

Of the 843 questions received, 802 were answered within the deadlines set by the Assembly Business Office. In all other cases a holding response was sent to the Member within the deadlines, with the answer following as soon as possible.

Plastic Surgery

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the waiting times for plastic surgery in each of the last 3 years.

(AQW 3922/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Waiting times for plastic surgery, by monthly timeband, for the last three years and the position at 30th September 2007, the quarter for which official information is most recently available, are outlined in the table below.

Quarter Ending	Number of Patients Waiting for Plastic Surgery (by Monthly Timeband1)									Total Waiting
	0-2	3-5	6-8	9-11	12-14	15-17	18-20	21-23	24+	
31st March 2005	501	292	245	199	125	50	24	26	122	1584
31st March 2006	516	332	191	77	0	0	0	0	0	1116
31st March 2007	503	208	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	711
30th September 2007	488	150	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	638

Source: Departmental Return CHI

1 - Waiting time relates to the number of completed months a patient has been waiting to be admitted to hospital. For example, a patient waiting 2 months and 30 days would be included in the 0-2 month category and a patient waiting 3 months and 01 day would be included in the 3-5 month category.

Waiting Times for Neurological Surgery

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the waiting times for neurological surgery in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3923/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Waiting times for neurological surgery, by monthly timeband, for the last three years and the position at 30th September 2007, the quarter for which official information is most recently available, are outlined in the table below.

Quarter Ending	Number of Patients Waiting for Neurological Surgery (by Monthly Timeband1)									Total Waiting
	0-2	3-5	6-8	9-11	12-14	15-17	18-20	21-23	24+	
31st March 2005	51	45	27	31	31	35	15	11	137	383
31st March 2006	50	45	33	12	0	0	0	0	0	140
31st March 2007	57	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	60
30th September 2007	105	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	109

Source: Departmental Return CHI

1 - Waiting time relates to the number of completed months a patient has been waiting to be admitted to hospital. For example, a patient waiting 2 months and 30 days would be included in the 0-2 month category and a patient waiting 3 months and 01 day would be included in the 3-5 month category.

Sexual Abuse

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the steps under consideration to inform and empower parents in relation to taking preventive action to protect their children from sexual abuse, whether perpetrated by family members or strangers, either inside or outside the home. (AQW 3929/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety continues to develop and implement a wide range of measures aimed at safeguarding children and helping to keep parents informed of ongoing developments. These include:

Issuing a Safe Parenting Handbook containing wide ranging advice on issues such as babysitting,

childminding, internet safety and other useful topics relating to child protection;

Introduction of new Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups legislation in Northern Ireland which when commenced will strengthen further current vetting and barring arrangements and will make provision for parents to check online the status of individuals such as private tutors, nannies etc before employing such people to work within their home;

Establishment of a regional Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland to strengthen child protection arrangements by improving interagency co-operation, including proposals for a Young Person's Reference Group to support the work of the Board; and

Plans for officials from my Department and the Office of the Minister for Children in ROI to begin exploring how best to co-operate on an all-island child protection awareness campaign.

Diabetes

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2604/08, to confirm whether or not a decision has been made in relation to the next round of service frameworks. (AQW 3957/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Proposed priority areas for the next round of service frameworks remain under consideration. A decision is expected before the end of March.

Wernecke-Korsakoff's Dementia

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the services available for the diagnosis and management of Wernecke-Korsakoff's dementia across all Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQW 3960/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: These are no services which are dedicated solely to the diagnosis and management of Wernecke-Korsakoff. The expertise that is required to deal effectively with this condition is spread across different disciplines within the health and social care system.

Early diagnosis is very important for this condition. I would therefore expect all those health and social care professionals to whom people with the condition might be expected to present to be aware of the symptoms of Wernecke-Korsakoff and that anyone suspected of suffering from this condition be referred as quickly as

possible to the most appropriate source of diagnosis and treatment within their particular Trust.

Once confirmed I would expect those with Wernecke-Korsakoff to be treated and supported in the way best suited to improve their particular condition and support them, as far as is possible, in independent living.

Incidences of Dementia

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment he has made in relation to projected incidences of all types of dementia, in people under the age of 65, across all Health and Social Care Trust areas. (AQW 3964/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are a number of types of dementia which can occur in people under 65, the causes of which vary from inherited disorders to acute trauma. Projections of future incidences of early onset dementia are therefore uncertain.

Some causes of early onset dementia are better known, such as those arising from excessive alcohol intake. If the consumption of alcohol by younger people were to continue to increase I would expect larger numbers of younger people to present with the condition, and at an increasingly earlier age. This is one of the major concerns that the Department's strategy on alcohol misuse is designed to address.

For those who already have or do develop early onset dementia, of whatever variety, I would expect to see care provision and support which is geared directly to the particular problems and circumstances of the individuals concerned, and for services to be planned and commissioned to meet future emerging needs.

Proposed Savings

Mr Brady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the action he is taking to ensure that appropriate practice and labour standards are maintained, in light of the proposed savings from regional procurement of social care; and to confirm that the proposed savings will not jeopardise (i) in-house services; or (ii) small providers. (AQW 3970/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: All Departments must achieve 3% efficiency per annum from 2008/09 to 2010/11 and proposals are still under development. There is a fundamental principle, however, that social care services must be procured on the basis of quality and value for money. Chief Executives of HSC Trusts have specific duties of responsibility in respect of both of

these criteria. There are also detailed Government guidelines underpinning the procurement of all goods and services by public bodies and a rigorous regulatory framework for service providers.

Compliance with the regulatory framework, achievement of agreed quality standards and value for money will therefore be the key criteria for the procurement process. There is also a need to ensure that the process itself is as efficient as possible. The proposed changes to Health and Social Care structures will provide more opportunities for a harmonised approach across Northern Ireland, with procurement conducted on a regional basis where it is appropriate to do so. That is the way to assure the taxpayer that the resources at our disposal are used properly to support the maximum number of people with quality services.

MRSA Patients

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what his assessment is of whether or not patients diagnosed with MRSA should be isolated from other patients when undergoing hospital treatment. (AQW 4005/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On 25 January I announced an extensive package of further measures aimed at fighting healthcare-associated infections. Included in these measures, is the proposal for single rooms in new hospitals to improve privacy and hygiene.

Research shows that the main advantage of single rooms is the potential to reduce infections and improve patient safety. By isolating patients diagnosed with MRSA, this can help prevent the bacteria from spreading. Where isolation rooms are not available patients with MRSA infection will be moved to an area reserved for patients with MRSA, a practice known as 'cohorting'.

Medical Diagnoses

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of people diagnosed with (i) mellitus; (ii) encephalitis; (iii) multiple sclerosis; (iv) Chronic Fatigue Syndrome; and (v) polyneuritis, in each year since 2000. (AQW 4080/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of people who have been diagnosed with (i) mellitus; (ii) encephalitis; (iii) multiple sclerosis; (iv) Chronic Fatigue Syndrome; and (v) polyneuritis in Northern Ireland is not currently available. However, information is available on the number of admissions to hospital where a diagnosis of one or more of the above conditions was recorded. The table below provides the number of admissions for each condition in each financial year from 2000/01 to 2006/07 (the latest year for which information is available).

Diagnosis	2006/07	2005/06	2004/05	2003/04	2002/03	2001/02	2000/01
Mellitus	21,362	20,546	19,845	18,719	17,498	18,591	16,906
Encephalitis	63	64	67	64	70	62	61
Multiple Sclerosis	1,438	1,519	1,173	1,157	1,074	1,178	1,063
Chronic Fatigue Syndrome	50	89	94	85	87	76	65
Polyneuritis	539	410	396	477	363	282	223

Source: Hospital Inpatient System.

Note: It is not possible to report on how many of these admissions are new diagnoses, or how many people have been diagnosed, but are not being treated in an inpatient setting. Discharges from hospital and Deaths in hospital are used as an approximation to admissions. It is possible that any individual could be admitted to hospital more than once in any year and will thus be counted more than once as an admission.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Phosphoric Acid

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a timescale within which phosphoric acid will no longer be added to drinking water. (AQW 3276/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that orthophosphoric acid is used during the treatment process in order to minimise levels of lead in the drinking water supply, and to ensure that the regulatory lead standard of 10 microgrammes per litre is not exceeded.

Orthophosphoric acid will continue to be added to the water supply until the Drinking Water Inspectorate is satisfied that at least 98% of samples taken at

customers' taps can meet the lead standard. Any subsequent reduction in orthophosphoric acid will be implemented in stages in agreement with the Drinking Water Inspectorate.

Lead Water Pipes

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the location of houses with lead water pipes; and to give a timescale within which the lead pipes will be coated. (AQW 3277/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that some properties built up to 1970, mainly in the greater Belfast area and in major city and town centres, may be connected to the public water supply by a lead service pipe. NIW does not maintain records of such properties but most of the lead water pipes would be within the property boundary and are the responsibility of the owner.

NIW has for some time been treating drinking water with orthophosphoric acid which forms a coating on lead pipes and minimises levels of lead in the drinking water supply. This process will continue until the Drinking Water Inspectorate is satisfied that the regulatory lead standard of 10 microgrammes per litre is not being exceeded.

Blocked Sewers and Flooding

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of incidents recorded in the South Down constituency in relation to (i) blocked sewers; and (ii) flooding, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3342/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that incidents of blocked sewers or flooding are not recorded by Parliamentary constituency. However, the following details are based on records held by NIW of incidents in the major population centres within the South Down constituency and should give an indication of likely volumes rather than exact figures by constituency boundary. It should be noted that external flooding could include contacts which may have resulted from road, river as well as out of sewer flooding.

Year	Blocked Sewer Incidents	Flooding Incidents External	Flooding Incidents Internal Properties
2005	1,197	114	15
2006	898	77	5

Year	Blocked Sewer Incidents	Flooding Incidents External	Flooding Incidents Internal Properties
2007	951	121	16

My Department's Roads Service does not maintain central statistics of flooding incidents and therefore the number recorded in the South Down constituency in each of the last 3 years is not readily available. They do however estimate that the number of flooding incidents would be relatively low and would have resulted mainly from blocked gullies or verge outlets.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has advised me that its Rivers Agency does not hold flooding information by constituency basis but has provided the figures for flooding incidents detailed below, which are based on towns and regions in the South Down general area.

Year	Number of Calls	Watercourse Related
2005	32	16
2006	11	6
2007	27	17

Killyclogher Reservoir

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm whether or not the water infrastructure near Killyclogher reservoir is fit for purpose, given the recent faults experienced. (AQW 3411/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that temporary repairs to the burst trunk main in the vicinity of Killyclogher reservoir have now been completed, and the water supply has been re-zoned to normal operating areas. Work is continuing to structurally strengthen the embankment in the area where the burst occurred and a permanent replacement of the main will take place when this is completed.

NIW plans to commence a Zonal Study in May 2008 which will examine the condition of the water infrastructure in Omagh and make recommendations for any improvements required to meet future demand, based on the West Tyrone Area Plan 2019 and beyond.

Door-to-Door Transport Scheme

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of people that use the Door-to-Door Transport scheme, broken down (i)

by area; and (ii) by month, since the scheme was launched. (AQW 3479/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The information is not readily available in the form requested. The number of members of the scheme in each area is as follows:

Antrim	75
Armagh	45
Ballymena	110
Ballymoney	24
Banbridge	31
Bangor	483
Carrickfergus	317
Coleraine	48
Cookstown	70
Craigavon	126
Downpatrick	64
Dundonald	40
Dungannon	54
Dunmurry	64
Enniskillen	35
Holywood	79
Larne	58
Limavady	12
Lisburn	129
Lurgan	42
Newry	137
Newtownabbey	318
Newtownards	169
Omagh	102
Portadown	69
Strabane	32

A1 Dual Carriageway

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the emergency plans in place to ensure that the A1 dual carriageway remains open during severe weather conditions, such as the recent severe snow and rain. (AQW 3516/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In the event of severe weather conditions, officials in my Department's Roads Service will concentrate their resources on keeping key traffic routes such as the A1

open and should closure occur, these routes in particular will be re-opened as quickly as possible.

Where necessary in snow conditions, gritters fitted with snow plough blades will be diverted from other routes, and, if the snow is deep enough to warrant their use, snow blowers will be deployed. If necessary, Roads Service may also engage external contractors.

The drainage systems on the A1 have been designed to modern standards and consequently, flooding is a rare occurrence. Roads Service operates a regular drainage inspection procedure and ensures that drainage gullies are cleaned at least once per year on average and more frequently if necessary. While it is not possible to ensure that the drainage system will never become blocked, on the relatively rare occasions that this does happen every effort is made to ensure that blockages are relieved as soon as possible and that no standing water remains on the carriageway.

Unfortunately, when severe weather conditions strike, it is not possible to guarantee that even main arterial routes, such as the A1 dual carriageway, can be kept open at all times. However, I am satisfied that Roads Service does have in place, all appropriate measures to ensure that A1 will remain open to traffic, where possible.

I can also advise that from 13 February 2008, as part of a Roads Service Design Build Finance and Operate (DBFO) Contract, the operation and maintenance on the A1 between Sprucefield and Beechill became the responsibility of Amey Lagan Roads, working under the supervision of Roads Service. On completion of the A1 Beechill – Cloghogue dual carriageway in 2010, Amey Lagan Roads will be responsible for the operation and maintenance on the A1, from Sprucefield to the border. This contract will include responsibility for winter maintenance and emergency plans from 1 October 2008.

Bilingual Signage

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to ensure that signage for the new railway station, planned for Newry, will be in both Irish and English. (AQW 3536/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Road signs are authorised or prescribed by my Department under the Road Traffic Regulation (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. There is, however, a doubt about the power to promote languages other than English on road signs, and as such my Department's current policy is not to provide bi-lingual road signs.

You may be interested to know that my Department's Roads Service is currently developing policy proposals and amending legislation to enable the authorisation of

a limited number of bi-lingual road signs. Signs to railway stations will not, however, be included in these proposals.

Signage at railway stations is dealt with by Translink and they are currently reviewing their policy in this area.

DRD Work in Crumlin

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 February 2008. (AQW 3560/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service is progressing works to provide traffic calming schemes in Main Street and in Glenavy Road, Crumlin. This work is time consuming and it is anticipated that it may not be completed until March. Roads Service will also complete resurfacing work on the Ballynadentrigh and Ballyquillan Roads, which link Crumlin with Antrim, during February. This will involve resurfacing approximately 3.2 kilometres of carriageway.

I can also advise that Roads Service has programmed routine safety inspections of roads and footways in Crumlin for mid February. Any defects noted during these inspections will be repaired by mid March.

Northern Ireland Water has advised that work commenced on a watermain replacement at Glenavy Road on 4 February 2008, to resolve some low water pressure problems in the area. This work will take around six weeks to complete.

Planning Policy Statements

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail which Planning Policy Statements he is responsible for developing, which ones are currently being revised, and to give a timescale within which each updated statement will be published. (AQW 3572/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: As a result of the Judicial Review Judgement on PPS 14, responsibility for the preparation and publication of all Planning Policy Statements has transferred to the Department of the Environment.

Ballykelly Bypass

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on the answer to AQO 281/07 concerning a Ballykelly bypass, and to

further provide an updated traffic census figure for Greysteel. (AQW 3586/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Services officials advise that the award of a commission to develop a Preferred Option Scheme Assessment report for a bypass of Ballykelly was confirmed in December 2007. Ongoing work will conclude with the recommendation of a preferred route corridor and a public information day planned for April or May 2008. This will allow the public an opportunity to comment on the emerging findings of this assessment.

The appointment to provide the Preferred Option Scheme Assessment was made in advance of the determination of an expanded Strategic Road Improvement Programme to investigate if lands, that the Ministry of Defence propose to dispose of at Shackleton Barracks, are required as part of any scheme.

The Ballykelly bypass remains part of the expanded SRI Programme which has not yet been finalised. I am therefore not in a position to advise on the timing of the scheme at this time.

With regard to the second part of the question, there has been a 2.5% increase on the 2006 traffic census figure, with the annual average two-way daily traffic flow at Greysteel in 2007 being 14,965 vehicles.

Sewerage Systems

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development whether or not he will undertake an urgent review of sewerage systems at (i) Edenmore Road; and (ii) Rathmore Road, Limavady, due to further problems on 2 February 2008; and what plans his department has to increase the sewer pipe capacity. (AQW 3589/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that a recent Drainage Area Study for Limavady identified no sewer deficiencies in Edenmore Road or Rathmore Road and there are no plans to increase the sewer capacity in these areas.

A recent sewer repair was completed at Edenmore Road, Limavady which resolved some discharge problems at Bovally Medical Centre and a blocked sewer was cleared on 2 February 2008. NIW is not aware of any problems with the sewer in Rathmore Road.

Rural Street Lighting

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail whether or not he will review the existing criteria for the installation of street

lighting, particularly in relation to rural communities, to ensure that (i) personal safety; and (ii) road safety, are maximised in rural areas. (AQW 3596/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that, in urban areas, street lighting is generally provided for roads and footways which it has adopted for maintenance purposes. When considering the provision of street lighting in rural communities, Roads Service uses two main criteria which consider both personal and road safety issues. They are:

- the density of housing within a community, including public buildings with significant night time use; and
- road safety, where street lighting would contribute to a reduction in the number of night-time accidents.

The policy for provision of road lighting in rural locations was relaxed in 2002, following an extensive review of street lighting provision. Since then, any public building with significant evening use within a community is counted as two dwellings when considering housing density.

Roads Service has to balance the demand for more rural lighting against the unwelcome effects of increased urbanisation of the countryside, the environmental impact of light pollution on people, wildlife and flora and the financial costs of providing and maintaining additional public lighting installations.

I have no plans for a further review of the criteria at this time.

'Project Better Place'

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development what is his assessment of the 'Project Better Place'; and what consideration he has given to adopting such a plan. (AQW 3599/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department has not had any contact with the recently-founded company 'Project Better Place'. Therefore, I have not undertaken any formal assessment of 'Project Better Place' proposals to develop an electric recharge infrastructure to support the deployment of electric vehicles.

I have no plans to adopt the 'Project Better Place' plan. However, as the sustainability principles, which underpin 'Project Better Place', are compatible with my Department's sustainability agenda, my officials would be willing to consider the viability of any proposal this company may wish to explore.

Congestion on the A8(M)

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development what action his department is taking to ease congestion on the A8(M) city bound.

(AQW 3632/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (2015) has identified the provision of a new junction on the M2 north of the existing Sandyknowes junction, together with a new road linking it to the A8 (M) at Corr's Corner. This will provide greater capacity at Sandyknowes, thus reducing or eliminating many of the conflicting movements at the existing roundabout which give rise to congestion. This is one of a number of schemes under consideration for inclusion in an Expanded Strategic Road Improvement Programme, assessment of which is at an advanced stage following the endorsement of the Investment Strategy 2008-2018 by the Assembly. However, as it has not yet been finalised, I am presently not in a position to advise on details of its content or timing.

The Plan also proposes modifications to the Sandyknowes roundabout, comprising of full signalisation, coupled with layout improvements, so that conflicts between different movements are minimised and greater priority is given to the strategic M2 and A8 traffic movements. These proposals are in the early stages of development.

As it will take some time to implement these schemes, my Department's Roads Service will continue to examine and review options for improvements at this junction in the short to medium term, with a view to increasing its traffic capacity.

The recent closure of the Hightown Road Bridge has increased traffic congestion on the Sandyknowes roundabout, which in turn may cause temporary congestion on the approach from the A8(M). To ease this, new traffic signals have been installed on the Scullions Road entrance to the roundabout. These have been supplemented by traffic monitoring cameras to allow Roads Service's Traffic Control Centre to adjust signal timings on the roundabout according to changing traffic conditions.

M2 Motorway

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on the work currently being carried out on the M2 motorway.

(AQW 3633/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service is presently undertaking improvement works on the M2 Motorway between the Sandyknowes and the Greencastle junctions. These

works involve widening the Belfast-bound carriageway to three lanes between the junctions, widening the country-bound carriageway over the Greencastle Interchange, replacing the Longlands, Hightown and Collin Bridges, and upgrading Bellevue Bridge. These improvement works on the M2 started in spring 2007 and I would report the following progress to date:

M2 Road works – Work involving service diversions, road drainage, and earth works to accommodate the widened motorway and the construction of new retaining walls along both carriageways of the M2, is now well underway.

M2 Northbound at Greencastle – Work to upgrade the parapets on the bridge on the North bound carriageway of the M2 at Greencastle will start later this month. This will include the provision of an additional traffic lane over the bridge to give three continuous northbound lanes over the Greencastle Junction.

Longlands Bridge – Half of the Longlands Bridge has been demolished and traffic is presently running on the remaining half, under traffic light control. The replacement structure is due to be completed and re-opened to traffic by spring 2009.

Hightown Bridge – The new abutments and bridge deck are well advanced. Once completed, essential services will be diverted into this bridge deck and demolition of the existing Hightown Bridge, which closed on 27 January 2008, will commence. The Hightown Bridge will remain closed for up to one year during the demolition and reconstruction work. During the closure traffic is being diverted via a signed diversionary route along Mallusk Road, Scullions Road, Sandyknowes Roundabout and Antrim Road. On 7 January 2008, I announced a package of measures to accommodate the travelling public and alleviate disruption in the Glengormley and Mallusk areas during the closure.

Collin Bridge - Half of the Collin Bridge has been demolished and traffic is presently running on the remaining half, under traffic light control. The replacement structure is due to be completed and re-opened to traffic by spring 2009.

Bellevue Bridge – Work has begun to upgrade the existing substandard bridge parapets, with this work expected to be completed by summer 2008.

During the course of the works it will be necessary to introduce a number of temporary traffic management arrangements on the M2, to allow the widening works to be completed. However, during construction two lanes will be maintained in each direction on this section of the M2. The overall M2 Improvements scheme is presently on target for completion in summer 2009.

Work Carried Out in Randalstown

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the work being carried out by Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water in Randalstown, and the surrounding areas, during February 2008. (AQW 3647/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service will complete road lining and catseye installation work at Church Road and Craigstown Road, which were resurfaced in January 2008.

Following completion of routine safety inspections in the Randalstown area, some minor repair work will also be completed during February 2008, on roads and footpaths.

Northern Ireland Water has advised that, following leakage detection in the Randalstown Road and Creevery Upper areas of Randalstown, some repair work will be undertaken during February 2008.

Work Carried Out in Mallusk

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the work being carried out by Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water in Mallusk, and the surrounding areas, during February 2008. (AQW 3648/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service will continue to work on the M2 Improvements Scheme between Sandyknowes and Greencastle junctions.

Preparation work will take place for the demolition of the Hightown Bridge over the M2 motorway. This will involve the diversion of existing water mains, foul sewer, Phoenix Gas mains, NIE and Virgin Media cables and the provision of a new pedestrian footway that will be maintained when the existing bridge is demolished. During the closure of Hightown Bridge, Roads Service will continue to monitor traffic conditions on the diversion route and will implement additional measures as appropriate to improve the flow of traffic.

Road markings and traffic signs will be altered and maintained at the M2 and A8 (M) off slips at the Sandyknowes Roundabout. Some minor reinstatement and grassing at the new traffic signals introduced at the Scullions Road/Sandyknowes junction will be undertaken.

Temporary traffic management arrangements will be introduced on the city-bound carriageway of the M2 on the approach to Sandyknowes to facilitate the installation of a new sign for the M2 bus lane.

Routine maintenance work on the M2 motorway will be completed, including gully cleaning and cleaning at emergency telephone points.

Northern Ireland Water has advised that some minor repair work was completed following leakage detection in the greater Mallusk area. No further work is planned during the month of February 2008.

Light Rail System

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the private sector finance that has been secured to fund the proposed light rail system for Belfast. (AQW 3649/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department commissioned a Strategic Outline Case for the development of Rapid Transit proposals (light rail or bus based) within Belfast. The scope for securing private finance was part of the terms of reference for that study. The study is being finalised but it is already clear that there is potential for developer contributions and other private sector involvement to the scheme. My Department will be pursuing all such opportunities as the proposals move forward.

Bus Services In and Out of Belfast

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of people who have used bus services in and out of Belfast for each of the past five years. (AQW 3666/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Translink collects passenger journey data on a financial year basis. Following clarification with the Member that his Question relates to Metro services, I can advise him that the number of passenger journeys on Metro/Citybus for the last five financial years to March 2007 are as set out in the table below. Metro, which was launched in February 2005, includes a number of services previously provided by Ulsterbus.

Period	Number of Passengers
2002/03	19.9m
2003/04	19.5m
2004/05	19.9m
2005/06	23.5m
2006/07	24.1m
Total	106.9m

Flooding in McClelland Park

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the steps taken by Northern Ireland Water to prevent the recurrence of flooding in McClelland Park, Dunloy. (AQW 3676/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that in order to reduce the risk of flooding in McClelland Park, Dunloy, it is proposing to undertake work to divert some of the flow to a nearby foul sewer serving Bellaghy Park. This work, which would provide a short term solution to the flooding problems in the area, could commence within three months subject to obtaining permission to access private lands.

A permanent solution to the flooding problems at McClelland Park would require the construction of a storm water sewer to remove all surface water from the vicinity and alleviate pressure on the existing combined sewer. This work could take up to one year to deliver and would be subject to the availability of funding.

A43 Road in Glenariff

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Regional Development, in relation to the A43 Road in Glenariff, to detail the maintenance that is undertaken to prevent road slippage occurring; and to confirm (i) whether or not there is a relationship between heavy rainfall and potential slippage; and (ii) what protocols are in place to protect against this. (AQW 3750/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service carries out routine inspections on the A43 Glenariff Road every eight weeks. These inspections can identify depressions and cracking in the road, which might indicate potential slippage. No other specific routine maintenance inspections are undertaken to identify potential slippage areas.

As surveys to identify the need for preventative measures would have to be carried out by specialists in this field, involving detailed investigations, they would be very expensive. As there have been very few instances of major landslides on roads of this nature and none on the Glenariff Road in the last 10 years, at least, the use of such surveys would be very difficult to justify.

Heavy rainfall can trigger landslides for a variety of reasons, including raised water table levels, culvert blockage and scour action. Roads Service officials are alert to the increased risk of landslides at such times and any problems with blocked drainage picked up by inspections, or otherwise reported, are remedied as quickly as possible, depending on their severity.

Ballyhenry Park and Ride Scheme

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his involvement in the development of the Ballyhenry Park and Ride scheme to date, and to provide an update on this project. (AQW 3753/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: The development of park and ride facilities is a key element of the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan. Indeed the Plan proposes a total of some 2100 park and ride spaces on the M2 and M5 corridors. These will be provided at 11 locations served by train or bus services to central Belfast.

My Department's Roads Service proposed the Ballyhenry Park and Ride scheme some time ago, to facilitate local commuters. The land is owned by the Department and Translink's Metro services already pass the Ballyhenry Road site. Translink has given an assurance that if the scheme is successful in attracting new customers, adequate bus capacity will be made available to facilitate this demand.

A planning application for this scheme was submitted in June 2003, which resulted in 140 letters of objection, all relating to increased traffic and traffic safety. Roads Service subsequently provided Planning Service with additional information supported by a Traffic Impact Assessment and the proposal was re-advertised on 8 August 2003.

At a subsequent meeting between Roads Service officials, Councillors and local residents, it was requested that a comparative study be carried out of the Ballyhenry site, and an alternative site at Corr's Corner. The results of this study indicated that the alternative site would not generate as much usage as the Ballyhenry Road site and would be much more difficult for Translink to serve.

More recently, in order to alleviate concerns regarding residential amenity, Roads Service has amended the application to allow for a 1.8 m high wall and a 5 m wide landscaped strip between the site and the residential properties adjoining it. This was re-advertised on 17 August 2007 and Planning Service is currently considering further concerns expressed by local residents.

Meetings With MLAs

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of meetings he has held with MLAs since May 2007. (AQW 3784/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: From 8 May 2007 to 12 February 2008 I have held meetings with MLAs on 33 occasions. This total does not

include Executive Committee meetings or Sub-Committee meetings.

Season Ticket Parking: Limavady

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development pursuant to his answer to AQW 3307/08, to clarify what agency is responsible for issuing season ticket parking passes in Limavady. (AQW 3804/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: NCP Services Ltd, acting on behalf of my Department's Roads Service, is responsible for the issue of season tickets in respect of the Connell Street and Central car parks in Limavady.

Season Ticket Parking: Limavady

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3307/08, to detail the reasons why business owners have been refused season ticket parking passes in Limavady in each of the last five years. (AQW 3805/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: As I alluded to in my reply to the Member's Assembly Question AQW 3307/08, there is a specific allocation of season tickets for each car park. I am not aware of any particular business owner being refused a season ticket, however, if any have, it will have been on the grounds that all available tickets have been sold at the time of their request.

Season Ticket Parking: Limavady

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3307/08, to outline why charges have been raised for season parking ticket holders without consultation with all stakeholders. (AQW 3806/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am advised by Roads Service that the scale of charges for car park tariffs, including season tickets, is specified in Schedule 2 of the Off-Street Parking Order (Northern Ireland) 2000. The season ticket charges at Connell Street and Central car parks in Limavady have not been increased since then. However, with the agreement of Roads Service, NCP now issues season tickets, on a monthly/quarterly basis rather than 4-weekly and 12-weekly. The charges of £40.95 and £99.45 respectively do not represent an increase in fees but rather reflect the different period covered.

Season Ticket Parking: Limavady

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3307/08, to confirm that he is aware that business owners are being informed that there is a waiting list for season ticket parking, in both Connell Street and Central car parks, in Limavady. (AQW 3807/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I am not aware of any particular business owner being informed that there is a waiting list for season tickets in these car parks. However, the number of available tickets will vary according to demand and there may be times when all tickets are sold. In these circumstances it is good practice to give potential customers the option to be placed on a waiting list to be contacted when vacancies arise.

Water Supply at Coolcreaghy Road/Lisleen Road, Castlederg, West Tyrone

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) reported incidents of inadequate water supply at Coolcreaghy Road/Lisleen Road, Castlederg, West Tyrone; (ii) the action undertaken as a result of these reports; and (iii) the measures in place to ensure the resolving of reported difficulties. (AQW 3813/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that since their new Customer Register was established in November 2006, there have been seven reported incidents of inadequate water supply at Coolcreaghy Road/Lisleen Road. On each occasion NIW staff responded promptly and implemented the action needed to restore the water supply as quickly as possible. These included repairing minor bursts and flushing the mains to restore water quality.

A recently completed detailed zonal study for this area has identified a need to upgrade/replace 33 kilometres of water mains, including a 5 kilometre section of cast iron pipe that supplies the Coolcreaghy Road/Lisleen Road. Replacement of this section is presently scheduled for late summer 2008.

‘Water Ponding’ on Rural Roads

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline what analysis has been undertaken of the increasing instances of ‘water ponding’ on rural roads; and to detail the steps he is taking to alleviate this problem in the interests of road safety. (AQW 3814/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department’s Roads Service does not routinely collect or analyse the number of instances of water ponding occurring on rural roads.

The Member will be aware that many rural roads were not built to modern standards and have evolved from old access tracks, which were largely unpaved and without formal drainage. Over the years, a combination of severe weather and heavy traffic has resulted in these roads becoming deformed slightly, leading to depressions on the road surface. This inevitably results in areas of localised ponding which can only be resolved by the installation of new drainage arrangements or by regulating and resurfacing. The use of these expensive measures is restricted by the limitation on funds available for structural maintenance.

That said, safety on rural roads is a high priority for Roads Service and a system of regular inspections is in place to ensure that response maintenance is identified and completed as necessary. For example, excessive standing water and water discharging onto or flowing across the highway is detected during routine safety inspections and noted for attention, if appropriate.

In addition to response maintenance, Roads Service also has a programme of planned maintenance, to ensure that the network remains safe and serviceable. Priorities are assessed using information obtained from condition surveys, other works programmes and professional engineering assessments by Roads Service Engineers.

Roads Service also aims to inspect, and clean where necessary, all gullies in rural areas once a year. This policy ensures that a reasonable level of maintenance is carried out to drainage systems, taking account of the Department’s finite funding and staff resource levels.

In addition to this scheduled operation, further cleaning is carried out to deal with blocked gullies, particularly at locations where fallen leaves represent an ongoing problem at certain times of the year, or where there has been a history of gullies becoming blocked for other reasons.

More recently, a Flooding Hotspots register has been established jointly by Northern Ireland Water, Rivers Agency and Roads Service. This contains a list of key flooding locations across the North, together with the nominated lead agency for each location. This register is continually updated as new locations are added and problem locations dealt with.

Traffic Management Pressures

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to address the traffic

management pressures on (i) the A2 Shore Road; and (ii) the Old Shore Road, at their junctions at either end of Whiteabbey Village. (AQW 3851/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: In relation to AQW 3851/08, officials from my Department's Roads Service advise that the southern junction of the Old Shore Road with the Shore Road operates under full traffic signal control, while the northern junction takes the form of a priority junction. The level of traffic delays experienced at these junctions is not unusual for an urban setting and there are no plans at present to change the traffic management arrangements.

I would, however, note that in relation to the southern junction, the developer, as a condition of the planning approval for the redevelopment of the former Glenavana Hotel site, will install a traffic management system to improve traffic flow at the existing junction.

With regard to AQW 3852/08, I can advise that Roads Service officials are aware of the delays that traffic can experience when using this junction. However, when compared with other locations throughout the Greater Belfast area, these delays are not exceptional and possible improvements at this location would not, at present, have sufficient priority to be included within a Local Transport and Safety Measure Programme. As with all such locations, the situation will be kept under review.

Re-Opening of Hillhead Road

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the progress being made in relation to the re-opening of the Hillhead Road, Newry; and to provide a timescale in which he will be in a position to report back to residents. (AQW 3859/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: Further to my answer to the Member's previous Assembly Question (AQW 1718/08) on this matter, engineering consultants engaged by my Department's Roads Service to consider the available options have completed an initial review and have prepared a draft report on the outcome of the assessment process, along with cost estimates.

Following consideration of the report, I have requested Roads Service to arrange a further round of meetings with both the Quarry owners and the affected residents. These will take place within the next four weeks.

The outcome of these meetings will assist Roads Service in forming a view on the progression of further works necessary on the Hillhead Road. It is also envisaged that following these consultations

Roads Service will hold further meetings/discussions with local residents and public representatives.

Water Treatment Plant

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a timescale in which Northern Ireland Water will upgrade the waste water treatment plant at Keady, in order to increase its capacity. (AQW 3860/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the upgrade of Keady Wastewater Treatment Works, at an estimated cost of £3.7 million, is currently programmed for commencement in summer 2010 and the work will take one year to complete.

A1 Cloghogue to Beechill Scheme

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development to specify the date on which all work stopped on the A1 Cloghogue to Beechill scheme; and to detail (i) the reasons for the stoppage; and (ii) the action he is taking to ensure that work resumes without any further delay. (AQW 3920/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that work has not stopped on the A1 Beechill to Cloghogue dual carriageway scheme, which is being constructed as part of a Design Build Finance and Operate (DBFO) contract.

As the Member will be aware, the top soil strip operation on this scheme has uncovered a number of potential archaeological features. The DBFO Co, in consultation with the Department of the Environment's Environment and Heritage Service, is currently preparing plans to deal with these.

This is normal practice in a construction project of this nature and scale and, while this may be impacting on the DBFO Co's initial programme for earth works, it is not expected to extend the overall construction period.

This DBFO contract is a Public Private Partnership agreement and I am satisfied that my Department's officials and their consultants are working closely with the DBFO Co, their designers and construction contractor to progress this Strategic Road Improvement scheme.

Waste Water Treatment Plant in Dunmurry

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide a timescale within which the

Waste Water Treatment Plant in Dunmurry will be upgraded. (AQW 4079/08)

The Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that a project to upgrade Dunmurry Wastewater Treatment Works is scheduled to commence in the summer of 2010 and will take slightly over 2 years to complete.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Housing Executive Budget

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the Northern Ireland Housing Executive grant budget, for each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3543/08)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): The Northern Ireland Housing Executive Private Sector Grant Budget for the last 3 years is:

Year	£m
2004/05	43.1
2005/06	42.9
2006/07	41.2

Housing Executive Budget

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the grant budget for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive for the financial year 2007-08. (AQW 3548/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Private Sector grant budget for the 2007/08 financial year is £42.8m

Housing Executive Budget

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm whether or not the grant budget for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive for 2008 has been reduced. (AQW 3550/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Details of the Budget 2008-11 were presented to the Northern Ireland Assembly on 29 January 2008. Over the next few weeks I will be considering how best to allocate the funding in the Budget 2008-11 across my housing priorities and I will be making a statement.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the average length of time taken between application and the instruction to install, under the Warm Homes scheme, for each district council area. (AQW 3574/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The attached table shows the average time taken in days between application date and instruction to install date by council area for a sample period from 1st April 2007 to 30th September 2007.

WARM HOMES SCHEME

SAMPLE TAKEN FROM 1ST APRIL 2007 TO 30 SEPTEMBER 07

Council Area	Days between application date and instruction to install date
Antrim	114
Ards	95
Armagh	98
Ballymena	100
Ballymoney	84
Banbridge	113
Belfast	74
Carrickfergus	105
Castlereagh	114
Coleraine	76
Cookstown	69
Craigavon	99
Derry	104
Down	115
Dungannon	113
Fermanagh	120
Larne	97
Limavady	110
Lisburn	93
Magherafelt	95
Moyle	108
Newry & Mourne	113
Newtownabbey	121
North Down	102
Omagh	106
Strabane	103

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of outstanding approved applications for the Warm Homes scheme relating to (i) insulation; and (ii) central heating, by district council area. (AQW 3575/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information is not available in the format requested. Eaga collate information from geographical areas which can be subdivided into postcode areas. The information in the attached table shows the number of approved applications for heating systems by postcode area.

There are no outstanding applications for insulation. When a survey confirms that insulation measures are required Eaga allocate the job to an installer within one week.

WARM HOMES SCHEME - APPROVED APPLICATIONS FOR HEATING

Heating	Area 1	Area 2	Area 3	Area 4	Area 5	Total
Approved Applications	79	42	227	201	177	726

Area 1	Area 2	Area 3	Area 4	Area 5
BT60	BT45	BT1	BT3	BT2
BT61	BT46	BT13	BT4	BT7
BT62	BT47	BT14	BT5	BT8
BT63	BT48	BT15	BT6	BT9
BT64	BT49	BT29	BT16	BT10
BT65	BT51	BT36	BT18	BT11
BT66	BT52	BT37	BT19	BT12
BT67	BT53	BT38	BT20	BT17
BT68	BT54	BT39	BT21	BT24
BT69	BT55	BT40	BT22	BT25
BT70	BT56	BT41	BT23	BT26
BT71	BT57	BT42	BT30	BT27
BT74	BT81	BT42	BT33	BT28
BT75	BT82	BT43		BT31
BT76				BT32
BT77				BT34
BT78				BT35
BT79				
BT80				
BT92				

Area 1	Area 2	Area 3	Area 4	Area 5
BT93				
BT94				

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of applications that have been received by EAGA Partnership for the Warm Homes scheme, relating to (i) insulation; and (ii) central heating, broken down by council area for each of the last three years. (AQW 3576/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Eaga hold information by Council area for completed work only. This is shown separately for insulation and heating by council area for the last 3 years in the attached tables. The figures for the current year show jobs completed up to 8 February. There are a further 726 approved applications not included in these figures. I refer the honourable Member to my reply to AQW 3575/08 for the detail on these.

INSULATION BY COUNCIL AREA

Council Area	April 2005 to March 2006	April 2006 to March 2007	April 2007 to date (8th Feb 08)
	Number of Completed Jobs	Number of Completed Jobs	Number of Completed Jobs
Antrim	170	190	225
Ards	172	296	305
Armagh	397	334	251
Ballymena	247	197	233
Ballymoney	75	99	135
Banbridge	200	212	260
Belfast	1540	1203	1028
Carrickfergus	96	199	100
Castlereagh	250	261	217
Coleraine	154	183	214
Cookstown	283	248	256
Craigavon	327	546	567
Derry	600	466	324
Down	208	254	398
Dungannon	361	298	266
Fermanagh	234	303	319
Larne	83	124	84

Council Area	April 2005 to March 2006	April 2006 to March 2007	April 2007 to date (8th Feb 08)
	Number of Completed Jobs	Number of Completed Jobs	Number of Completed Jobs
Limavady	163	234	149
Lisburn	303	458	408
Magherafelt	199	181	160
Moyle	64	43	54
Newry & Mourne	704	953	481
Newtownabbey	377	611	267
North Down	372	275	269
Omagh	212	368	435
Strabane	244	267	202
Totals	8,035	8,803	7,607

HEATING BY COUNCIL AREA

Council Area	April 2005 to March 2006	April 2006 to March 2007	April 2007 to Date (8th Feb 08)
	Number of Completed Jobs	Number of Completed Jobs	Number of Completed Jobs
Antrim	90	98	92
Ards	67	76	112
Armagh	114	210	121
Ballymena	85	109	66
Ballymoney	40	38	47
Banbridge	58	95	148
Belfast	421	318	500
Carrickfergus	43	30	46
Castlereagh	66	53	102
Coleraine	68	59	65
Cookstown	126	202	219
Craigavon	145	325	274
Derry	53	309	154
Down	90	67	256
Dungannon	168	234	202
Fermanagh	168	182	189
Larne	43	32	31
Limavady	53	63	45
Lisburn	121	126	166
Magherafelt	64	100	69

Council Area	April 2005 to March 2006	April 2006 to March 2007	April 2007 to Date (8th Feb 08)
	Number of Completed Jobs	Number of Completed Jobs	Number of Completed Jobs
Moyle	36	18	22
Newry & Mourne	259	397	319
Newtownabbey	123	124	210
North Down	113	44	129
Omagh	105	192	344
Strabane	57	77	136
Totals	2776	3578	4064

Regeneration of the Village Area, South Belfast

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 3192/08, to detail the meetings and discussions that have taken place between her department and community representatives in the Village area of South Belfast, in relation to the regeneration of the area. (AQW 3588/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Seven meetings have taken place between my Department and community representatives in the Village area on housing issues. In addition officials within the Belfast Regeneration Office regularly take part in meetings and discussions with community representatives on Village regeneration issues.

Housing Executive Waiting List

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people currently on the waiting list for Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties in the (i) Antrim Borough Council area; and (ii) Newtownabbey Borough Council area.

(AQW 3605/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The total numbers of applicants on the waiting list for social housing at 31 December 2007 for the Antrim and Newtownabbey districts are 1,037 and 1,713 respectively of which 538 and 1,007 have more than 30 points and are therefore considered to be in housing stress.

Housing Executive Budget

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the Northern Ireland Housing Executive Grant Budget, broken down by parliamentary constituency, for each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3654/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information is not available by parliamentary constituency. The table below details Private Sector grant funding broken down by District Council.

District Council	2004/05 £	2005/06 £	2006/07 £	Total £
Ards	891,890	1,167,564	1,263,802	3,251,256
Antrim	382,126	415,160	386,960	1,112,246
Armagh	1,576,210	1,222,553	1,345,639	4,072,402
Ballymena	906,367	987,067	713,545	2,534,979
Ballymoney	437,785	483,361	387,681	1,236,827
Banbridge	850,391	480,429	877,276	2,136,096
Belfast	10,038,112	10,054,496	9,376,099	29,396,707
Carrick-fergus	578,091	539,490	435,856	1,481,437
Castlereagh	568,165	571,513	622,011	1,689,689
Coleraine	1,171,495	1,069,648	537,050	2,706,193
Cookstown	1,547,813	1,434,329	1,476,190	4,386,332
Craigavon	1,303,526	1,711,132	1,784,721	4,727,379
Derry	2,060,139	2,677,021	2,450,869	7,116,029
Down	2,034,672	1,305,049	1,467,716	4,735,437
Dungannon	2,426,817	2,426,471	2,037,087	6,818,375
Fermanagh	3,257,274	3,542,160	3,772,189	10,499,623
Larne	1,023,618	666,065	691,393	2,309,076
Limavady	651,407	710,867	710,969	2,001,243
Lisburn	1,120,742	974,668	1,172,083	3,195,493
Magherafelt	1,048,412	1,301,322	1,158,722	3,436,456
Moyle	424,868	354,236	246,473	953,577
Newry and Mourne	3,095,981	2,994,212	3,568,390	9,586,583
Newtown-abbey	1,179,301	992,589	1,072,268	3,172,158
North Down	955,168	861,013	1,078,120	2,822,301
Omagh	2,265,416	2,224,700	1,857,714	6,275,830
Strabane	1,324,526	1,573,577	1,445,187	4,271,290
Totals	43,120,312	42,740,692	41,936,010	125,925,014

Housing Executive Budget

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the Northern Ireland Housing Executive Grant Budget for the Newtownards area, in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3655/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Private Sector grant budget for the Newtownards area in each of the last 3 years is:

2004/05 £	2005/06 £	2006/07 £	Total £
891,890	1,167,564	1,263,802	3,251,256

Regeneration of the Village Area, South Belfast

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 3140/08, to detail what means are being considered to address housing problems in the Village area of South Belfast. (AQW 3686/08)

The Minister for Social Development: A dual approach will be adopted to address the problems facing the people in the Village area. In the long term my Department will be working with the community and its representatives to identify housing and regeneration opportunities; innovative private sector contributions must also play a key role. In the short term my Department will try to address the needs of those vulnerable people in the greatest need. The Housing Executive will for example carry out room conversions, install insulation, upgrade heating and re-house where necessary and feasible.

Regeneration of the Village Area, South Belfast

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development pursuant to her answer to AQW 3155/08, and in light of her commitment to the Assembly on 2 July 2007, whether or not departmental officials met specifically with homeowners in the Village area who had concerns about home improvements. (AQW 3687/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Officials, either from my Department and from the Housing Executive, have met on a number of occasions with homeowners in the Village area. Some homeowners also attended the Village Planning Day in July 2007, and a meeting with my Director of Housing on 26 November 2007. I am very much aware of the diversity of opinion as to the means of improving living

conditions in the Village and will ensure that all views are fully considered before these are implemented.

Disabled Facilities Grant

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an update on the findings of a report by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive on the effect of allowing the first £5,000 of a disabled facilities grant to be free of means testing.

(AQW 3689/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department asked the Housing Executive to take part in a review of the Disabled Facilities Grants Scheme and commissioned a report on possible options including changes to the means test. The Department has not yet proceeded with the review as no changes have been made to the means test regulation in England and Wales which are normally reflected in the Northern Ireland scheme.

Housing Units

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to the answer to AQW 3213/08, to detail the number of housing units that are to be constructed in (i) Newcastle; (ii) Castlewellan; and (iii) Dundrum, in the next three years. (AQW 3707/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The current Social Housing Development Programme makes provision for the following over the period to 2011/12 in Castlewellan, Dundrum and Newcastle.

Year	Scheme	Units	Need Group
2007/08	45A Bracken Avenue, Newcastle	1	General Needs
Total		1	
2008/09	Lawnfield, Newcastle	35	General Needs
	PSNI Site, Castlewellan	7	General Needs
Total		42	
2010/11	Drumaroad	6	General Needs
Total		6	
2011/12	Newcastle	55	General Needs
Total		55	
Grand Total		104	

In addition to the schemes formally programmed, Housing Associations have registered an interest in six sites in Newcastle; three in Castlewellan and two in Dundrum. The feasibility of developing these sites is being investigated with a view to acquisition.

The Social Housing Development Programme is rolled forward annually and the 2008/09 – 2012/2013 update will be available shortly.

Housing Executive Grants

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm whether or not all home inspections, in relation to Northern Ireland Housing Executive Grants, have been cancelled for January to March 2008; and to detail what plans she has in relation to home inspections from April 2008.

(AQW 3710/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Home improvement grants inspections have not been cancelled. There are currently no delays in carrying out inspections. The grants budget for 2008/9 has yet to be finalised but it is not currently expected that there will be delays in inspecting grant aided works which have been approved.

All payments are kept under continuous review to ensure that budget limits are adhered to in any financial year.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Social Development to detail whether or not there is a requirement for a tenancy contract to exist prior to landlords qualifying for their properties to be upgraded under the Warm Homes scheme.

(AQW 3748/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Eaga manage the Warm Homes Scheme on behalf of my Department. There is no requirement for a tenancy contract to exist in order for a tenant to qualify for assistance from the Warm Homes Scheme. The onus is on the applicant to provide proof of benefit at the specific address and on the landlord to provide proof of ownership and to give permission to carry out the work.

Meetings With MLAs

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of meetings she has held with MLAs since May 2007.

(AQW 3785/08)

The Minister for Social Development: In addition to the many informal and ad hoc meetings I have had with members, in this house and elsewhere, I have held 55 scheduled meetings with MLAs since May 2007.

Safety Issues

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 3060/08, to detail the reasons why the starting date of the scheme has been frequently delayed over the last 6 years; and in view of the safety issues involved, to confirm that will she undertake to prioritise the upgrading of these properties as a matter of urgency. (AQW 3801/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive first identified the need for a Multi Element Improvement scheme for Millburn in April 2004. The actual start date for any scheme will always be subject to normal lead in times for design and the consultation process. Estimated start dates are also subject to the availability of finance in any given year and can therefore be subject to change. The Millburn scheme is currently programmed to start in 2009/10.

Child Support Agency

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of cases held by the Child Support Agency (CSA) in which the Non-Resident Parent has been found to have provided fraudulent information in relation to their income; and to confirm (i) whether or not the CSA can take action against these parents; and (ii) how successful any such actions have been. (AQW 3853/08)

The Minister for Social Development: To date this year the Child Support Agency (CSA) has made 343 non-benefit fraud referrals. These referrals are as a result of non-resident parents or parents with care either giving false information or failing to provide information at all. It is not possible to say how many of these referrals fall into each category.

In the case of false information the first action is for an interview to be conducted with the alleged offender under caution. In the vast majority of cases this leads to the supply of the correct information. Only when it is very clear that information is still incorrect after the interview under caution, will any prosecution be considered.

In all cases this year where an interview under caution has been carried out the Agency has been successful in obtaining correct information. No prosecutions have been necessary on these grounds.

Energy Performance Certificates

Mr Donaldson asked the Minister for Social Development to provide a timescale for the phased

introduction of Energy Performance Certificates for homes. (AQW 3892/08)

The Minister for Social Development: It is intended to roll out a programme for the introduction of Energy Performance Certificates (EPCs) in three phases starting at the end of June of this year with existing dwellings being offered for sale on the housing market. This will be followed at the end of September by EPCs for newly constructed dwellings and finish with public and private rentals at the end of December.

Meetings Held

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of meetings she has held with (i) delegations representing one or more of the district councils; (ii) the Northern Ireland Local Government Association; and (iii) the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, since May 2007. (AQW 3900/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Since May 2007 I have held 3 meetings with delegations representing district councils and 1 meeting with the Northern Ireland Local Government Association. I have not held any meetings with the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives.

Assembly Questions

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of written Assembly Questions she has received since May 2007; and (ii) the average length of time it takes her department to respond. (AQW 3910/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I have received 516 written Assembly Questions during the period from 8 May 2007 to 19 February 2008. The average length of time my Department has taken to respond is 6 days.

Ballymoney Town Centre

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the action her department is taking in relation to the regeneration of Ballymoney town centre. (AQW 3945/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department is currently working on the following regeneration activities in Ballymoney town centre.

- The department is working with Ballymoney Borough Council to complete the 'Experience

Ballymoney' project funded under the Town Centre Promotions and Marketing Programme;

- The department is assessing a small number of projects for funding from the Urban Development Grant scheme. Ballymoney has been selected as one of five towns in Northern Ireland to benefit from a pilot of this scheme.
- The department is working up plans for an environmental improvement scheme on the Main Street and Castlecroft in conjunction with our colleagues in DRD Roads Service.

Waste Produced

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the percentage of waste produced by the department that is recycled. (AQW 3949/08)

The Minister for Social Development: My Department does not hold the information requested. However, the Department has been recycling cardboard, paper, printer cartridges and other consumables for many years and a small number of offices have been recycling additional materials, such as plastic bottles, clear glass and cans.

As a first step in trying to quantify the amount of waste going to landfill and to test how recycling can be maximised in the office environment, an environmental pilot was initiated in 2007.

The waste percentage rates during the pilot were recorded as follows:

- Percentage of waste stream - Recycled: 68%
- Percentage of waste stream - Landfill: 32%

Social Security Agency

Mrs McGill asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the alternative investment plans that are in place to ensure that (i) the Social Security Agency and (ii) the Job Centre, in Strabane, can co-locate in a 'one stop shop' facility. (AQW 3962/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The Social Security Agency remains committed to the roll-out of a Jobs and Benefits service in Strabane to ensure that clients benefit from the same enhanced work focused service which is available elsewhere in the province. Following the withdrawal of the planning application, the Agency is currently exploring how best to address concerns raised by Roads Service with regards to the number of car parking spaces available on the existing site at Urney Road, Strabane. In addition, revised plans are currently being prepared and it is anticipated that a further planning application will be submitted for the new office in the near future.

Benefit System

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people receiving (i) Disability Living Allowance; and (ii) Incapacity Benefit, broken down by parliamentary constituency, in 2006 and 2007. (AQW 4006/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out in the tables below. The figures in table 1 show the number of claims where Disability Living Allowance was in payment at the date of extract and table 2 shows the number of claims where Incapacity Benefit was in payment at the date of extract. The date of extract was 14 October 2006 and 20 October 2007 for both benefits.

TABLE 1: DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE BENEFIT CLAIMANTS BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AT 2006 AND 2007

Parliamentary Constituency	2006	2007
Belfast East	7,217	7,337
Belfast North	12,193	12,304
Belfast South	7,176	7,240
Belfast West	16,111	16,148
East Antrim	6,462	6,695
East Londonderry	6,867	7,067
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	8,714	8,681
Foyle	13,471	13,671
Lagan Valley	7,755	7,898
Mid Ulster	9,008	9,222
Newry And Armagh	11,327	11,418
North Antrim	7,712	7,928
North Down	5,543	5,712
South Antrim	7,807	8,056
South Down	10,593	10,806
Strangford	7,600	7,790
Upper Bann	11,587	11,810
West Tyrone	11,745	11,839
Unallocated Postcode*	629	1,178
Total	169,517	172,800

TABLE 2: INCAPACITY BENEFIT CLAIMANTS BY PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AT 2006 AND 2007

Parliamentary Constituency	2006	2007
Belfast East	2,944	2,835
Belfast North	4,421	4,351

Parliamentary Constituency	2006	2007
Belfast South	2,796	2,725
Belfast West	4,686	4,570
East Antrim	3,178	3,075
East Londonderry	3,449	3,364
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	3,448	3,287
Foyle	5,388	5,256
Lagan Valley	3,374	3,359
Mid Ulster	4,026	3,974
Newry And Armagh	4,564	4,324
North Antrim	3,912	3,907
North Down	2,480	2,426
South Antrim	3,418	3,395
South Down	4,402	4,296
Strangford	3,605	3,510
Upper Bann	5,426	5,240
West Tyrone	4,638	4,447
Unallocated Postcode*	434	580
Total	70,589	68,921

* In producing these 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.

Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plans

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the discussions her department has held with other departments and agencies to advance the implementation of the neighbourhood renewal action plans of the Neighbourhood Partnership Boards in the North West; and to outline those agreements that have been reached. (AQW 4044/08)

The Minister for Social Development: In the North West the Department meets regularly through its Neighbourhood Renewal Programme Group to take forward implementation of the Neighbourhood Renewal strategy. The Department has also had two full set of engagements with relevant Departments and agencies. There have been various agreements and these include the development of a land audit, provision of training on health statistics, signposting of services, the advancement of a number of capital projects, funding being made available to tackle educational underachievement and an agreement that schools will engage with regard to the Extended School's programme. Furthermore, engagements have been held on a Northern Ireland wide basis at the

Ministerial Group which have culminated in a number of regional targets being agreed.

Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plans

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the perceived blockages to reaching agreement with other departments and agencies, in relation to advancing the implementation of neighbourhood renewal action plans of the Neighbourhood Partnership Boards in the North West. (AQW 4046/08)

The Minister for Social Development: There have been a number of obstacles that have to be addressed to reach agreements with other departments and agencies. These include budgetary constraints and staffing efficiencies under the Comprehensive Spending Review, the Review of Public Administration and overly ambitious Neighbourhood Action Plans that have been developed by some Neighbourhood Partnerships.

Benefit Fraud

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 3151/08, what is her assessment of the levels of benefit fraud in Northern Ireland, as a result of her department's rolling programme of annual benefit review exercises. (AQW 4049/08)

The Minister for Social Development: The latest estimate of the level of fraud in benefits administered by the Social Security Agency is £18.1m which equates to 0.5% of benefit expenditure during the survey period January to December 2006. The estimated cost of Housing Benefit Fraud during the same period is £3.3m (0.8% of expenditure).

Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plans

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the mechanisms she has put in place to ensure that essential funding to community groups will not be reduced or lost, after 31 March 2008, in light of any failure to reach agreement on the implementation of neighbourhood renewal action plans of the Neighbourhood Partnership Boards in the North West. (AQW 4050/08)

The Minister for Social Development: I am currently in discussions with my officials regarding the implementation of Neighbourhood Renewal beyond 31 March 2008 and will make an announcement in due course. However, Neighbourhood Renewal is not about funding and, particularly, it is not about sustaining

individual groups or projects because they have always been funded.

Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the long-term plans for the full implementation of the neighbourhood renewal strategy as set out in the People and Place strategy.
(AQW 4053/08)

The Minister for Social Development: Neighbourhood Renewal is being implemented as detailed in People and Place – A Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. Neighbourhood Action Plans which identify the priorities of the targeted areas have been developed and all Departments and statutory agencies are currently working to agree a collective response to these local needs, within the resources available.

Meeting Requests

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of meeting requests she has received since May 2007.
(AQW 4066/08)

The Minister for Social Development: In the period from 8 May 2007 until 18 February 2008 I have received 719 written requests for meetings.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Recycling at Parliament Buildings

Mr McKay asked the Assembly Commission to detail the amount of waste from Parliament Buildings that is recycled.
(AQW 3487/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): Estate Maintenance, Department of Finance and Personnel manage the waste and recycling for Parliament Buildings and the Stormont Estate. Estate Maintenance has tasked a company called SITA to take over the collection of the waste and recycling.

SITA collect the waste on a daily basis and segregate it at source into dedicated waste streams. The waste streams include paper, plastic, cardboard and tins. All glass used at Parliament Buildings and Annexe C is also recycled however, the figures for glass recycling is not recorded. Estate Maintenance has advised that a conservative estimate for this would be in the region of 250kg per week.

In addition the printer and fax cartridges and other computer consumables are recycled as is the cooking oil from the kitchen. It should be noted that all buildings within the estate showed a significant decrease in recycling for the month of December 2007. The contractor was unable to advise why this was the case however, it is hoped that the figures will return to around 25% as was previously achieved.

Building Management Branch meet regularly with Estate Maintenance to try to increase the recycling figures and regularly send out emails to staff to remind them of the recycling arrangements.

	Oct 06	Nov 06	Dec 06	Jan 07	Feb 07	Mar 07	Apr 07
Recycled Kg	2.1	2.9	2.6	2.4	2.4	2.9	2
General Waste Kg	4.4	3.8	3.5	3.3	3.2	6.4	4.5
Percentage recycled	33%	42.65%	42.60%	42.10%	42.86%	30.70%	30.76%

	May 07	Jun 07	July 07	Aug 07	Sept 07	Oct 07	Nov 07	Dec 07
Recycled Kg	2.5	2	1.8	1.7			1.65	0.8
General Waste Kg	5.4	7	4.6	5			6	5.7
Percentage recycled	25.2%	22%	28.07%	25.32%			21.63%	12.46%

* Due to the change over in the contract there are no figures available for September and October

Paper Usage in Parliament Buildings

Mr S Wilson asked the Assembly Commission to detail what actions it will take to reduce paper usage in Parliament Buildings.
(AQW 3634/08)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Rev Dr Robert Coulter): A review of the Assembly's printing requirements is currently underway. The review is looking at issues such as the types of documents that need to be printed, the

number of copies required and the need to e.g. print a full Committee report as opposed to the summary and recommendations. The outcome will be used to inform the specification for the Assembly's printing and publishing contract.

A survey of Members will also be conducted to ascertain their requirements for Assembly publications in hard copy. Additionally possibilities will be explored for having printers and photocopiers set to automatically produce documents double-sided to reduce paper usage.

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Committee Stage

Charities Bill [NIA 9/07], CS1, CS3, CS5, CS7

Scott, Ms Joy (Cleaver Fulton Rankin Solicitors)

Committee Stage

Charities Bill [NIA 9/07], CS5, CS6

